

**Key Note Speech**  
**By Karl Gregory**  
**Supervision Conference UK**  
**Birmingham 7<sup>th</sup> April 2018**

**Slide 1**

The theme of this conference is 'Supervision: Balance in an unstable world? So I will reflect on the theme of the conference in this talk

**Slide 2**

I find the *political, social* and *environmental* issues often coming into counselling and supervision. While I'm not advocating a specific political stance I now think that there is no such thing as being neutral. As doing nothing is doing something!

So as a supervisor I can sometimes get caught up in trying to help my supervisees find solutions.

**Slide 3**

I find that a difficult tight rope to walk and I get pretty unbalanced doing so!

Supervision can feel a bit like being a resource for providing information and techniques

**Slide 4**

In an effort to support supervisees in their quest to balance the unstable world for their clients, I have to be more and more knowledgeable.

Specialisms that hit the medical world have now reached us! Pushing us to feel that we are not qualified in this and that

But is this really all we do as supervisors?

Is it our role just to monitor, instruct and inform?

**Slide 5**

So for me as a supervisor the question mark becomes more important. *Not* how do we balance an unstable world but how do we *sit* with the experience of our supervisee's in the world they find themselves.

The question mark itself takes on a deeper meaning about staying curious; discovering what is happening for the supervisee as their clients bring their struggles.

So we are finding a process which we can explore, not just going with the content of every struggle. This has taken me to the heart of my relationship with my supervisee.

Doing supervision took me on this *relational* journey more than anything else I have done and in this key note I will take you on *that journey*

A journey that has led me to being able to fully explore the issues of the day and the effect it has on our relationships, giving myself permission to be subjective. It became my mission to move away from the expert, who is seemingly objective and authoritative.

In the early days as a supervisor and a tutor at the University of Bristol, I use to have supervisee's asking how to write a contract before they even met a client. At first this question dumbfounded me. Can I really say how I will work with someone before I have even met them?

So working with my supervisee's I offered our supervisory relationship as a place to start. Finding out what we needed in the supervision. It was through this process that I developed a framework which I call the 4c's.

## **Slide 6**

I find the *contact* that we make will set the tone of the supervision how we get to know each other the stories we tell, and the connection we make.

We need to find out our differing ideas and concepts of what supervision means to each of us; the models, approaches and frameworks.

The many layers of context will gradually be expressed from the work, to personal understanding and social constructs through to the clients worlds

Finally we can then establish a contract. One that congruently said the way we could work together.

This improved our contact which helped us to understand supervision more and increased our awareness of our context and so on. Deepening our way of working together so that the contract becomes a more fluid process, helping us get to 'the heart of the matter'. This led me to work even more relationally with my supervisee's

## Slide 7

I found a relational approach to supervision gave me an anchor to explore the complicated issues coming into the therapy from our world today

So what do I mean by being relational in supervision. I will now take a step back into what *helped me* to understand my *subjective relational* way of working.

Recently I have become really enthusiastic by the 'relational turn' that all the main schools of therapy seem to be taking, from relational theory to relational depth and then meaning.

This was ignited by the *conclusive* evidence in research that the therapeutic relationship is considered to be *the most* significant factor in achieving positive therapeutic change

There has been a quiet revolution in our work, a significant paradigm shift, an approach that values and works with the *subjective* experiences that we have with each other.

In a relational approach human beings are seen as part of a network of relationships, continually motivated, from birth, by the need for relationship. This shapes internal perceptions of external experiences. Disconnections in relationships create psychological difficulties.

This paradigm shift is moving us away from the various 'objective' models of therapy and focusing us on the subjective relationship itself.

And of course this shift has happened in supervision too particularly heralded by the work of Maria Gilbert and Ken Evans nearly 20 years ago. They were willing to take the risk of being rigorously subjective in their exploration of relational supervision.

So the movement to looking at the relationship itself began shaping the way I was in supervision.

## Slide 8

In the early days the *function* of supervision was beautifully articulated by Brigit Proctor – Restorative, Formative & Normative.

About eight years later Michael Carroll defined the *tasks* of supervision and I have put those alongside on this slide

Then a further 10 years on as we became *more relational in our approach* to supervision, Vicky Palmer and I felt it important to build on these foundations and articulate the *role* of the supervisor.

We found that exploring the role of the supervisor brought us further into the relationship. Having a valuing presence and encouraging our supervisees was important for supervisees to feel support. Being a supportive challenger, helping supervisees & ourselves to be more reflective then moving to be more *reflexive* provides the climate for our educational role.

Finally the normative aspect of the relationship was aided by being *collaborative in ethical considerations, resourceful in our administration* and act as a *consultative practitioner in our evaluation*.

So we can see how a relational approach evolves from the foundations of our past, by building on our previous knowledge.

At the same time as the relational approach was developing the neuroscience was also having an impact on our profession which gives us further context

## Slide 9

Information about how our brain develops has not only confirmed the importance of the relationship in all we do but has also helped to progress a relational approach.

I find that what is coming out of the neuroscience so valuable to my work in supervision. So I'll just spend a few moments to go over some very basic points that I have understood.

There is broad agreement now amongst the neuro scientists that our brain develops in roughly three stages

A large nerve from the body – called the Vagus nerve - nicknamed the superhighway feeds information from all major organs of our body to the brain and visa-versa. So the body begins to help the brain develop from the information it receives.

We are born with the brainstem, here, fully operating (shine laser) – nick named the reptilian brain. It is called the reptilian brain because this part of the brain is all about survival.

As the baby suckles and develops with the caregiver the limbic region develops and attachments become important. This creates firing of neurons in the mammalian brain.

These two aspects of the brain are said to be in most mammals and operate non-consciously in humans. So what we now know is that in any given situation we are only 3-5% conscious so the effect we have in these areas of the brain through the relationships we form are important.

The human then develops further aspects in the neocortex nicknamed the executive or social brain located in the prefrontal cortex here. This area of the brain is not fully functioning until we are roughly 25 years old and is situated just behind the forehead here.

The 'executive brain' or prefrontal cortex allows us to pause to reflect. It's extremely fragile and will switch off when in fear. For example if we are being charged by a bull we don't need to pause and reflect to find out if he's friendly, we need to get out of the field fast.

For the brain to fully function it needs to integrate. This integration comes about through relationships with other human beings as our system adapts to the environment that it finds itself. The neuroscientists have discovered that the brain is a social organ.

For the brain to develop, one brain and body needs another brain and body. Brain and body are now understood to be so connected and to mean one. For example we have simple neurons in each of our major organs and the stomach is now seen as our 'second brain' validating the *gut* feeling many of us have!

I find it fascinating that some commentators on the neuroscience suggest that we are not rational beings but that we are rationalised. That is we usually work from our instincts and gut feelings in the moment then rationalise our actions. This puts me in mind of Carl Rogers's scepticism of theories and models saying that he felt they can get in the way of the relationship!

So for me this is why the relational aspect of therapy and supervision are important.

One person needs another person to heal. We are even told that the use of compassion can literally help clients and supervisees *create healing chemicals* in the body, *change neural pathways* in the brain and *develop hormonal responses* that can help heal past abuses. The implication of this for supervision is enormous

## Slide 10

In their book on Ethical Maturity, Carroll and Shaw show us that the way we respond to our situations with our supervisees and their clients will have an effect on how we do our supervision.

For example if fear is prominent in our relationship and around us then the impulses from the reptilian brain will be about keeping us safe. While that is important the warning here is the 'me only' effect. (As Robin Shohet discussed at a previous conference) we generally will look at sticking to the rules and staying close to the boundaries set by our professional bodies. All that matters to the individual is keeping them safe

I have been feeling recently that some of our professional bodies reflect this as they become more fear bound in this unstable world?

Thankfully Karen Kitchener provided us with a wider ethical *framework* in the 1990s that many professional bodies have adopted. Even if some are now trying to wriggle out of it!

Moving further on to the 'mammalian brain' will give us some of our relational approach, bringing in our experiences and emotions, helping us to communicate. But if we just stay here we are likely to become collusive, over identify with our clients and supervisees. This brings us to our echo chamber of 'my model only'.

We can hear this in the wider world as people become more polarised, for example, over Brexit issues.

So what the executive brain allows us to do is to pause to reflect, then be more rational, managing our emotions with our experiences. But essentially it is in the here and now, non-emotional and if we only use this part of the brain we can become manipulative.

What we now know is that for our brain and body to fully integrate and function we need a safe, understanding and compassionate environment, otherwise we will fall back on keeping safe and in the tight limitations of the boundaries of our echo chamber.

To me this is why the relationship in supervision is so crucial to help ourselves and our supervisee's fully function. It is in the relationship that we can grow and develop.

Bringing all these concepts together my colleague Judy Hemmons and I explored the elements of the relationship that help us to connect with each other. We believe that these elements capture all I've just discussed and more.

## Slide 11

We named these as the interconnected relational elements of supervision (they also relate to relational therapy). These are intent, presence, attunement, resonance, reciprocity.

These are not always in this order and often occur at the same time, collapsing into each other

## Slide 12      Intention

Making a conscious choice to be together

Bringing our ethics together – keeping safe, being relational and then moving to meaning

Allowing the whole body & brain to integrate and function at its best

Our intention of doing no harm

Our ethical foundations of values and principles are built on these

The creation of a sacred space where I shall bring compassion

## Slide 13      Presence

Is our state of being together that is constantly emerging and re-emerging as we connect

Presence as a fluid, energetic state created and developed as we fully exist in each other's company – this is beautifully captured on this slide just look at their faces and bodies completely in tune with each other!

So we are talking about a compassionate presence

Being relational is *helping* the supervisee to be fully present with us too.

Exploring any taboo's and blocks in our relationship that may impede being fully together

## Slide 14      Attunement

Linda Finlay describes this well in her latest book *Relational Integrative Psychotherapy* I have produced her slide here

Once we are both fully present then we begin to attune to each other with empathy

An empathy that is bodily attuned - way back in philosophy Schopenhauer (1818) observed that we gain knowledge from our bodies that we struggle to articulate.

I have learnt that if we are both empathetically attuned then there is another language to consider from our *affect* that is communicated in our being together often beyond words.

## **Slide 15      Resonance**

To resonate is to 'chime' together

Mutuality in relationship each being a part of what is happening

Confirming the supervisors and supervisee's right to exist in the moment.

Helping to make observations and contributions together.... leading towards exploring the 'wisdom voices' that emerge from the work.

Here I sometimes find that I can get caught in mutuality if it starts moving towards symbiosis – always agreeing with each other, that is speaking only from one mind, one model, and one approach as the only way of doing supervision; a conditioned response to each other.

In all dynamic relationships I have learnt there is a dance between intimacy and separateness which I can sometimes get wrong. But we have to do the dance Pause and possibly get it wrong Pause because that is when we meet each other's separateness which leads us then to reciprocity.

## **Slide 16      Reciprocity**

Different minds working together

The giving & receiving aspect of supervision

Our shared intention to risking getting it wrong

The give/take interchange that continually builds the bridge between each other

Here I link our own life experiences which integrate our understandings and also help us challenge each other. Self-disclosure is an important aspect of this both in our immediacy of experiences and in our own life struggles.

## **Slide 17**

As Irvin Yalom once said 'there is some problem with the lack of reciprocity in the authentic therapy relationship –it's a knotty problem'

I wish schools of counselling would get away from teaching 'not to self-disclose' and teach students 'how and when to self-disclose', working with what is useful to the therapeutic relationship

### **Slide 18**

In and between these interconnected relational elements I often pick up echoes of, and experiences with; blocks and frustrations, distorted affects and mistrust, hurts and resentments, that have characterized our relationships with others in our ordinary day lives. Ours, our supervisee's and their clients

All leave imprints and are re-enacted in the troubled unstable world in our supervisory and corresponding therapeutic relationships.

In supervision we have a chance to re-explore what these mean to each other and sit with the discomfort once we are connected in a fully functioning relationship.

That exploration of the discomfort is important.

### **Slide 19**

You might have seen the window of tolerance presented differently; in 1999 while doing my Masters I identified a control continuum which was remarkably similar to the window of tolerance that is used nowadays in the trauma field so I have combined the two and stripped it right down for this slide

As we move out of our comfort zones and get emotionally dis-regulated it is here we need to name what's going on for us – in a relational approach this dis-regulation is important as it is here that our bodies are often telling us something

The tendency in life for some of us is to feel shame at this point and retreat into the reptilian brain response and only do what is safe, always keeping in the comfort zone

But what I am aware of both in my own supervision and with supervisee's is that if the shame is triggered in an atmosphere of fear then we can become either hyper aroused or hypo aroused, depending on the level of dis-regulated emotions and how the experiences have been repeatedly recorded in our mammalian and reptilian brains. In hyper arousal the supervisee can feel overwhelmed or get agitated in hypo arousal we can become withdrawn and become more silent

### **Slide 20**

Now what Deborah Lee has shown us is that by using compassion and appreciating our supervisee's work we can work with the shame and help turn off the threat system fired in the reptilian brain

With a compassionate response I have found that my supervisee can then tolerate the shame feeling more and begin to *speak their truth, their authenticity* and work with discomfort to develop their *own authority*, an authority that comes from authorship.

The supervisee then can sit with their client's experiences in the unstable world, with a similar process.

## Slide 21

To summarise, over the years I have been on a journey in and with supervision

This journey has guided me towards taking more notice of my relationships with my supervisee's than the modalities and techniques of the old schools of therapy.

I've been exploring deeply my relationships in supervision from my role as a supervisor to discovering what interconnected elements of the relationship in supervision seem to help.

Then when the relationship is mature enough I have discovered that we can explore the struggles, ruptures and pitfalls that the world brings us.

So it is here that I sit  
with my supervisees  
being balanced enough with ourselves  
to work with the experiences of the unstable world