An Existential Perspective on Supervision

Dr Alison Strasser
• WHAT DO YOU SEE?

• HOW DID YOU SENSE DO YOU MAKE OF IT?
How the client sees themselves  What the client gives the therapist  How the therapist sees the client  What the therapist gives the "supervisor" (if anything)  How the "supervisor" sees the client

Protecting the client?
Existential Philosophy

• A move from conforming to universal principles (where one is part of the crowd) to subjective truth (as freedom)
• The individual creates their meaning - it is not imposed from the outside (God, the past, family, culture etc)

• Style cannot be reduced to a general law or form
• The style of a work of art is best described as being within the art itself
Existential Supervision

• Existential psychotherapy is a philosophical endeavour that aims to reveal the context in which Being comes to light (Heidegger, 1962).
• “As existential therapists philosophy becomes an integral part of our lives and teaches us how to question the way in which we are. Most importantly this reflection enlightens us to our relationship to the world and to others. This is of course true of existential supervision” (Moja-Strasser, 2009)
The Wheel of Supervision
Existential

Relationship = Supervisor - Supervisee

Relationship = Supervisee - client

Relationship with outside agencies

Choice & Freedom

Emotions

Theories, Values & Assumptions

Worldview

The Frame

Safety

Uncertainty

Time

Isolation

Anxiety

Choice

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• The client is only there through the eyes of the supervisee – hence it is about the open-ness of the supervisee’s experience of the client
• It is a SEEING OVER - to look again
• What are the doubts, irritations, disturbances that effect the supervisee’s ability to be with the client? What is getting in the way?
• What is it the supervisee feels is provoked in the relationship with the client?
Emmy Van Deurzen

• Help supervisees clarify ethical or professional problems
• Clarify dynamics of therapeutic and supervisory relationship
• Has a focus on life
• Addresses both the client’s and the supervisee’s existential issues
• Supervision is in first instance about vision.  
• It is about seeing and overseeing the situation that has been created between client and therapist.  
• Also overseeing the situation between the client and the other people and things in her life: widening their horizon.  
• A chance to get some perspective and make new connections: see how client’s and own concerns are both the same and different.  
• Understand a bit more about human existence.  
• Help them understand the client’s experience, situation, dilemma and purpose.  
• Help them face up to underlying human issues, contradictions, possibilities, limits.
The Practice of Existential Supervision

- The phenomenological method
- The Inter-Relational Realms of Discourse
Phenomenology - Assumptions

• *We are active interpreters* – we are continually interpreting the world around us according to our own view of the world

• *All observations have assumptions* – we are never assumption free. By attending – just noticing, describing – not explaining, and not pre-judging, we can get a better idea of our assumptions.
Biases/Assumptions

1. Clients’ worldview, bias
2. Therapeutic relationship
3. Supervisee’s worldview, bias
4. Supervisor’s worldview, bias
5. Life and the wider perspective
Phenomenological Process

- Phenomenology is about description not explanation. Attempt to step back from explanations, transformations, interpretations etc
- Stay with the immediate material
- Stay curious and ask descriptively focussed questions (eg: How do you mean? What’s that like? Can you say a bit more about that?
- The intention is to open out possibility, not to close it down.
- To gain an objective view of our subjective experience
Description

• To see through the assumptions we have by staying with description rather than explanation
• To describe both the story AND the meaning and emotional sense
• To resist the temptation to ‘leap ahead’ and find an explanation for the supervisee
The Four Realms of Encounter

- I focus
- You focus
- We focus
- They focus
Explore the Supervisees Questions and the Meanings:

- The Relationship between – Supervisee and the client
- The Relationship between Supervisor and the Supervisee
- Narrative and The Process: How are they linked?
Inter-Relational Layers in Supervision
Exploring assumptions

- The existential method seeks to encourage clients into further examination of their assumptions and their underlying value system. What ultimately matters in existential work is to determine what it is that really matters to the clients (supervisees), not what ought to matter to them. (van Deurzen 2002, p. 106)
Working with the phenomena/themes

- As you listen to your supervisee’s narrative, reflect on what themes might be emerging. This might be for the supervisee/the client or both – and might extend to the supervisor and/or the organisation. For instance:
  - Expression of emotions
  - Aging
  - Loneliness
  - An expression like “I don’t know”
  - Creativity
  - Sexuality
  - Spirituality
Ongoing Thoughts - Alison

• Exploring the supervisee’s perception (understanding/interpreting) of their client’s world and their experience of being with them
• As a supervisor noticing your experience of being with the supervisee
• To allow for an opening to alternative experiences/ideas – use of questions rather than interpretations/explanations
• To examine together the assumptions, perceptions the supervisee has
• Process more than story – to work with the phenomena as they appear in the conversation
• Exploration of themes

• We never know! Supervision is speculation