

The relevance of play to the teaching and learning of psychotherapy

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Abstract

I draw on my backgrounds as a kindergarten teacher, psychotherapist and supervisor to examine how play is relevant in the teaching and learning of psychotherapy. Specifically, the role of play in supervision is explored. Within the supervisory relationship I examine the kinds of learning spaces that enhance or impede development. This paper is an expanded version of a paper published in *Psychotherapy in Australia* (2005) 12(1), 28-31.

Introduction

If the teaching of psychotherapy is concerned with the growth and development of the psychotherapist, central to this paper is the question of how the supervision relationship might enable or inhibit this kind of growth. Casement (1985) states, 'No-one can make another person grow. One can only enable growth or inhibit it' (p. 183).

How is play relevant to the teaching and learning of psychotherapy? I draw on my background as a kindergarten teacher in the late 70s and 80s where we were taught that children learn through play. The environment of the kindergarten was one of 'free play'. This meant that the children, aged 3-5, would arrive to an environment full of educational opportunities, using toys, blocks, collage, play dough, sand play, fingerpainting, books, puzzles, musical instruments, carpentry equipment, dress-ups etc. We learnt that play is children's work. Stone and Church (1975) state:

Adult education values the useful activities of the adult as serious work while the activities of the child are considered frivolous play. However, pre-school education values play as serious work for learning. Play is not oriented to achievement or final products, or as monuments to what the child has done. Rather it is the process of play itself which is the learning vehicle (p. 231).

The training drew significantly on the work of Jean Piaget. Piaget developed a taxonomy of play and considered that children displayed different levels of play appropriate to their developmental stage. The training also included a lot of experiential learning through play. We literally sat on the floor with blocks or manipulated play dough. If children learn through play, does play have a role in the teaching and learning of psychotherapy? If objects like blocks, playdough and dress-ups are props for childhood play, what are the props for adult learning through

psychological play? How is play relevant to the development of the psychotherapist and what kinds of learning spaces enhance or impede this development?

Supervision

Ekstein and Wallerstein (1958) comment on the implicit agreement that is supervision:

In the case of the learning therapist the entering into a supervised relationship implies a willingness to offer to joint scrutiny the sector of themselves that compromises their professional helping function in order to achieve their goal of learning and increasing psychotherapeutic skill (p. 138).

When I first met my supervisee Linda I found myself returning to thoughts of my days as a kindergarten teacher. It was her bossy, controlling and entitled manner that captured my attention. Fond memories returned of that time as a kindergarten teacher in the ‘family corner’¹ with preschoolers. I easily imagined Linda as a four year old dressed up in her mother’s clothes, bossing her peers about. “Now I’ll be the mother...you be the little girl. When I say this, you do that...” Struck by my reverie² I developed an appreciation of Linda’s defensive style, or what Ekstein and Wallerstein (1958) describe as ‘the learning problem’ (p. 137). She could be described as a parentified child, having learnt a role of caretaking and controlling others, perhaps in an attempt to protect herself from anxiety and distress. I considered how this style might impact on her work with clients. I wondered how I might make use of this initial counter-transference and enable Linda to reflect on her own processes. How might we use our relationship to enable Linda to come more fully into relationship³ with her clients?

My initial identification was situating Linda within a pre-school educational environment which emphasises the importance of learning through play. This environment collapses the dichotomy of play and work. Today, play, although regarded as serious, has traditionally been devalued as an occupation of childhood which is not particularly useful. I recall a colleague of mine taking pride in producing creative handouts for the class. He had spent some time ‘working’ on the computer, creating an impressive document. “Look what I’ve done,” he said with delight. His delight with his creation reminded me of a child at play. Donald Winnicott links play to psychotherapy. Winnicott (1971) states:

Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together. The corollary of this is that where playing is not possible then the work done by the therapist is directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play (p. 38).

One of Winnicott’s significant contributions to the theory of play is his notion of

potential space. He describes this space as an area of illusion, a reality different from that of ordinary life and it exists on the boundary between external and internal reality. Modell (1990) states:

This potential space represents the subject's transformation of external reality, creating something that belongs to neither 'subjective' nor 'objective' reality... This potential space, this shared reality, is a playful or illusionary intermingling of the inner world of two participants... (p. 29).

For Winnicott, the aim of treatment is to provide a setting 'in which the patient is able to be maximally creative' (Modell, 1990 p. 29). Winnicott describes play as an interaction that explores reality. He states that the capacity for play, in relationship, enables or inhibits the authentically experiencing self. Winnicott considers that it is through the interaction with the environment that the baby learns whether they are safe or whether they may have to respond with compliance. This compliance could lead to isolation of the infant from its own spontaneous and life giving core (Winnicott, 1948). This compliant (false) self develops at early stages of relating when there is not 'good enough' mothering. Is it the capacity for authentic relating that enables play?

Learning Psychotherapy as a Relational Process

Ekstein and Wallerstein (1958) highlight the importance of the relational process involved in the problem of teaching and learning psychotherapy. In their discussion of teaching techniques of supervision, Ekstein and Wallerstein suggest supervisory techniques not be viewed as either 'teacher-centred' or 'student-centred' but rather in terms of 'process-centred' techniques. They consider the supervisory relationship to be multi-faceted, including relationships between the therapist, client, supervisor and administrator. They maintain that teaching psychotherapy 'is not teaching a series of specific interactions, but is teaching how to carry on psychotherapeutic activity' (p. 10).

Schindelheim (1995) describes the importance of the teacher being open to the creative moment. He describes the significance of 'knowing something in my head, or even by heart, and having it in one's bones available for use' (p. 153). Poetically, he describes the teacher 'who found me in my experience of being taught (who) thereby allowed a deeper learning' (p. 165). In learning from his experience he states:

As a teacher I have found that creating room for that experience requires a suspension of my illusion of knowingness. This allows for a dissolution into a moment of discovery that is similar to that of the learner (p. 166).

How might both supervisor and supervisee let go of a propensity for defensive 'knowing', and instead allow a play space between them? Bion (1992) maintains that experience is the foundation of real learning. He contrasts learning 'about' things with being able to learn from the experience of 'the-self-in-the-world'

(Waddell, 1998 p. 95). Bion maintains that no psychoanalytic theory could contain what psychoanalytic experience could teach us (Bion cited in Green 1998 p. 661). He considers the importance of learning how much we don't know and referred to Keats (1817) notion of negative capability, which is: 'when a man is capable of living in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason...' (Keats quoted in Bion, 1970, p. 125).

To engage in the supervisory relationship, in which there is life, the supervisor and supervisee each require a mind that can play, that can be spontaneous and freely moving. Bion (1992) was interested in the difference between thinking and psychical activity. Rushing to action, he maintains, is an indication of the psychotherapist's lack of negative capability. It is this model of action rather than particular acting out which enlightens their psychic processes. He refers to the notion of thoughts without a thinker. The idea of thoughts without a thinker draws attention to the supervisee who is psychically busy but who remains unable to process or think about their own thoughts or experience. In this situation the supervisee may need to project their thoughts into an 'object that can think'.

Bion (1962) considers that learning depends on the capacity for an integrated container that is not rigid. This, he says, is foundational for the state of mind which can retain past knowing and experience and also be open to new experience. Bion draws on the initial mother-baby relationship and considers this 'container/contained' relationship as learning experience which constantly recurs in various forms throughout mental development. He suggests that the mother's capacity to contain the infant's fears (the contained) renders the original anxieties more manageable. If the mother is unable to contain the baby's projected material, the mutually communicative capacity is disrupted, resulting in less linking and less understanding.

In contrast, Linda's relationship style appeared to be one of dominating the other to avoid truly coming into relationship with herself or the other. It appeared that Linda was unable to play in a creative sense, but rather she 'took on' the role of a 'psychotherapist' who would administer techniques onto the client, perhaps as once she 'took on' the role of the 'mother' as a child. She seemed frightened of allowing herself to feel.

Phil Mollon (1989) discusses supervision in terms of providing a certain kind of space. This space, he suggests, offers an opportunity for learning through reflection and attention to inner thoughts and experiences. He states: 'The function of supervision is not to teach a skill directly, but to create a "space for thinking"- a kind of thinking which is more akin to maternal reverie, as described by Bion, than problem solving' (p. 62).

Meares (1992) describes the play of psychotherapy as 'the fostering (of) a form of mental activity which is non-linear, non-logical and which is found in states such as

reverie' (p. 34). How might Linda develop this capacity to play in her mind? Meares (1992) suggested that the play space is developed through a kind of environment whereby the space is not constantly disrupted but is properly and securely established⁴. 'This state is broken into by moments of anxiety, so the principal therapeutic task is to deal with these intrusions of anxiety in order to allow the healing form of mental function to begin again' (p. 34). Therefore the capacity for play can be affected by anxiety and the qualities within the self, within the context, and within the quality of relatedness to the other.

It follows that where the play space is constantly disrupted, so also will the evolution of the self be impeded...the more severe the disturbances of personality development can be conceived in terms of a field of play which has never been properly or securely established (Meares, 1990 p. 36).

Modell (1990) draws attention to the importance of clear boundaries⁵ to provide a secure setting,

Play is fundamentally paradoxical in that the essence of play is its freedom and spontaneity, but it is a freedom that must occur within certain constraints... Play illustrates the profound truth that *freedom exists by means of constraints* (p. 27).

Therefore, the work of play in supervision involves a structured, delicate relationship between supervisor and supervisee. It requires a secure, trustworthy environment that fosters creativity, authenticity, curiosity and exploration. This contrasts with the demand to adapt. Perhaps the opposite of play is not work, but compliance and adaptation.

Adaptation

Linda preferred to ingest knowledge, inviting me to tell her the 'answers', to 'do it' for her, to rob her of her opportunity for imagination, discovery and mastery. Winnicott (1971) warns us against acting on this type of invitation, '...the significant moment is that in which the child surprises him or herself. It is not the moment of my clever interpretation' (p. 51).

Consider the impinging supervisor who 'knows' and needs to be both appreciated and admired, who considers herself 'benevolent' and 'right'. Unable to provide a protective maternal presence (Winnicott 1969; Casement 1985; Modell 1990; Bion 1992) that can, for example, survive the supervisee's envy or hostility, the supervisee may instead be encouraged to adapt, comply and be grateful to the environmental demands elicited by the narcissistic needs of the supervisor. In this relationship there is little room for play. Rather there is an idea that psychotherapy can be 'taught' rather than 'thought' (about) or played with.

The learning of psychotherapy is an anxiety evoking endeavour (Adler 1989). Adler argues the importance of the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and 'not knowing' in psychotherapy. He contrasts the therapist's feelings of uncertainty with 'pathological certainty' which the therapist can use to defend himself against difficult feelings. Adler states that

the analyst's ability to be aware of his feelings of vulnerability, anger, shame and guilt help him detect tendencies to protect himself by 'knowing' with certainty that his theoretical or clinical formulations are correct (p. 100).

Defences against learning can encourage compliance and the 'false-self', or a kind of copying that prohibits real connection. Symington (1996) describes the process of mimesis as the copying of one animal by another, its purpose being to deceive. 'The Asilid fly mimics the bee in an attempt to avoid its predators; the laminex table in a canteen displays the grains of wood, so diners feel they are eating fine food while seated at a wooden table' (p. 116). This brings a question about the role of imitation, rather than adaptation in play. Is there a place for imitation in the teaching and learning of psychotherapy?

Imitation

The developing therapist must learn the 'analytic attitude' which includes patience, trust in the analytic process, interest in the client and respect for the power of the client's resistance. Moldawsky (1980, p. 126) suggests that the best way for the supervisee to learn these qualities is by receiving the same in the supervisory relationship.

The relationship between learning and development has been extensively explored by Vygotsky (1978). He says that 'learning is more than the acquisition of the capacity to think; it is the acquisition of many specialised abilities for thinking about a variety of things' (p. 83). Vygotsky maintains that when a child learns to perform an operation he assimilates some structural principle that not only improves one function but can affect the development of another. 'Consequently, in making one step in learning, a child makes two steps in development, that is learning and development do not coincide' (p. 84). Thus, claims Vygotsky, learning precedes development and the capacity for learning affects development.

The child 'learns to learn' from the earliest relationships with caregivers. Vygotsky (1978) considers that imitation can be in the service of development and describes the place for imitation in learning.

Children can imitate a variety of actions that go well beyond the limits of their capabilities. Using imitation, children are capable of doing much more in collective activity or under the guidance of adults (p. 88).

We can think of examples of this kind of imitation that enhances the development of the young child. Consider the child who watches their older sibling reading a book. The younger child then tries it out. He picks up the book and looks at the pictures, learns to hold the book the correct way up, learns how to turn a page, learns to follow the print from left to right, relates to the text and so on. In supervision, an example might be that the supervisee notices how the supervisor gives themselves space for thinking, and does not rush into psychological⁶ action. The supervisee may be able to notice and think about this and 'try out' giving himself more space in his sessions with his clients. Vygotsky (1978) described this as the zone of proximal development, and stated that 'good learning' is that which is in advance of development. He described learning that 'awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers' (p. 90). In 'trying out' the idea of allowing space the supervisee can then begin to develop such capacities as tolerating anxiety and ambiguity. Waddell (1998) described good learning as:

The child's resiliently seeking understanding by engaging with his or her experience of a secure, inner sense of self, derived from a capacity for introjective identification with good and thoughtful qualities of mind (p. 96).

Similarly, Haesler (1993) regards supervision as central to the psychotherapist as it is a process of gradual internalisation of the supervisor's functioning 'and this inner functioning of the internalised supervisor will be crucial for the competent functioning of the psychotherapist' (p. 554). Haesler (1993), Waddell (1998) and Vygotsky (1962) point to the idea that it is the subsequent development through imitation, or lack of development, that indicates whether or not good learning is taking place. Defensive imitation reinforces the false self, while constructive imitation is the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky 1962), enabling thinking about a variety of things and enhancing both learning and development.

Levels of play

Piaget (1951) developed a taxonomy of play in childhood that includes three levels: a) practice play, the child repeats an activity, b) symbolic play, the child plays with toys and things, apparently ignoring the mother, c) games with rules: the child interacts and contributes to others' play. As I consider the idea of levels of play in the teaching and learning of psychotherapy, some parallels may be drawn to Modell's (1990) three levels of relatedness in psychotherapy. Like Piaget's levels of play, these levels move from being solitary to being co-operative. Modell (1990) describes these levels as a) the dehumanisation of the object, b) self-containment in a state of contiguity, c) shared creativity. It is a synthesis of these two models which has produced a model of learning through play in supervision.

Playing Alone - Repetition

Piaget (1951) refers to the first level of play as repeating an activity, while Modell (1990) describes the first level of relating as the dehumanisation of the object. Modell states that in this stage the personhood of the object remains unperceived and unacknowledged, and accordingly the guilt that is evoked by the impulse to destroy the object is not experienced. In this first level of play the supervisor (or supervisee) may be exploited as a non-person (p. 115), especially when this is the participant's repetitive way of being in the world. Shared play seems unlikely. An example of playing alone is the following interchange in supervision. The supervisee is working with a terminally ill client and has recently read a book on dying. She states, "Dying needn't be difficult". The supervisor comments, 'Good!'

Ekstein and Wallerstein (1958) describe learning as involving personal change which is impossible without affective components. Resistance to the affective components, which must be considered for personal change, is what Ekstein and Wallerstein describe as the working through of the learning problem. They write:

... the predisposition to react in a particular patterned way toward the patient- *the learning problem*- may be projected into the relationship with the supervisor as a characteristically limited way of reacting and of learning, and pose therefore a specific *problem about learning* (p. 139).

Ekstein and Wallerstein (1958) write that as much as we want to learn 'learning implies change, and however much desired, change is simultaneously feared' (p. 141). This vignette illustrates lack of affect, lack of relating and lack of openness. The issue of death is not explored, rather it appears controlled. Rather than being open to something new, the participants defensively avoid using thoughts and feelings. They avoid relationship. Both remain locked in phantasies of omnipotent control.

Playing Alone in the Felt Presence of Another

Modell (1990) describes the second stage of relating in psychotherapy as 'Self-containment in a state of contiguity (the sphere within the sphere)' (p. 118). In this level of relatedness, the supervisee remains within his self-contained cocoon, yet they are consciously aware of being held by the larger sphere of the therapeutic setting. For Linda to rely only on herself for safety she depends on phantasies of omniscience and omnipotent control. The safety of the supervisory environment may offer a second chance to create an inner world that is not a response to environmental danger (p.118). Winnicott (1971) describes a capacity to be alone. In this capacity to be alone, he says, the infant develops the capacity to be in 'potential space'.

This experience of a containing space includes the experience of the space in which we work creatively, the space in which we relax 'formlessly', the space in which we dream, the space in which we play... (Ogden, 1985, p. 356).

This is not a space which defends against the other, but rather it is an inclusive space.

Winnicott (1958) states that being alone, working in solitude or the capacity to reflect in the presence of another are examples of transitional phenomena, that is, the capacity that emerges through the child's internalisations of interactive moments with the caregiver. Winnicott considers these times are fundamental to self-differentiation. In these times the supervisor can notice the supervisee exploring quietly in the presence of the supervisor. For example, the supervisee says 'Dying needn't be difficult.' The supervisor hears and feels an unconscious wish and fear. The supervisor notices and thinks about these conflicting thoughts and feelings and quietly and empathically reflects to invite further exploration 'Mmm... ..death...'

Yerushalmi (1992) writes that the literature around the issue of supervision regards the supervisory encounter as a developmental process, whereby the reconstruction of relationships like the parent-child relationship takes place. He emphasises the role of the care-taker in the experience of the infant, and accordingly he stresses the importance of the supervisor, like the mother, not intervening but remaining silent and attentive. Yerushalmi writes:

In such moments, the supervisor should convey a presence, participation and empathy, but in a silent way... Just as infants who are not left on their own will not find their own selves, developing instead false selves, so the supervisees who are not left on their own to discover their professional selves in the marginal presence of the supervisor will not develop true professional selves (p. 262).

In this holding space the supervisor provides a function that is more like a background or atmosphere for the supervisee. This background is used to facilitate the development of internal mental functioning or reverie⁷. The teaching and learning of psychotherapy requires certain kinds of spaces. This space, the play space in supervision, depends upon certain qualities within the self, within the environment and within the quality of relatedness to the other. This capacity for play may be limited by deficits within the trainee, trainer, or both. Paradoxically, it seems that at times supervisees differentiate themselves by playing alone in the presence of the absent supervisor and in the absence of the present supervisor. There is an unnoticed but containing space within which, supervisor and supervisee are both playing alone yet together.

Co-operative Play

Aron (1993) considers that Piaget's great contribution to psychoanalysis is his understanding of the development of operational thought. 'What we need to do to resolve conflict or to heal a psychic split is, in Piagetian terms, to simultaneously

decentre from our immediate perception of the situation in order to attend to a contrasting dimension of experience' (p. 289). Aron states that one of the problems in psychoanalysis is the tendency to deal with the complexities and ambiguities of psychic life by 'simplifying, dichotomising and splitting by resorting to 'either-or' instead of 'both-and' (p.289). Modell (1990) also pointed to the importance of bearing different realities in psychotherapy:

if the patient makes use of the analyst only as a self-object, reflecting back what is already known, there may be a strengthening of the sense of self, but the patient will not benefit from the analyst's construction of reality (p. 120).

Combining these ideas, it would seem that part of the supervisor's role is to invite the supervisee to play with difference or contrasts. Modell (1990) maintains: 'This state of relatedness requires *the ability to merge playfully with the analyst yet retain a sense of separateness*' (p. 120). Modell describes the third level of relating as 'shared creativity' (p. 120). He states that this level results from the interplay of separateness and merging. In this stage the supervisee is able to welcome the supervisor's interpretations, or creativity, and will not experience this as an impingement or intrusion. Just like children at play, this level of play is cooperative. It is a state of relatedness that requires the ability to merge playfully yet retain a sense of separateness. For example, the supervisee states, 'Dying needn't be difficult.' The supervisor notices her own feelings of sadness and irritation and thinks about this. What might it mean? She thinks about the supervisee's defensive lack of affective attunement to the client's experience and wonders about this. She meets the client's words and invites further exploration, potentially inviting difference. Eventually, she says, 'For whom?'

Winnicott (1969) suggests that the acceptance of the externality and separateness of the object is supported by the mother's acceptance of the baby's hatred. This process enables the object to be 'used' in a constructive sense, rather than merely related to as a bundle of projections: 'Obviously the idea of the use of an object is related to the capacity to play' (p. 711). Thus, to make use of the supervisory relationship, we are also invited to tolerate and make use of difference, to be disagreed with, to be envied, hated. Some might say we need to be able to hate and be hated well. In this type of relationship the supervisor and supervisee may each be made use of as a separate person with something 'different' to offer, rather than simply functioning as a 'self-object' (Wolf, 1989)⁸. Mollon (1989) comments on the task in supervision:

Thus the supervisors' task is to help create a space for thinking, a space for reflection with a tolerance for not knowing and not understanding-a space for reverie in which peripheral thoughts, feelings and fantasies in relation to the patient can be brought into awareness and examined (p. 62).

In my experience of supervision we move through different levels of play and relatedness at different times. Sometimes I feel alone in the comforting presence of the other, sometimes we delight in each other and create something new together, and sometimes we unconsciously repeat known formulations to avoid the feelings and anxieties of facing something new. Stern (1983) writes about our fear of the new. He says that 'anxiety leads us to search out the familiar and comfortable in experience, and throw out the rest' (p. 74). The work of play requires the capacity to explore the new, to be open to the unfamiliar and unexpected. The supervisor and supervisee, by creating between them a world of curiosity, rescue the true learning experience from what Stern (1983) describes as the 'oblivion of the familiar' (p. 95). The task is to develop and attend to the play spaces, within ourselves as supervisors and within the spaces we create with our supervisees to enhance the creative learning endeavour we call psychotherapy.

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(Endnotes)

¹ The 'family corner' is a corner of the kindergarten which is set up as a small house. The size of the furniture and equipment is reduced to be compatible with pre-school children. This space encourages dramatic play.

² Bion (1962) equates the therapist's 'evenly suspended attention' with the mother's 'reverie'. The mother's function is to contain those aspects of the infant's experience. If she is emotionally available to her infant she is able to process the infant's projections and to make sense of them by means of her 'reverie'.

³ Clarkson (1993) states that intentional use of relationship should be much of the training in psychotherapy.

⁴ For the reader further interested in the importance of the analytic setting refer to Green (1975).

⁵ Constraints in supervision include such things as the length and time of sessions, the payment of fees, the ethical and professional nature of the relationship.

⁶ Bion (1992) refers to psychical action as the busy mind incapable of negative capability.

⁷ Vygotsky (1962) considered that the monologue of symbolic play in early childhood does not simply disappear but that it is eventually internalised and becomes the language of the inner world. 'Seen in this way the child's language while playing is a form of mental activity found in adults such as reverie' (p. 90). Before this milestone is reached toys and props are 'the vehicles of, and necessary to, a particular kind of mental activity which is comparable with the inner life of an adult' (Mearns and Anderson, 1993. p. 596). However, once language is internalised, play can be an intrapsychic and imaginative activity that is free of the need of things.

⁸ Wolf (1989) describes self-object as neither self nor object, but the subjective aspect of a self-sustaining function performed by a relationship of self to objects who by their presence or activity evoke and maintain the self and experience of selfhood.