

The Intergenerational Transmission of Core Values in Clinical Supervision

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Abstract

Four authors representing four generations of therapists reflect upon the role of core values that are communicated in the supervision hour. They further reflect upon how such values are transmitted from one generation of therapists to the next. Drawing upon their own experience of giving and receiving supervision, the authors hypothesize the existence of an intergenerational process by which values are passed on from one generation to the next.

Keywords

Core values, intergenerational transmission, presence, supervision, unconditional love

Four generations of therapists originally presented the ideas in this paper on the Intergenerational Transmission of Core Values in Clinical Supervision at a conference in Seattle. The purpose of the workshop was to demonstrate that the process of supervision goes beyond conveying theoretical ideas or suggesting clinical interventions for expressing and enacting core professional values. The further purpose of the workshop was to study how this takes place concretely over generations of therapists who pass on core values down the generations. The goals were approached by asking four generations of supervisors and supervisees to take turns presenting what they had experienced in supervision. The four included Merle Jordan, who was Doug Anderson's major supervisor in his doctoral program; Doug, who has provided clinical supervision and supervision of supervision to Brian Kennedy; Brian, who currently supervises Julia Bagley; and Julia, speaking about her experience as supervisee.

As the workshop unfolded, one theme emerged from all four speakers: the value of unconditional love. The quality of unconditional love in the supervisory process is

absolutely essential and basic. This value is transmitted both through the simple presence of the supervisor, but also through didactic methods.

We began with an unusual supervisory experience near the end of a clinical year of a PhD program in pastoral psychology where Merle Jordan was the supervisor for Doug Anderson. Merle wanted to share something very personal regarding the growing edge of this capable and perfectionistic student counselor. So Merle invited Doug to go with him outside the supervisory office to a drug store across the street to get a milk shake. After sitting down in a booth together, the supervisor said:

You have done a superb job academically and in acquiring clinical skills. However, I am worried sick about you. You may complete your whole training here and never get to know and value the lazy, imperfect, inadequate, and

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mistake-making part of you. I suggest that on your long drive home this afternoon that you have a heart-to-heart talk with that side of you, telling it all that you love and cherish about it.

Having made this dominant point, Merle, the supervisor, just got up and left. Later, Doug, the supervisee, described his experience by saying:

I drove home from that meeting about an hour's drive. As I drove, I imagined that part of myself that Merle had described was sitting in the front seat beside me. I spoke out loud directly to it, naming one after another his positive qualities that came to my mind. As I did so, I felt a surprising surge of energy throughout my body, an experience akin to falling in love. That experience initiated for me a career-long internal dialogue that became the foundation for my practice first of therapy and later of supervision.

In a similar fashion, Julia, the youngest professional of us four, told the story of her experience in supervision with Brian. In talking with Brian, she explained the anxiousness that she sometimes experienced when doing therapy. He suggested that when her self-doubt arose in a therapy session that she should notice it, acknowledge it, and give it space. Julia noted that she did just that in an initial meeting with a couple:

I could feel my anxiety level rising as the fear of the trauma this couple was presenting became apparent, and in turn my familiar self-doubt surfaced. In the past when this occurred, the fearful part of me orchestrated what happened next in the session and took me away from knowing my client's experience. Moreover, in the past, having these thoughts and feelings made me become polarized with them, such as thinking that a good therapist wouldn't be feeling this way, which only exacerbates things. This time I noticed the feeling in my body, and my belly, as well as the thoughts and their stories. I could grieve. Nothing got fixed in that session, but I believe I was able to stay grounded and was able to stay with my clients and move from a place of not knowing to a place of both curiosity and compassion. As I seemed to have a shared experience with them of anxiety initially, I believe that they had a shared experience with me as the session progressed, of just a bit more calm and space to hold all they carry.

Brian expressed his appreciation for Doug's quality of unconditional love that was transmitted to him, both through the didactic material but primarily through Doug's presence:

Doug has an ability to communicate to me something about a client that might be different from the way I may have perceived the situation, but it is done in such a way as to leave me continuing to feel respected and empowered in the encounter, even though, he may gently disagree with the direction I may want to go with a client. Another way this has been

transmitted to me is the way I may have, at times, been upset with Doug about something. I heard it said once that the best spiritual teachers are the ones who have room for the projections of others. On one occasion, I can recall the experience of perceiving that Doug had been critical of something I had done. On this occasion, when I expressed to Doug my experience of feeling criticized, what I expected from Doug is exactly the opposite of what I received. He took a thoughtful, concerned and loving approach to asking me about my experience. He didn't try to explain himself or offer an alternative view. With an unconditional positive regard, he allowed me to speak and he thoroughly witnessed my experience. It wasn't dispassionate either. He was very much engaged with me and even apologetic that I would have felt that way about an encounter he and I may have had. It was this "space" of compassionate witnessing that allowed me to learn about myself in that encounter. It was in that encounter that I could see so much about what I have learned from Doug.

Thus a core value passed on in supervision is growing in self-awareness and self-compassion that leads to enacting compassion toward one's supervisee. It involves the integrity of being true to one's self, especially to one's own feelings and parts of ourselves we would tend not to use consciously in our work as therapists. The underlying theme is of a gracious love and integration for all parts of one's self, even the so-called "bad me" and "not me" parts. As we gain courage to utilize the whole of ourselves, the more we naturally encourage our clients to discover, integrate and love all parts of themselves. So this challenges the client's formative experience and one's family of origin in which one has learned from parental authority that certain aspects and feelings of one's personhood need to be repressed, suppressed and denied in order for one to feel loved, confirmed, and accepted.

This approach also has profound spiritual and theological meaning. The supervisor is embodying that the Ultimate Heart of Reality loves us as we are and does not require us to put on a "good" face and "right" behavior in order to earn Divine Love. So this supervisory affirmation of the wholeness of the therapist's being is a profound corrective to the misperceptions and false beliefs about the negativity of various aspects of one's true self.

In implementing this corrective perspective, the therapist will need to challenge the inner, often unconscious, undermining and condemning voices that tell persons that they are inadequate, incapable, inferior, stupid, bad, weak, etc. Sometimes that challenge or corrective needs to point out that those negative inner voices, usually from one's family of origin, are not the voice of ultimate truth, but rather they have been acquired in the growing-up years around our supposed inadequacies and weaknesses. In a sense the approach is one of challenging one's self-destructive beliefs as lies that are much less than absolute and final truth. Oftentimes the supervisee will be operating within a world view that tells him or her that he or she must be perfect as a

therapist. The therapist, too often lives under the false guise that he or she needs to be perfect and do every step in therapy perfectly and correctly. What a relief it is for those therapists to learn in supervision that their feeling inadequate, weak, helpless and afraid is normal and natural for the therapeutic endeavor. They are not required to be perfect, superhuman, always right, and have all the answers.

Love is fundamental to the healing process in psychotherapy and in the creative interactions in clinical supervision. Karl Menninger suggested that it is un-love that makes people unwell, and it is love and love alone that can make them well again. Menninger's contention is buttressed by more general studies and surveys, in which it has been shown that those therapists are most successful in bringing health back to their clients who are best able to convey love. The theoretical framework may be Freudian, Jungian, Rogerian, Gestalt, transactional analysis, or anything else, but the most telling factor is still the ability to communicate care and hope to a troubled person. This explains in part why some psychotherapists seem to do so little for people even after months and years of appointments, and some complete amateurs who are more able to convey love are able to make a significant difference in a short time.

Carrying the above one step further is the construct that the very Heart of the Universe is Love. When we reflect that fundamental Love is our interaction in supervision and in therapy, we invite another into a more profound and realistic way of perceiving oneself as well as others. That absolute truth is grounded in love, that ultimate authority is founded on unconditional love and grace, that our honest self-definition is determined by such love – almost too good to believe – but it is true.

Brian has noted that Doug as supervisor has transmitted to him the importance of encounter over intervention, or maybe the better terminology would be the presence of the therapist is the intervention:

In a modern psychotherapeutic world dedicated to technological interventions, Doug has helped me to see that it is my presence, the way I receive the client, that is key to change and not technique. Not to suggest that Doug has not transmitted to me the importance of intervention, which he has, but it is the Encounter that makes any intervention possible and the Encounter is the most important intervention. There is an ever-evolving encounter or rather a string of encounters that is leading to an ever-growing relationship where a client can feel held and witnessed by me. It is through this ever-deepening unconditionally loving curious, spacious, non-pathologizing encounter that the client has a chance, maybe for the first time, to feel truly accepted and to also explore aspects of themselves that had been previously unexplored.

Another core value transmitted in supervision is the dogged and tenacious refusal to pathologize a client.

Brian notes:

At times when I may have been tempted or even crossed the line into painting a client into a box, Doug remained continually and tenaciously curious about the context of the client's life that may have created the behavior. His curiosity, and at times teaching, offered me a strong and compelling alternate view to the pathologizing one set forth by the client, the family, other practitioners and myself. At times the hardest client for me to work with has been the narcissistic male or female. The male narcissist has been the more challenging of the two. Again, Doug's commitment to relentless understanding of the context of a client's life and behavior has helped me to see that this selfish, self-serving client sitting in front of me is just as deserving of my love, maybe more, as the next. An example of this can be seen in the way that I have been sitting with a husband and wife where the husband had been consistently portrayed by the wife as an emotionally abusive bully, who was racist, sexist, and closed-minded to the point of alienating her religious values. I was being slowly hypnotized by the wife, and somewhat by the husband, into seeing him in that light. Until I spoke with Doug, I had not realized how I had been indoctrinated into the marital dyad's stuckness.

Julia spoke up at this point to add that in being supervised by Brian, she had experienced the same attitude stance from him. His supervision of her work has resulted in increased self- and other-awareness that in turn has resulted in her being able to understand and love her clients more fully.

Doug concluded that these supervisory themes have grown out of his original experience of Merle's supervision of him in graduate school. All four speakers confirmed that at the heart of supervision lies the encouragement to grow in self-awareness and self-acceptance. Coming to know oneself more fully and lovingly makes it possible to express compassion to our own clients and supervisees. These are the core values we four have experienced in the intergenerational transmission between us.

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