
A Supervision of Solidarity Une supervision de solidarité

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ABSTRACT

This article illustrates an approach to therapeutic supervision informed by a philosophy of solidarity and social justice activism. Called a *Supervision of Solidarity*, this approach addresses the particular challenges in the supervision of therapists who work alongside clients who are subjected to social injustice and extreme marginalization. It asks, “How can we as therapeutic supervisors support therapists to do this difficult work in the margins in ways that are in accord with our collective ethics? How can we (both therapists and their supervisors) experience sustainability and transformation collectively across time?” The article provides an example of this form of supervision, highlighting key aspects of the work.

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article illustre une approche de la supervision thérapeutique qui s’inspire d’une philosophie de solidarité et d’une action militante en matière de justice sociale. Appelée *Supervision de Solidarité*, cette approche porte sur les défis particuliers inhérents à la supervision de thérapeutes qui travaillent auprès de clients soumis à de l’injustice sociale et à une marginalisation extrême. La question fondamentale : « Comment pouvons-nous, en tant que superviseurs de thérapie, aider les thérapeutes à accomplir ce travail difficile en contexte de marginalité d’une manière qui concorde avec nos règles de déontologie collective? Comment pouvons-nous, aussi bien en tant que thérapeutes que superviseurs, atteindre une viabilité et une transformation collectives au fil du temps? L’article fournit un exemple de cette forme de supervision, en mettant en lumière des aspects clés du travail.

The approach to therapeutic supervision that I call a *Supervision of Solidarity* grew from my desire to embrace and connect learnings from activism with therapeutic supervision. I specifically wanted to bring a spirit of solidarity and understanding of collectively held ethics that side with justice into this work. Solidarity means that our collective liberation, our ways forward toward something *just*, are woven together. I wanted to contribute to therapists’ abilities to stay alive in the oppressive contexts of our work by creating opportunities for supervision to attend to more than immediate and individual crises and pain.

In this article, I will describe the context of my work with therapists working in the margins that informed the development of my approach. I will outline the six principles of the Supervision of Solidarity and, to illustrate these principles in action, I will present an outline of the Solidarity Group and a retelling of this therapeutic supervision practice. I have developed several supervision practices that

follow from commitments to these principles, but I have chosen to address the Solidarity Group because of the energy, interest, and usefulness that the practice has inspired in the therapists who participate in it.

The Solidarity Group emphasizes our collective sustainability with a specific aim to build solidarity and an orientation for justice-doing. At the centre of the conversation are themes connected to principles I will elaborate on in more detail later, including centring ethics, doing solidarity, addressing power, fostering collective sustainability, critically engaging with language, and structuring safety. This is different from organizing therapeutic supervision around specific problems and individual workers. The Solidarity Group is only one component of the necessary supervision of therapists, with an emphasis on collective sustainability of the therapeutic community and their relational ethics. In the Solidarity Group, a community of therapists is the resource, not necessarily the supervisor. Although one therapist is interviewed, the centre is the whole group.

This writing does not aim to offer a static model for therapeutic supervision nor a set of tools, but rather the principles of a Supervision of Solidarity that can be acted upon differently to suit particular contexts. I hope that this writing will lead therapeutic supervisors to engage with the principles of a Supervision of Solidarity offered here, re-create the Solidarity Group practice, and create other practices, to serve the needs of their specific therapeutic communities.

THE THERAPISTS WHO STAND BEHIND THIS WORK

A Supervision of Solidarity evolved in response to the contexts of injustice and marginalization in which I was supervising therapists. What the therapists I work alongside most desire is to be of use to their clients. I have supervised therapists who work in rape crisis centres, in shelters for homeless people, in health clinics in impoverished communities, and alongside refugees who have survived political violence and torture. Many therapists suffer from a cold fear in the belly that incompetence or a lack of knowing on their part may result in devastating consequences for clients. Isolation is often at work to invite stories of their own identities as incompetent, disconnected, and ineffective.

Losing clients to suicide and violent death is a reality. Experiences of being overwhelmed are not uncommon. Job titles such as support worker, shelter worker, or addictions counsellor offer only thin descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of the complex demands of their work, and they do not honour the magnitude of trauma, violence, and exploitation that shape the identities of clients. Many therapists must resist being beaten down by waitlists, which act as *weight lists* due to scarce resources and abundant need. In these contexts, therapists struggle to practice in line with their ethics, and to help clients keep a fingerhold on dignity. Teachings from these therapists have informed this work from the inside, pushing me to be of use because of their own determination to stay alive and effective. The humble competence and slogging patience of these therapists has accompanied me in the development of the Solidarity Group supervision practice, and this holds me up.

THE THERAPEUTIC SUPERVISION PRACTICE: THE SOLIDARITY GROUP

Before outlining in detail how solidarity groups are organized, and providing an example of this form of supervision in practice, I would like to briefly review some traditions related to therapeutic supervision. The approach shares with others an attention to practices of collaboration and an attention to the particularities of power in therapeutic supervision. Bird's (2006) innovative therapeutic supervisory practices have informed me, specifically her attention to the power of language and to the possible connective practices of language that can bring us together and in relationship with ideas.

Collaborative therapeutic supervision practices, as developed by Andersen and Swim (1995), invite a generative and community-making spirit to therapeutic supervision. Crocket (2004) invites therapeutic supervisors to share responsibilities with therapists so that the supervisory relationship is not limited to monitoring clinical performance. Fine and Turner (1997) invite therapeutic supervisors into accountability for their access to power within the supervisory relationship. I've also found inspiration from Tsui (2005), who asserts that the goal of supervision is to enhance vision and to add multiple visions, not necessarily to direct therapists toward an idea of the correct vision.

The structure of the Solidarity Group is borrowed from Andersen's (1991) reflecting team. Originally, a reflecting team included a group of therapists who were invited to offer their reflections to a conversation between therapist and client. Andersen's use of the term *reflection* means "something heard is taken in and thought about before a response is given" (p. 12). In Andersen's approach, the reflecting team witnessed but was not part of the conversation between the therapist and client. Following the therapist's interview with the client, the reflecting team offered their responses as the therapist and client took a listening position. There have been many innovations in the use of reflecting teams, which speaks to the creativity and possibility evoked in the structuring of this kind of conversation (Andersen & Jensen, 2007).

Narrative therapist Michael White was inspired by the possibilities of the reflecting team and informed by Barbara Myerhoff's (1982) work. She believed that people require an audience for the stories of their preferred identity, and she called the performances of the story telling "Definitional Ceremony." White (2007) adapted this approach to therapeutic work and group supervision, calling it an "Outsider Witnessing Group." One of White's innovations was to invite non-therapists, qualified by their lived experience, into the role of reflecting listeners.

In solidarity groups the therapeutic community is being supervised collectively. In many ways it does not matter who is speaking, as the entire group is at the centre. As the supervisor, I look for themes that resonate with the principles of a Supervision of Solidarity. I attend to emergent experiences that hold meaning for the therapeutic community, not necessarily the individual being interviewed. These experiences may be acts of justice, ethical struggles, startling successes, painful losses, or other occurrences that hold meaning collectively. As the supervisor,

it is my task to ensure that all participants are witnessed in the conversation and that people are woven together.

SIX PRINCIPLES THAT INFORM A SUPERVISION OF SOLIDARITY

Six key principles inform the practices of the Solidarity Group: (a) centring ethics, (b) doing solidarity, (c) addressing power, (d) fostering collective sustainability, (e) critically engaging with language, and (f) structuring safety.

Centring Ethics

Theory and practice are central to the work of counselling, and they exist in relationships with ethics. While much therapeutic supervision is centred on investigations into theory and practice, for me the centre of supervision is the therapist's relational ethics. By this I mean the therapists' ethical positioning as they respond to clients' varying needs and contexts of power. When therapists cannot act in accord with their ethics, they experience spiritual pain. Spiritual pain speaks to the discrepancy between what feels respectful, humane, and generative, and contexts that call on therapists to violate the very beliefs that brought them to this field. In my supervision conversations, I am curious about what composes the ethical stance of the therapist, the collective ethics of the group, and how these ethics are revealed in practice (Reynolds, 2009).

Doing Solidarity

My understandings of solidarity are derived from time-honoured activist traditions of looking for points of connection and weaving people together, and in attending to both practices of resisting oppression and promoting social justice. This spirit of solidarity has been beautifully articulated by Lily Walker, an Australian Aboriginal women's leader speaking to non-Aboriginal activists at a land rights protest: "If you come here to help me, then you are wasting your time. But if you come here because your liberation is bound up in mine, then let us begin" (Walker, as cited in Sinclair, n.d.).

Addressing Power

Addressing power speaks to witnessing resistance and acts of justice-doing. Addressing power invites cultural and collective accountability. Accountability requires a complex analysis in which the multiplicity and intersection of sites of both power and oppression are acknowledged and addressed (Grant, 2001; Reynolds 2010a). Richard Day (2005), a grassroots anarchist, engages with a commitment to "groundless solidarity and infinite responsibility" (p. 18) – *groundless* meaning that our ethics are not tied to one oppression; *infinite responsibility* meaning that we strive always to be open to the other, to the multiplicity of ways that we might not be acting in authentic solidarity.

Fostering Collective Sustainability

Sustainability refers to an aliveness, a spirited presence, and a genuine connectedness with others. It requires more than resisting burnout, more than keeping a desperate hold on hope, and yet it encompasses both of these capacities. We are sustained in the work when we can be fully and relationally engaged, stay connected with hope, and be of use to clients across time. I see sustainability in our therapeutic work as something that we promote relationally, not in a series of individual projects running in isolation. Sustainability is nurtured by working in line with our collective ethics, which can offer a useful response to the spiritual pain that comes when structures, and our own limitations, persuade us to work in ways that go against the ethics that brought us to this work. Sustainability is inextricably linked with an alive engagement with a spirit of social justice, and an openness to the transformation we may experience as therapists in this difficult work (Martín-Baró, 1994).

Critically Engaging with Language

Critical understandings of language are important in all supervision conversations as we construct our understanding of the world through language (Wittgenstein, 1953). My purpose in relation to language is directed toward a critique of language as it can be used to serve or resist abuses of power. In particular I am interested in language in relation to power, what Coates and Wade (2007) speak of as the *four operations of language*, meaning the ways that language is used to conceal violence, obscure perpetrator responsibility, conceal victims' responses and resistance, and blame/pathologize victims. Without an overt intention of utilizing language in liberatory ways, supervisory conversation can invite therapists to hold clients responsible for their own suffering, displacement, and poverty. Critically engaging with language honours the role of social poetics (Shotter & Katz, 1998), which acknowledges the dialogue that exists outside of words and invites a languaging of the body.

Structuring Safety

I take responsibility for framing the dialogue as the therapeutic supervisor, and this is instrumental in the structuring of safety. Co-creating relationships of enough-safety, outside of the false binaries of safe and unsafe (Bird, 2006), is a cornerstone of this work. Practices such as continually negotiating permission can help invite safety. All conversations across difference are risky and of greater risk to some than to others. This is just one small way in which our work can never be innocent. The possibility of doing harm by replicating some kind of oppression is a potential risk. This is true despite our commitments to act in ways that are connected to social justice and in accord with our collective ethics. As the supervisor I cannot assure safety. I am also aware of the limitations of accountability and strive to create structures of safety so that transgressions and harm are less likely to occur. I believe that at times accountability holds the centre in therapy, when

justice would be better served by creating contexts in which the transgression does not occur. This requires Structuring Safety.

THE FORM OF THE SOLIDARITY GROUPS

To illustrate these principles in action, I will connect them to the supervision practice of the Solidarity Group, followed by a retelling of a particular therapeutic supervision practice. Here is an outline of the structure of the Solidarity Group.

In the opening dialogue, as the interviewer I engage in dialogue with a therapist who serves as the interview partner while the rest of the group is in a reflecting position. A “reflecting position” is a nonspeaking position with an intention of listening for what stands out in the conversation. Three or four other therapists serve as the reflecting witnesses who are then interviewed by me about their responses to this opening dialogue between me and the interview partner. Here the reflecting witnesses are invited to connect the parts of the conversation that stood out for them to their own experience, weaving connections in the group.

Following the conversation with these reflecting witnesses, I again interview the interview partner around his or her responses to the reflecting witnesses’ dialogue. All of the therapists who have not been in the roles of interview partner or reflecting witnesses serve as listening witnesses, and they are invited to offer a written response to the interview partner regarding their responses to the dialogue.

A PRACTICE EXAMPLE: “RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE”

The Collaborative Community Practice Group of Ottawa comprises therapists from a number of different local agencies and private practice, but with shared commitments to collaborative practice and ongoing supervision and training. I was invited to facilitate a Solidarity Group for this practice community by the clinical supervisor, David Paré. (The participants in this Solidarity Group have agreed to have their names used and the context of the group revealed. Don Baker, a family therapist, is the interview partner. The reflecting witnesses are Pam Storey Baker, Judith Brooks, and Susan Kennedy. There were also three listening witnesses—Francine Titley, Linda Smith, and David Paré—but their thread is not picked up in this re-telling.) This account is informed by a videotape of the group, as well as conversations with the participants.

Opening Dialogue (Interviewer: Vikki; Interview Partner: Don)

The Interviewer and the interview partner engage in dialogue, while the therapists who compose the witnessing group are positioned for reflecting, observing in silence.

When I asked what was at the heart of Don’s work, he said, “I’m a rage against the machine kind of guy” and spoke of “the ways that institutions in larger systems sometimes ‘do to’ clients.” He talked about “responding to people getting caught up in systems by advocating for them, maybe standing with them ... I have seen clients be humiliated a lot, angry that they don’t have power.” When I

asked what values or ethics inform these acts, Don named these ethics: “to stand up for what you feel is right,” “when there’s something on your mind to speak it,” and “to question.” Don said, “I believe that people would recognize these ethics in me. I hope they would.”

When I asked Don what qualifies him for his work, he spoke of “being able to connect with people and what they feel is important.” We discussed the times that raging against the machine is of use to clients, but Don also acknowledged that at times this position gets in the way. I asked how Don kept “rage against the machine” out of the way, if it was not the most useful thing for people. Don told a story of being at a client’s home when a social worker drove up in a new SUV.

The client, who did not own any vehicle, reflected on the wealth of some social service providers and then laughed, and asked Don why he was only driving an old Honda. Don was also struck by the way the vehicles marked the money privilege differences between them all, but didn’t talk about it until the client named it. I asked what difference it makes that the client is the one who took a position, and that he joined with her. Don said, “I don’t want to put my observations on her, well (a quiet pause), I think I do sometimes put my observations on people.” I asked how he would know he was putting his observations on others; he paused and said, “Perhaps I wouldn’t know because I’d be raging against the machine.”

I asked about the times “raging against the machine” might make it hard to put the person at the centre, and Don said, “Sometimes I can go overboard when I’m talking about the education system and just going on about how the system keeps huge dossiers on people full of negative stuff. But the education system does wonderful things, too; there are marvellous people in the education system.”

When I asked why Don thought it might not always be a good idea for him to rage against the education system, he said, “Well, those people have to use it... I feel like sometimes I’ve pushed my outrage way too much.” Here I attended to the pain Don experienced in disclosing an aspect of his practice he was not proud of and asked to track its presence in the body. I negotiated permission, and Don chose to continue to follow a thread of the spiritual pain he experiences. Don began to consider that “I could rage against the machine or perhaps it would be healthier for me to come in and work alongside the people working in that system, stepping in a little closer, because their reality is the exact same reality I’m facing.” When I asked which approach he thought served clients best, Don said, “I think the collaborative effort alongside the education system for sure.”

I asked Don if he had any thoughts about why we divide ourselves off as professionals and start to “rage against the machine” at each other, and he said, “I’m thinking it had something to do with starting to think my ideas are the right ideas.” I asked Don if he thought people went into the education system to get students under their thumb, and we both laughed. Don said, “Of course not, people went into that work because they were passionate about it; maybe learning impacted their lives positively.” I wondered if there is room for a real critique of the abuses of power that clients suffer if we’re “raging.”

I told Don this conversation had me thinking about the times that I've put my politics and my own agenda—particularly against other disciplines—at the centre, letting him know this is something I fall into also, and that I had some shame about that because it is not how I want to be. Don joined with me, and said, “I need to start to watch it when I feel too righteous ... there is a real danger for clients I work with ... I can cling onto righteousness. I think I'm good at that.”

I asked about the autonomy of clients and where their voices are if Don is with righteousness. Don said, “It's about me, it's about my righteousness. That's really getting away from the client being at the centre.” I said that it sounded like Don wanted to move away from “rage against the machine” when it gets in the way, and closer to “let's listen to people talk about what they really want,” and Don agreed, saying, “This righteousness can get in the way of what people want.”

Witnessing Dialogue (Interviewer: Vikki; Reflecting Witnesses: Susan, Judith, and Pam)

The reflecting witnesses are invited into a reflecting dialogue with the interviewer, and the interview partner is situated in a listening position. Note that here the reflecting witnesses may refer to parts of the conversation that were not included in my above account of the opening dialogue.

Pam spoke at the beginning of the witnessing dialogue: “I have a visual image of seeing Don standing alongside people and how different this is from thinking of him standing on a box.” Pam connected with Don and said, “I was most interested in watching out for righteousness ... I think in my work when I get caught around righteousness it's about that expert position ... the expert trap and a laying down of the law kind of thing.”

I asked about the correlation between expertness and righteousness. Pam talked of the times they are asked to be experts and uphold ideas of professionalism that don't always serve clients, specifically “policies we have to uphold.” I acknowledged that it was very complex and that the word floating above our head was “power.” Susan said that “nobody wants to be in the expert role.” I said that it is the work some people are given to do and asked how that connects with righteousness.

We talked about the reality of Children's Aid workers having to apprehend some children, and the fact that children do die, and that in some families children are not safe. I said that as a society we leave the care of children to Children's Aid, say that they have to protect children, and then accuse them when they do it. Everyone agreed that this was a hard position to be in. I asked how “raging” against other workers got in the way of advocating for clients when we need to challenge these workers' decisions. Judith acknowledged that “there was a lot of dynamic tension in the conversation and that the righteousness Don is experiencing, his pain, happens alongside his openness, so there is not just one story.”

We talked about the usefulness of the Collaborative Community Practice Group to all of its members and its clients. We talked about how this community can help all of us stay away from righteousness, and how they can help Don stay more in line with his ethic of putting people at the centre.

Reflecting on the Witnessing Dialogue (Interviewer: Vikki; Interview Partner: Don)

The interviewer and the interview partner dialogue centred upon the reflections of the reflecting witnesses.

Don acknowledged that the witnesses had come “close to the things that I valued in our conversation ... Susan helped me remember that other workers have humanity. They might be the agent of the state, and they have to do this drastic thing—intervening in someone’s family—and it really resonated with me that I need to cut them some slack. If I am raging against them, what service does that do anybody? So that was a really powerful thing.”

I brought forward Pam and Susan’s conversation about the tough job Children’s Aid workers had. Don said, “I couldn’t stand doing that job,” and he put his hand to his heart and shrugged visibly, shaking his body. I asked Don if he had some new understandings and compassion that social workers do not primarily *want* to take children from homes. Don said, “Well, I’m thinking now that if I’m in too much of a rage about that, or being too righteous about their jobs as opposed to what I do, that takes all of the dignity out of what they’re trying to do.”

I said I thought the witnessing dialogue took a position of solidarity with families and with those other workers even though they were not present. We spoke of the fact that children are at risk because of the contexts of an unsafe society, and that the responses made possible to workers are flawed and under-resourced. Don said, “And these are the people who have to do that job ... I would like to work much harder at a kind of celebrating of what they do in trying to keep families together—it is a worthy goal.” I brought forward Susan’s comments about the Collaborative Community Practice Group “being able to fall down together,” and Don said, “That is going to have some power for me when I have to work with others, especially when I start to feel righteous when I’m working with others.”

Don spoke of Pam’s image “of me standing up with clients as opposed to standing up for clients, and I liked that language. It brought clarity to my mind about what I sometimes do as opposed to what I want to do.” I asked if this could be an image he could remember to help keep his practice in line with his ethics, and Don agreed.

Don said, “I was interested in the conversation you had with Pam about the difference between expertness and righteousness, when you were talking about power.” I brought up the fact that Pam said she struggles with the same thing, not a battle with righteousness, but slipping into expertness, and that I also struggle with it. Don responded, “I think that if you become righteous too long you become an expert about your righteous ideas ... This conversation just brought it into focus about how if I am being righteous, I better watch out because maybe another day from now I’ll be an expert. And I don’t want to be an expert.”

I brought forward Judith’s remark that there was a “collective sigh” about the collectivity of these ethics, these ways of being, and how the group is such a resource to everyone. I named my excitement when Judith spoke about the collec-

tive ethics of the group. Judith used the words “energy” and “electric.” I said the conversation seems to be about trying to stay out of the way of people exercising their own power, exactly what Don is trying to do in his work with people. Don responded, “I was really connected to what you and Susan and Judy were saying about power, the connection with Pam’s ‘expert trap,’ and everyone not wanting to do power-over on clients.”

THE PRINCIPLES OF A SUPERVISION OF SOLIDARITY IN ACTION

In this Solidarity Group, the community was at the centre and their collective ethics were evoked despite the fact that only one member was interviewed. Centring ethics was attended to by picking up on Don’s struggle with righteousness, a struggle that was shared by the community. The community connected regarding their discomfort with power-over and expert positions. The collective ethics of the community were brought forward, and these included taking positions of solidarity with other workers and with each other. Doing solidarity encompassed being alongside Don in his spiritual pain and a commitment to going on together, across time. Fostering collective sustainability was enacted through the points of connection with Don’s ethical struggle. Critically engaging with language invited attention to the particularities of language, such as “rage against the machine,” and to the participation of our bodies in the language. Supervisory conversations centring on ethics are risky. Practices of structuring safety, such as negotiating permission and discussing the trustworthiness of this collective, enabled this conversation to be safe-enough.

Supported by these six principles, solidarity groups serve as community-making dialogues to assist therapists to hold onto a sense of aliveness and engage a spirit of solidarity within contexts of social injustice and extreme marginalization. I have some concerns that this work might be seen as simply derivative of other uses of reflecting teams. This interpretation would disappear the activist orientation and the spirit of solidarity that are central to the meaning and usefulness of these dialogues. The structure, while important, provides the scale. The dialogical engagement with these ethical principles for *doing justice* provides the jazz.

Solidarity groups assist therapists to work in accord with collective ethics by inviting collective accountability and by honouring our resistance (Reynolds, 2008, 2010b; Wade, 1995) against the ways society is structured unfairly. We look at both the ways we can abuse our power and the ways our work is a site of liberation for us.

Solidarity groups promote sustainability by creating intentional community and witnessing the transformations this work brings to the lives of therapists. Therapists working in contexts of extremity—extreme scarcity and extreme need—can experience this work as shovelling water. The familiar prescriptive story of discouragement, burnout, and isolation is often told. Solidarity groups bring forward countervailing stories that witness small acts of justice-doing and the multiple ways we have sustained each other.

In bridging activism and solidarity practices with therapeutic supervision, my hope is that a Supervision of Solidarity can make a contribution to our collective sustainability as therapists: as with clients, we do not want to be merely survivors of this complex work. Rather, we want to be of use, congruent with the ethics we are committed to and fully alive over time.

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