

Intersubjectivity and Reflective Supervision/Consultation: Applying Theory to Relationship-Based Practice

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WHY THIS WORKSHOP?



"Why, indeed," said the baby.



"Huh?" said the toddler.

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Common Misconceptions about Reflective Supervision

Reflective supervision is often misunderstood as an experience to primarily provide:

- Containment for the supervisee's intense emotional responses to the work
- A holding environment for the supervisee
- Mirroring of the supervisee's experience

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What Makes Reflective Supervision Unique

- The supervisory relationship is co-created.
- The supervisor is not merely a container for the supervisee’s emotional responses; rather, they are an active participant in the supervision experience.
- Supervision is transformative because the supervisor
 - supports the supervisee’s exploration of their experiences of their work
 - explores the development of a real relationship between supervisor and supervisee.

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What is Intersubjectivity?

- Under the umbrella of psychodynamic theories
 - Focus on the unconscious
 - Behavior is understood as an expression of internal and external “forces” that “have an impact on mental and emotional development” (Berzoff, 2002, p. 5).
 - Borne out of mother-infant observation and infant developmental theories

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Intersubjectivity is a Two-Person Theory

- Therapist and client bring with them their own experiences of relationships, power, and with emotions such as, anger and joy
- Therapist and client have multiple roles in terms of their cultural identifications, their experiences of family relationships, and their ghosts.
- Therapist and client bring the experiences of these roles to this therapist-client relationship
- Therapist and client influence one another and co-create a shared reality, called “the third”
 - This reality differs from the individual experience of the therapist or the individual experience of the client

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Intersubjectivity & Infant Mental Health

- The subjectivities of the therapist and client are important and recognized: Who am I and what do I bring to this relationship?
- The treatment relationship itself is an intervention
 - “The patient discovers herself through her encounter with the subjectivity of the therapist” (Delacour, 2002, p. 215).
- Attention to the “multiple identities” inhabited by clinician and client including the interpersonal and the social issues of power and privilege (Berzoff, 2011, p.236).

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Intersubjectivity & Reflective Supervision: Moments of “Twoness”

- Supervisor and supervisee are in a state of discord, unable to find a shared meaning or understanding of the supervisory relationship.
- Creates either/or dynamic of being “done to” and experiencing the other as the “doer” (Benjamin, 2004).
- Forces a choice between one person’s reality over another’s reality
- Denies authentic existence of multiple co-existing realities.

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Intersubjectivity & Reflective Supervision: Moments of “Oneness”

- Supervisor negates their own reality in deference to the reality of another; Benjamin (2004) calls this the “one-in-the-third”
- A supervisor’s attunement with a supervisee’s anxiety about a mother and baby overtakes their own reality of having a broader picture of the ebb and flow of IMH work.
- Similar to the experience of the newborn and mother dyad when the mother is able to provide feeding on demand; there is an experience of oneness and surrender (Benjamin, 2004).

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Intersubjectivity & Reflective Supervision: Moments of “Thirdness”

- Both supervisor and supervisee retain their own subjectivities while also recognizing their shared space.
- Benjamin (2004) calls this the “**third in the one**” experience where one can be attuned to another, by holding the other in mind, while also allowing for differentiation.
- Similar to mother who has been feeding the infant on demand and accommodating the baby’s needs but now needs sleep and allows herself to sleep; doing otherwise would be masochism or martyrdom that builds resentment and injures attunement (Benjamin, 2004).

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The Importance of Recognition

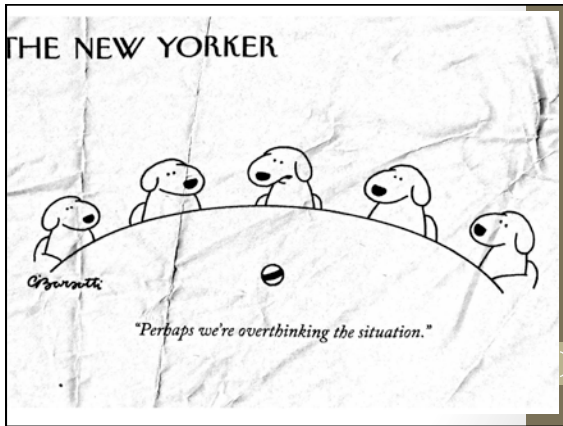
- “The mother cannot function only as a mirror” (McKay, 2019, 166)
- “The experience of being seen as one has longed to be but couldn’t have said so” (McKay, 2019, 166).
- “In Benjamin’s (2016) words, ‘I change you, you change me:’ the paradox is that both participants are themselves and changed by the other, ongoingly” (McKay, 2019, 166).

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Reflective Supervision Can Serve as the Third

- The Reflective Supervisor can offer an experience of the third for the IMH Home Visitor, particularly when the Home Visitor is stuck in a place of twoness with the family
- Supervisor can join with the IMH Home Visitor’s emotional experience while also having their own separate experience of the IMH Home Visitor-Parent and/or Parent-Infant relationship(s).
 - Just as the parent joins with the sadness of the toddler who falls and scrapes their knee but also knows what the toddler does not know: the pain will pass and it will not always feel this way.

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From Theory to Practice

A VIGNETTE: PART ONE

Introducing

- Rosanna
- Daniel & Candi
- Dorothy

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From Theory to Practice

PART ONE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Where are the relationships in this vignette, and how might we understand each of them?
- What evidences of twoness are you finding in those relationships?

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From Theory to Practice

A VIGNETTE: PART TWO

Considering
various consequences of
relationships in states of
twoness

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From Theory to Practice

Questions for reflection:

- What is happening in each relationship?
- How is each one affecting each other one?
- What might we worry about for the baby?
- What needs to happen – for each participant?

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From Theory to Practice

A VIGNETTE: PART THREE

...and then the tide began to turn

Considering
indicators of possibilities for
thirdness that led to
positive changes

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From Theory to Practice

Questions for reflection:

- What has changed in each relationship?
- How/why?
 - How did Dorothy create a sense of thirdness in the reflective supervision experience with Rosanna?
- What made it possible for Dorothy to be able to create this sense of thirdness?

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From Theory to Practice

Questions for reflection:

- In this moment, what evidence of thirdness can be observed in each of the dyads?
- Looking ahead, what might this sense of thirdness for Dorothy and Rosanna bring to
 - Rosanna’s relationship with Candi?
 - Candi’s relationship with Daniel?

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Closing Questions

When considering the uniqueness of you that you bring to a RS/C relationship:

How might this intersubjective theoretical framework help you to understand or explore your experiences of reflective supervision?

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Closing Questions

More specifically:
Think of one RS/C relationship in your life, and one infant/family you've discussed together. In which of these collaborative tasks are/were the two of you most likely to experience moments of
Twoness? Oneness? Thirdness?

- **Describing:** "What do we know?"
- **Responding:** "How do we and others think and feel about this?"
- **Exploring:** "What might this mean?"
- **Integrating:** "What have we learned?"

(Watson et al., 2016, p. 17; Alliance for the Advancement for Infant Mental Health)

References

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And the baby said, "Thanks!"