

Reflective Supervision: A Relationship for Learning

Michele Fallon, LICSW, IMH-E®(IV)

August 2, 2017

Welcome to Minnesota. MACMH-IEC is delighted to be co-hosting with CEED, the 2nd annual Reflective Supervision/Consultation Symposium. [a little bio...] –clinical SW, IMH, co-chair, special interest in inter-disciplinary work. Currently provide training and RS/C. One project I feel very honored to have participated in was Minnesota's MIECHV project whose goal was to build capacity in reflective supervision by.....

When Christopher Watson invited me to offer some opening remarks to 'set the context' for our time together, I was honored and immediately accepted—not my most reflective moment! The intimidation factor (What was I thinking?!) kicked in and I found myself uncharacteristically without words. This was interesting since I often provide training on reflective supervision/consultation and offer it is a primary part of my work each week. So I've been reflecting on that, acknowledging BOTH my thinking and my feelings so I'd like to share some of my reflections:

- I realized that for me, the process of receiving and providing RC/S has been a deeply personal journey, one that has been both empowering and very humbling.
- While I can talk about RS/C principles and practices, it is **the FELT internal experience within the relationship**, that I find difficult to put into words. True, both as a recipient and a facilitator of RS/C. I love Rebecca Shamooh-Shanok's definition of RS/C as "*A safe relationship for learning where strengths are supported and vulnerabilities are partnered.*" The word 'sacred' also comes to mind for me.
- So how to explain this "relationship for learning." It is not therapy. When I enter a therapeutic relationship, I am coming in with an identified issue or discomfort; it is my acknowledged vulnerability that brings me. This is not a reciprocal relationship, rather one with a built-in power differential. In the relationship of reflective supervision, I am entering into it as my professional self, the self that wants to be perceived as competent, as a worthy resource to help others.

- And yet, within the safety of this trusted relationship I can become vulnerable when I am offered the gift of someone who is willing to be fully present with me, exploring with curiosity and without judgment, the complexities of my work and my reactions to it. It is the liberation of learning to look at and accept my emotions and reactions, often not pretty, without shame. Because it is shame that blocks new learning.

So let me share a bit of my journey with this process.

- Career change...different idea of what 'supervision' meant, etc.
- "Child I didn't like..." Analogy of confession but without judgment or need for penance...
- The freeing experience of learning that my feelings, uncomfortable as they were, were useful information **and need not be a source of shame.**
- And that my supervisor could hold those feelings with me and we could explore their meaning together. Beginning of a life-changing process.
- **RS/C as a 'way of being with others'. The power of being fully present with another, bringing curiosity and compassion. Something I am learning to bring to other parts of my life.**

So, in the spirit of relationship-based work, I tapped some of my wonderful colleagues (many of whom are here) for their wisdom and reflections on reflection and the reflective relationship and I'd like to share these with you.

- *Amy--Has to feel like a safe relationship in order to allow oneself to be vulnerable—you have to feel like the supervisor really "gets" you in order for her to have any credibility.*
- *Linda--As I become known through the process of reflection I find my frailties and misconceptions and prejudices become more apparent to me. They also become known to another who holds them with and for me. Together we turn it over like a rare and precious diamond, although a diamond in the rough. We polish a bit and then hold it up to the light. When I look with someone I trust the tendency toward shame diminishes. **Shame always clouds my learning** by restricting the questions I ask. What if someone sees my ignorance? What if someone sees my strength?*

What if? What else? What next? How is that for you? These simple questions asked by a curious, caring and compassionate person hold the keys to learning about ourselves so that we might help another learn about themselves. It is only when our frailties are brought to

light, our vulnerabilities exposed, that we find the hidden facets in ourselves and begin to grow. That is the value of reflection and the lesson it teaches.

- *Katie: Reflective supervision as a relationship for learning meant that I felt safe to share my successes and to be vulnerable in sharing my missteps, my mistakes, my questions and open myself up to learning from them. In my experience, it allowed me to gain the insight and expertise from a seasoned practitioner but more so **hone my skills of reflecting on and interrogating my own practice without self-judgment or shame.** This is a skill that continues to serve me well.*
- *Donna-- What strikes me and humbles me is the breadth and depth of the way this process affects each person. Being humble so that we can learn in the relationship can bring surprises as well as learning!*

So, I have a B-3 teacher who says, "This is not "burnout prevention", this actually changes how we are with families. I think about how I am feeling and know something about how that child in front of me is feeling."

Another teacher says that this process has made her think about the parent's experience in a way that had never occurred to her before participating in the group.

Another said it helped her to stop and listen when she felt the urge to talk. And when she did that, she learned things about the family she never would have known. All of these teachers learned through their relationships with me, each other and with the families.

- *Jen--It's the parallel process. The belief is that there is an interlocking network of relationships between supervisor, Home Visitors, families and children. In Reflective Supervision staff have the chance to reflect about what is going on for the families they work with, the opportunity to do this outside of the emotional experience of sitting with the family which can lead to more clarity and understanding. I ask questions like, What does it feel like to sit with this family? This work can be emotionally difficult and we all have our own histories and triggers that may come up. Reflective practice is a safe space to recognize our own experiences so we can keep the focus of the interventions about the family. As the home visitors are holding all a family shares with them- I can hold all they share with me so together it feels less heavy.*

I hope our time together brings us all more clarity about the potential for growth that unfolds within the supervisory relationship as well as the 'felt' experience of being understood by another. Thank you all for the work you do. It will help make the world a kinder, gentler place.