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Ethical Maturity and the Role of Empathy and Compassion in Supervision

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'...two qualities that best sustain ethical maturity are empathy and compassion' (Carroll and Shaw 2013).

An old Cherokee chief is teaching his grandson about life:

"A fight is going on inside me" he said to the boy. "It is a terrible fight and is between two wolves, one is evil... full of anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt and ego... The other wolf is good... full of joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith... This fight is going on inside you and inside others too."

The grandson thought for a minute and then asked his grandfather "Which wolf will win?"

The old Cherokee replied "The one I feed" (Cited in Carroll & Shaw 2013 p20).

Introduction

In this workshop I will consider the changes that are happening in the field of ethics that are now coming together within the helping professions and impinging on the supervision process. I think these changes are much more aligned to the way many helping professions have evolved, giving a clearer framework that we can recognise (BACP Ethical framework). The subject of ethics is becoming alive and more meaningful in our work, rather than a set of 'thou shalt's' decreed by the moralistic philosophers of bygone days!

Over the past decade counselling, theology and neuroscience have begun to converge... this roughly translates to the therapeutic relationship, compassion and brain structure! Ethical maturity in supervision is about being aware of the developments in the helping professions and using them in service with our supervisees to work ethically.

Shaming is evident in many educational, family and social systems. Supervision has the potential to continue this process or change it. Shame is an existential feeling that can become toxic and block development (changing or arresting brain structure). Recent findings from neuroscience have suggested that empathy and compassion can allow the brain to restructure and develop. Allowing the brain to fully integrate with mind and body, gives us more capacity to make ethical decisions that are based on our relationship with each other and our environment.

Some major contributions and insights

- Carol Gilligan - Ethicist and Psychologist who wrote a seminal text on ethics in 1982 ('In a Different Voice'). Challenging the male preserve of individuation, autonomy and objectivity arguing for developmental and relational aspects in ethics
- The whole field of neuroscience over the last 10-15 years has confirmed this relational view that commentators such as Ian McGilchrist (2009 *The Master and His Emissary*) and Dan Siegel (2011 *Mindsight*) amongst others, have guided us in understanding
- Which has led us to further understand the role of compassion (Paul Gilbert 2009 - *The Compassionate Mind*) and empathy (De Waal 2009 *The Age of Empathy*)
- These themes were further developed in Sue Gerhart's book on the *Selfish Society* (2010) arguing for the 'ethics of care' in our society (political and economic)
- Then recently these concepts, ideas, research and practical experiences have been reviewed by Michael Carroll and Elizabeth Shaw (2013 - *Ethical Maturity in the Helping Professions*) and they challenge us not to just sit back on the codes and frameworks of our professions but to use them as a 'stepping stone' to a 'higher ethic of relational accountability' (Carroll & Shaw 2013)

Some questions:

Up until today what has been your experience of your ethical practice within your profession?

Do you look towards your professions' code or framework to solve ethical dilemmas?

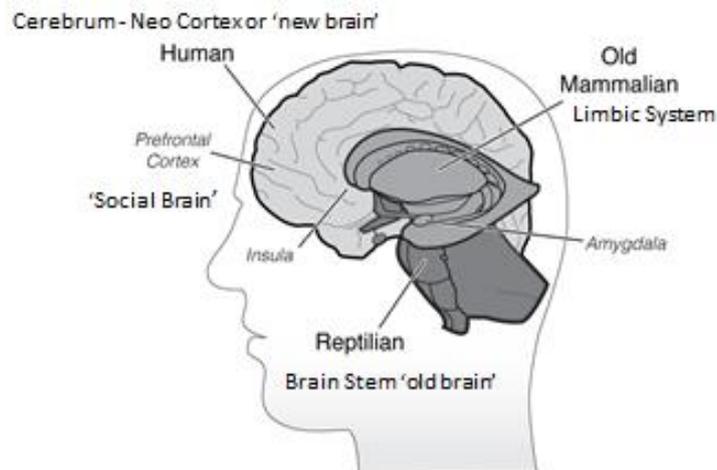
How is your view of ethics beginning to change/develop/establish from what you have heard so far?

Is there such a thing as 'objective' ethics?

Are there 'stages' to our ethical development? What might they be and how might they coincide within other aspects of our developmental growth?

The argument for a relational ethical approach that is developmental and underpinned by the neurosciences

Brain Development



- The brain is a social organ linking internal and external experiences
- We are born with the brain stem functioning which connects neural pathways throughout the body (reptilian brain)
- The limbic region then develops and is crucial for attachment with mother or care giver
- Next the prefrontal cortex develops, this area of the brain connects with the insula and limbic regions and mediates messages (nick-named the 'social brain')

Nine functions of the 'Social Brain'

- 1) Balance body functioning
 - 2) Attunement - crucial for compassion
 - 3) Emotional balance - regulates emotions
 - 4) Response flexibility - ability to pause - mediates impulse and action (act of will)
 - 5) Calms fear - fear modulation
 - 6) Develops insight - self knowing and awareness
 - 7) Empathy - ability to imagine what it feels like for others
 - 8) Morality - for the larger social good
 - 9) Intuition- instant connectedness to all body systems (heart, gut, spleen, brain etc) - creating integration
- Development of the prefrontal cortex integrates the rest of the brain
 - Differentiation + Linkage = Integration
 - Nurturing relationships are crucial for the healthy development of the brain

- The pulses from the reptilian brain can be strong - switching off the social brain for survival
- The cognitive brain interprets social and reptilian brain impulses to decide on action
- If social brain does not calm fear messages then reptilian impulses increase and results in anxiety
- The brain is connected with body neurological functions and vice-versa and can re balance itself (neuroplasticity) according to relational experiences with others, environment, behaviours etc - it continues to grow and develop throughout life

Reference: Siegel D. (2009) The Brain and the Developing Mind

http://fora.tv/2009/06/30/Dan_Siegel_The_Brain_and_the_Developing_Mind

From this understanding of our development as human beings, there is now beginning to be a consensus that to make fully formed ethical decisions we need integration of all areas of the brain, body and mind; automatic and intuitive impulses, emotional responses, cognitive and executive functioning of the prefrontal cortex. If these are developed or blocked as we relate and grow with significant others and our environment through life, so will our ability to make ethical decisions.

The role of empathy and compassion in supervision

Carroll and Shaw (2013) ascertain that "...two qualities that best sustain ethical maturity are empathy and compassion" and when we do not have empathy and compassion we then can 'objectify others' (often being seen as an important ingredient to act unethically). "Being 'in relationship' with others is a strong basis for ethical understanding and action" (Ibid p37).

As seen in the development model of the brain, fear can block the full functioning of the prefrontal cortex - we do not want to feel compassion for the bull charging at us in rage - so the fight, flight, freeze process can work automatically. Fear can often be triggered in supervision by the feeling of shame, the fear of being exposed by 'getting it wrong' or the strong desire to appear competent.

So how can empathy and compassion work? Let's look at what can happen in supervision:

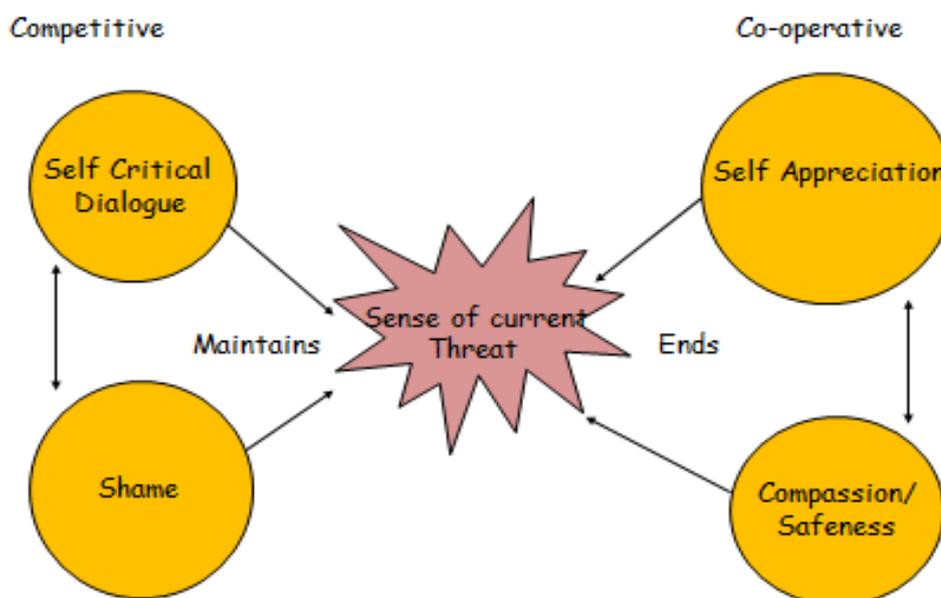
- There is a power imbalance in supervision (particularly in training)
- The supervisor can become unassailable 'beyond criticism'
- Abuse of power can lead to shaming, amongst other things
- Many supervisees/supervisors have themselves been subject to a shame-based education system, parenting styles, professional bodies and organisational management
- Shame means 'to hide' so often it can go unnoticed and/or unchallenged by both
- The shame prone supervisee/supervisor will be hypersensitive to criticism
- Feedback will be fraught with pitfalls, as trust is difficult to maintain

How to counteract shame and the fear response in supervision:

- Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.
- Compassion is more complex, arising when meeting another's suffering or struggle, where one may act (or not) to help
- Compassion is 'the keen awareness of the....' interconnectedness and therefore the.... 'interdependence of all things' (adapted from Thomas Merton 1915-68 - theologian)
- Mutuality of response is essential to our feeling secure in a real relationship - Kaufman (1992) (backed up by neuroscience)
- By first of all responding with empathy to the supervisee's emotional responses, a supervisee gets the message that they are understandable as a fellow human being
- This appropriately followed with compassion can create a bond between supervisee and supervisor
- This 'bond' Kaufman calls an interpersonal bridge
- Ruptures in the relationship can normally be healed via this bridge
- Supervision is not about rights and wrongs or any other polarisation but more about differing perspectives that might be useful in the supervisee's work with their client
- Once liberated from the right/wrong model of supervision (Gilbert and Evans 2000) then a supervisee will have the potential to flourish, feel safe enough to be challenged with support and begin to integrate the executive functioning of the brain. Thus making authentic ethical decisions that come from this developed sense of self and others
- From this safe environment the supervisee and supervisor can be open, questioning and inquisitive (Carroll and Shaw 2013 p135)
- Becoming less competitive and more co-operative

Deborah Lee (2009) described this diagrammatically:

Turning off the Threat System



Deborah Lee (2009)

The importance of interconnectedness, interdependence and integration in making ethical decisions

If we go with what the neuroscience is telling us, the brain is a social organ that functions best when it is fully integrated. It becomes fully integrated when able to develop over time, in relation and therefore interconnected with other human beings. We are a 'pack animal' and like all pack animals (dogs, horses, wolves) we link with each other to survive, yet we are also separate organisms.

When 'safe' enough the fully functioning, executive 'social' brain is able to appreciate differences, make linkage with those differences - human beings relate with each other within human experiences - that helps us to integrate as a whole, therefore being able to make ethical decisions to benefit the collective and strengthening human existence.

Carroll and Shaw offer that when all three brains are integrated and working together there is the possibility of ethical maturity. That is, when the reptilian brain is fully functioning we look after ourselves, we then connect with each other and bond through emotional responses in the limbic region, while the executive brain functioning in the prefrontal cortex, give us a sense of balance, pausing to reflect, developing insights and intuitive responses.

They offer this useful chart:

Brain	Gift	Warning signs
Reptilian	Keeping Safe	Me only
Limbic	Relational Communication Experience Emotions	Collusive Identified with No systemic thinking My-group only
Executive	Rational Imaginative Reflective Language Long term Manages emotions	Non emotional The present Mindless Manipulation

(Carroll and Shaw 2013 p100)

Ethical Maturity and How this Manifests in Supervision

There are many theories of human development (some highlighted in Carroll and Shaw 2013 p 127) but all agree that human beings don't just arrive as developed human beings but evolve and change over time depending on the environmental, nature and nurture factors.

I was once told that Native Americans believe that we are adolescent until we are 50 years old - coming up to 60 years I have a lot of sympathy with this view! From most theories of age/stage development we gradually develop our adult in our 30's and 40's but that most of us don't get to a sizable portion of the adult until much later, yet I am also sure that some do earlier according to their own developmental issues!

Carroll and Shaw (2013) view ethical maturity as 'a developmental process by which we move from dependency to an integrated state involving cognitive, social, intuitive and emotional aspects of decision making' (p136).

We are familiar with developmental processes of the counsellor and supervisor. As supervisors we are also aware of the difference between a student counsellor/psychotherapist/coach and an experienced qualified one.

What we now need to consider is our supervisee's and our own ethical development with all the variants involved. It is important not to make the assumption that qualification or accreditation in a professional body, equals maturity. Fully developed ethical psychotherapists /counsellors /coaches are not born and even age does not automatically give us an ethical view point.

Conclusion

Ethical maturity comes through an experiential, developmental, relational process, best developed in an atmosphere of support and challenge. The support is offered through empathy and compassion, supporting the efficacy of an integrated brain that is fully functioning in a safe environment. A fully functioning interconnected brain, body and mind that connects with our supervisee's corresponding fully functioning brain, body and mind, enhances authentic decision making skills.

Ethical maturity is developed on a 'journey' through life as we gain the necessary skills, not a destination that needs to be justified and defended by a set of external rules but can be guided by a framework of values and principles.

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