

Supervisory Triangles and the Helicopter Ability

In this paper the supervisory triangle (client/therapist/supervisor) and the helicopter ability (keeping an overview) will be examined. In Dramatherapy supervision this triangle is affected by another very important component, which is the art form (performance, story telling, sand-play, drawing to mention a few). The art form takes on the role of the all-encompassing container, which can substitute the roles in the supervisory triangle and shed light on the therapeutic process. It becomes the catalyst, the joining factor which dispenses with hierarchy. In art therapies generally the art process intervenes between the identification (should it be transference?) and counter-identification of the client and the therapist. It mediates within the transference and may facilitate the journey of a relatively unconscious state, through stages of concrete thinking, to the beginnings of separation and eventually to symbolization (Cassirer 1955; Schaverien 1991).

As an example I will be using the supervision of a professional playtherapist who consulted a dramatherapist on her practice. The terms supervisor and supervisee will be used. During supervision the therapy session is reproduced very closely to its original form, but at the same time it takes on a life of its own. As Doebram (1976) suggests, the failure to observe its presence in supervision may be an indication of a natural resistance on the part of the supervisor/supervisee to confronting the full impact of those forces which they are asking the client to face.

The relationship of the supervisor with the supervisee, however, is different from that of the therapist and the client. The former relationship is on a more equal basis and resembles the way Reason (1988, 11) describes co-operative inquiry. In co-operative inquiry we work with our co-researchers, establishing relationships of authentic collaboration and dialogue. While not ignoring the necessity for direction and the role expertise, we eschew unnecessary hierarchy and compulsive control.

Supervising the work of another therapist is similar to listening to a fairy story. However, unlike fairy stories, which speak the language of symbols, representing unconscious content, the story of the therapist represents the reality of her client, as far as she perceives it. When a therapist is telling the story of a session with her client, she is really asking and answering questions about the here and now situation of her client-protagonist. During the process of recalling a session the therapist needs to put the events into some form of perspective so as to gain a better comprehension of what took place. For this reason, in the beginning of a supervisory session, the Dramatherapist needs to hear out the supervisee before any form of action or analyzing can take place.

Dramatherapy supervisors listening to these stories can call upon their 'internal roles', as guides to their work. These roles are the 'internal client' the 'internal therapist' and the 'internal supervisor', which mirror the supervisory triangle.

The 'internal client' is the role which co-ordinates with the real client, whether that is the supervisee or her own client(s). Life experiences put us in touch with the experiences the client might be going through. These experiences come from the sphere of feelings, which could include joy, pain, loss and others. Many feelings and thought processes originate from the attitudes of parents, teachers and more broadly the culture in which a person has been brought up. The 'internal client' needs to be the spring from which empathy for the client comes forth. At the same time the 'internal client' needs to be kept at a 'safe' distance, so that she is not in danger of getting lost in personal alleys that would render the supervisor unable to help the supervisee and subsequently the client.

The 'internal therapist' is the role that sets out to face any given situation. The 'internal therapist' has the required training, theory and intellectual capabilities. She possesses the structure, the aim and the methods in order to guide the supervisee. Finally, 'internal supervisor' is the role which can give direction. It has the ability to remain at a distance from the therapeutic process, while at the same time it is also participating in it. The 'internal supervisor' is the role that can literally step outside the self and observe what is taking place. In this fashion the 'internal supervisor' can support or doubt what the other parts are involved in. The 'internal supervisor' navigates both the 'internal therapist' and the 'internal client' so that a balance can be achieved.

Parallel to these roles the dramatherapeutic technique applied during each session represents the artistic element in the process through which supervision can be inspired. In order for this to be understood I will give an example where a story was utilized in supervision. The story was used to fuel the imagination of the supervisee in relation to her client. The story became a guide for her to see her client in a different way.

During supervision the helicopter ability is put into practice. It incorporates the three internal recourses and could be described as the ability which enables the switching of perspectives between them. It gives the opportunity for a bird's-eye view of a particular situation as well as accessibility to different levels. Hawkins and Shohet mention: 'Unless supervisors are relatively clear about their basic feelings to the supervisee, they cannot notice how these feelings are changed by the import of unconscious material from the supervisee to their clients (1989, 71).

To illustrate the supervisory triangle I will be presenting some extracts from supervision sessions between a client, Alkis, a supervisee, Vera (paytherapist) and supervisor, Eleni (Dramatherapist). The names given have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

Four year old Alkis was referred to Vera as a hyperactive child with behavioural problems. He had started kindergarten but was having trouble adjusting, with the result that a private carer had been appointed to look after him. Alki's parents had been to several therapists in the past who were not able to deal with Alkis. In fact often, according to the parents they had been

blamed for Alkis' erratic behaviour. As a result, the parents felt threatened by psychiatrists and other specialists and wanted to believe that there was nothing seriously wrong with Alkis. On a different level they knew that Alkis was not like other children. There were many reasons which would indicate this fact, one of them being that they were unable to socialize with him with them.

Early on in my work with Vera, listening to her tell me about her client Alkis brought to my mind the image of *The Little Prince* (de Saint-Exupery 1982). As a result, I brought the story into our work and it seemed to run parallel with the unfolding of Alki's own story. The story of *The Little Prince* was used for twelve sessions consecutively and through it we gained insight into our supervision work. I have the whole story recorded in twelve abbreviated chapters so that I can use extracts which I believe could be helpful to my clients. As Lahad (1998) suggested, the story itself became the guide for the supervisory process, allowing the supervisor to take a back seat. A story provides the supervisee a distance from the immediate facts and through this there is a depersonalization of the problem. This results in the supervisee entering into a situation more freely and working on an unconscious level which can provide protection from feelings of exposure (Robertson 1998).

In the supervisory work with Vera during each session she would relate her recent work with Alkis and after this we listened to one chapter from *The Little Prince* and tried to make connections. I did not choose a specific chapter each time; instead I allowed the story to run its course. Using the story as a guide, we were able to gain insight into the work Vera was doing with Alkis. The fact that each chapter in the *The Little Prince* corresponded to Alki's story can only be ascribed to synchronicity. Similarities in the events of a supervisory session can be found in most stories when the fictional characters are similar to the clients. It is through the development of the story that parallelisms are drawn.

De Saint-Exupery presented the Little Prince as a child innocent to the way of the word and preoccupied with his own thoughts. His wisdom was simple and his manners were charming. He appeared to have no parents and lived on a little planet of his own far away from Earth. One day he decided to travel and landed on the planet Earth where he met a pilot who had crash-landed in the desert. He asked the pilot to draw some pictures for him. When the pilot asked him questions, the Little Prince never answered directly.

I could see many similarities with Alkis in this story. Alkis, at the beginning of his life, would also seem to have no parents as he had been put up for adoption. Alkis also appeared to live in a world of his own; he had his own wisdom and never answered questions. He too had found an adult (the therapist) to draw pictures according to his specifications. Finally, one could say that he also embarked on a journey like the Little Prince, through his Playtherapy sessions.

Perhaps one of the main issues arrived at through Vera's work with Alkis was the painful realization by all parties that he was a child with special needs.

Together with the death of the Little Prince in our story came the death of the romantic notion of Alki's as 'a cute little baby'. He wasn't a child with a psychological blockage due to his adoption, as had been assumed until then, but it would appear that he did have a more serious autistic problem, which the family needed to face and accept. Von Franz (1970, 1) in her book *Puer Aeternus*, analysis the story of *The Little Prince* and says that, in general, the man who is identified with the archetype of the *puer aeternus* remains too long in adolescent psychology; that is, all those characteristics that a normal youth of seventeen or eighteen are continued into later life, coupled in most cases with too great a dependence on the mother. She suggests that de Saint-Exubery was such a personality. I feel there is a parallelism in the personalities of de Saint-Exubery and Alkis, even though the first was a grown man and the second a child.

Alkis was four and a half, generally hyperactive and disruptive with the result that his mother kept their home sparsely decorated. Alkis did not hold conversations, he only asked questions. From his behaviour it was apparent that he was not lacking in intelligence. He has fascinated with hairs, strings and materials of interesting textures. He was not toilet-trained.

An extract from the supervision session

During this session the theme of moving and leaving others behind was prevalent and it seemed to be taking place on several planes. In the story of the Little Prince it appeared through his leaving his planet together with the migrating birds. This synchronicity inspired deeper meaning into the supervisory process.

Vera began her story:

Alkis ran away from school on Friday and it took them more than an hour to find him. The head mistress, who is an acquaintance of mine, was annoyed both with his mother and me because we hadn't warned her that Alkis could be dangerous. She wanted to expel him from her kindergarden. Alkis' mother telephoned me on Friday evening and she was very angry. She felt that everyone was taking advantage of her through her child. Perhaps she had a point. She was paying for an extra child-minder to look after Alkis while he was at school but the child minder was often assigned to other jobs.

Vera then told me that the weekend before this incident Alkis' parents had gone away from Saturday evening to Sunday evening, leaving Alkis, for the second time in his life, with his grandmother.

I had my own thoughts and questions about Alki's behaviour. Was Alkis' parent' weekend connected to his running away from school? Could this have been a mirroring of how he had felt about his parents' behaviour towards him especially when he was not used to it? Or was it simply that Alkis had been unhappy at school, felt bored and wanted a change?

I feel that there was a connection between his running away and his feeling of abandonment. His parents had only left him behind one other time so he must have felt bewildered and perhaps he felt he was to blame in some way.

Another important factor in Alkis' life was that he had been left by his blood mother as a very young baby at an institution from which he did not leave until he was a year old.

During his session with Vera, Alkis worked well. When, however, the session ended and Alkis' father was ten minute late coming to get him, he was very uneasy and destructive.

When Vera had finished her story about Alkis I put on the cassette with the story of the Little Prince. We had reached the part of his migration with the birds from his own planet to others. His first visit was to the planet of the king:

-Α, να ένας υπήκοος, φώναζε ο βασιλιάς όταν είδε το μικρό πρίγκιπα. Κι ο μικρός πρίγκιπας αναρωτήθηκε:

-Πως ξέρει να μ' αναγνωρίσει, αφού δε μ' έχει ξαναδεί ποτέ του; Δεν ήξερε πως για τους βασιλιάδες, ο κόσμος είναι πολύ απλοποιημένος. Όλοι οι άνθρωποι είναι υπήκοοι.

-Πλησίασε για να σε δω καλά, του είπε ο βασιλιάς, πολύ περήφανος που ήταν βασιλιάς για κάποιον,

Ο μικρός πρίγκιπας γύρεψε με τα μάτια του να καθίσει, μα ο πλανήτης όλος ήταν σκεπασμένος από τον μεγαλόπρεπο μανδύα του βασιλιά. Στάθηκε λοιπόν όρθιος, κι όπως ήταν κουρασμένος, χασμουρήθηκε.

-Η εθιμοτυπία δεν επιτρέπει να χασμουριούνται μπρος στον βασιλιά, του είπε ο μονάρχης. Σου τ' απαγορεύω.

-Δεν μπορώ να κρατηθώ, αποκρίθηκε κατατρομαγμένος ο μικρός πρίγκιπας. Έκανα μεγάλο ταξίδι και δεν κοιμήθηκα....

-Τότε, τον έκοψε ο βασιλιάς, σε διατάζω να χασμουρηθείς. Χρόνια τώρα έχω να δω κάποιον να χασμουριέται. Τα χασμουρητά είναι για μένα κάτι το αξιοπερίεργο. Εμπρός! Χασμουρήσου πάλι. Σε διατάζω.

After listening to that scene Vera felt she resembled the king very much and that she was always giving orders to Alkis. She drew a king with a large cape which hid his body completely and next to him she drew the small prince. Vera said: 'What concerns me is whether I am trying to structure my sessions with Alkis too much.'

The episode of Alkis' running away from school was an experience I had had in the past with my daughter when she was the same age as Alkis. She had also run away from school and the supervision session had brought this memory back to me. I had the same treatment by the teacher, who blamed me for my child's behaviour, so I felt a lot of sympathy for Alkis' mother. I remember feeling guilty about keeping my daughter on so late at school, because I was working, and yet I knew it was the teacher's responsibility to keep the children on school grounds. This memory is a good example of the 'internal client' coming to the surface, thus shedding more understanding on the feelings of Alkis' mother.

During this session it was as though several pebbles had been thrown into the pond simultaneously, causing many ripples.

The helicopter ability can call upon the correlation of different persons and ideas. Alki's parents, 'the system' could be seen as giving information to the 'internal supervisor', thus giving insight through their reactions towards their child. Alki himself was able to inform the 'internal therapist' through his action of running away which brought forward a chain of reactions.

On a different level one can see the story as a guide to the supervisory process as a whole. The Little Prince in his story was in charge of the situation. The orders were given by the king so that he could establish his power; however, he had to alter them in order to suit the Little Prince. Vera had felt that she was constantly giving Alki orders, while in fact he had managed to induce her into giving orders which suited him.

According to Storr (1969,132) the degree of recovery which takes place in the patient is proportional to the degree of maturity of the relationship which he is enabled to make with the therapist. This recovery, however, cannot change a person's basic characteristics. Vera and Alki had reached a maturity in their relationship but Alki was still in control.

By using the story of *The Little Prince* during the difficult time which Alki and his parents were facing, the supervisory process was given food for thought. Through the parallelisms of the story both Vera and myself were able to make connections between Alki and the Little Prince which furthered our understanding of Alki. By fuelling and containing the imagination the story nourished and inspired the 'internal supervisor'.

The internal resources of the Dramatherapy supervisor need to operate like a team which is involved in a very complicated relay game. At any moment in time one part is holding the skittle and it needs to hold on for as long as is necessary before passing it on. The length of time the skittle is kept with each part needs to be balanced according to the needs of the client. The helicopter ability makes use of these internal resources and at the same time enables the supervisor to observe the dynamics expressed in the several triangles that form during the supervision process.