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Talking in a variety of creative languages – a fresh approach to art-based supervision

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This article presents a new approach to creative supervision based on Jennings' EPR and Lahad's BASICPh model, while focusing on the issues of artistic medium and artistic form. It suggests an original way to explore complexities and resistance in arts-based therapy. This approach can be integrated into arts therapy supervision in general, and the work of therapists who combine different arts media. Detailed examples are provided to illustrate the implementation of the approach. The article highlights ways in which creative supervision can expand therapists' awareness, provide them with creative tools, as well as cultivate belief and inspiration.

Keywords: supervision; dramatherapy; artistic form; artistic medium

Introduction – the significance of creative supervision

As a teacher and supervisor of arts therapists, I understand the importance of arts-based theories and methods in enabling professionals to understand and construct the therapeutic process from a creative perspective. This perspective emphasises artistic form rather than the content linked to psychological approaches, and views arts-based therapy as special and different from other methods of therapy. Arts therapies consist of two parallel and interrelated processes: one seeks to advance the therapeutic process from a formal-aesthetic perspective and by creative means, whereas the other seeks to advance the process from the perspective of narrative-psychological content and insight, and takes place through means that are mainly verbal (Berger 2014). In my previous article 'Playing multiple roles', I argued that to inform holistic, effective treatment, these two perspectives must be combined, both in form and in content. The issues related to form cover the choice of artistic medium (drama, movement, stories, music and/or visual arts), the materials and what genre/style/artistic technique to use to advance the process.

In the course of my work in Israel and my teaching abroad, I have noticed that supervision in the field tends to be based on observation and questions from a psychological perspective that concentrate on narrative and meaning, and tends to neglect the artistic perspective. Nevertheless, a number of creative and

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dramatic methods in supervision are available, such as the Embodiment-projection role (EPR) and Mandala (Jennings 1998), the Role approach (Landy 1999), the Myth of the saviour and Creative supervision approach (Lahad 2002, 2015), Mandala making (Jackson et al. 2008), Journal writing (Durkin, Perach, Ramseyer, and Sontag 1989) as well as other creative techniques and approaches (Deaver and Shiflett 2011; Newsome, Henderson, and Veach 2005; Wilkins 1995). However, supervision tends to remain primarily verbal and cognitive rather than creative (Berger 2015; Jones and Dokter 2009). This trend is liable to reduce the uniqueness of the arts therapy profession and deprive it of its prime strength (Jones and Dokter 2009). It eschews the development of the artist within the therapist in favour of the development of cognitive insights and verbal modalities. It weakens professionals' belief in the tools of their trade and their unique language, but also distances them from the creative act itself, which is the heart and soul of the profession (Berger 2014, 2015). For all these reasons, I believe that supervision of arts therapists should be enacted from an arts-based perspective. This type of supervision can strengthen the artist within the therapist, expand her/his creative toolbox, and give the therapist faith in the tool and inspiration to use it.

The approach presented in this article is one of two developed in the course of my work as a supervisor and therapist. The first is called 'Playing multiple roles'. It explores complexities and resistance in arts therapy in general and in dramatherapy in particular by examining the position and role of the therapist. It defines the roles of arts therapists in terms of four basic theatrical roles, and then suggests ways to explore the choices made by the therapist in practice (Berger 2015). The second approach, termed 'Talking in a variety of creative languages', is presented here. It is based on concepts from the EPR and BASICPh (Belief, Affect, Social, Imagination, Cognition and Physical) model (Jennings 2010; Lahad 2002, 2015) and suggests exploring to what extent the choice of artistic medium/artistic form by the therapist is suited to the specific client and process. Both approaches are relevant to all arts therapy methods and to those integrating different art media, such as dramatherapy and the intermodal approach. In practice, these approaches expand the concepts and the implementation of the models to assist supervision processes and the development of an internal supervisor. Although these approaches can be applied independently, associating them with other theoretical approaches is recommended since a combination of form and content can enhance the perspective and make supervision more effective.

This article is organised as follows. First, the approach is presented along with its practical implications. Each concept is followed by a detailed example that highlights its meaning and demonstrates ways of using it in supervision. The examples focus on the meaning and implementation of this approach and do not include other aspects of the supervision exploration process. Since the goal of this paper is to show how the approach can be used in supervision, the vignettes deal with the meaning and impact of the choice of artistic medium/artistic genre on the process. Hence a deliberate choice was made not to deal with transference, contract and other crucial issues that are also part of the supervision process. All these examples are taken from work I

have done as a supervisor in recent years. The names and identifying details of the therapists have been changed.

Talking in a variety of creative languages – conceptual background

The ‘Talking in a variety of creative languages’ approach constitutes a ‘meta axis’ that can be used for observation or supervision in any therapeutic modality that incorporates the arts. The approach focuses on questions of form relating to the choice of medium and/or for carrying out the particular therapeutic intervention. It stems from the basic assumption that the work of the arts therapist is not only to advance psychological processes and processes developing insight, but also concerns processes connected to the development of the creative self and the client’s creative language/self. The approach assumes that the choice of artistic medium at every stage of the therapeutic process is not random and needs to be correlated with the developmental and creative stage and/or the artistic language of the client. The artistic medium should be chosen from the standpoint of advancing the creative development of the individual or group and should support the process as a whole. There must also be a match between the choice of the artistic medium and/or the genre and the intervention (Berger 2014, 2015; Knill, Barba, and Fuchs 2004; Knill, Levine, and Levine 2005). In a generalised way it can be said that the choice of artistic medium (drama, movement, drawing, sculpture, music, etc.), choice of genre (comedy, tragedy, abstract, concrete, etc.) and choice of art materials (soft–hard materials: gouache, chalk, marker, pencil, clay, etc.) needs to take into account the client’s artistic language/creative development, as well as to relate to relevant psychological issues and goals. In this way the therapy can also expand the creative language/creative self and develop the client’s psychological indices.

The ‘Talking in a variety of creative languages’ approach focuses on the choice of artistic medium and genre chosen in each situation, and at different stages of therapy. Its main argument is that if this choice does not coincide with the artistic language/style and/or the particular creative developmental stage, it is likely to delay the process and can also lead to resistance and/or empathic failure. The approach is relevant to all forms of arts therapy and especially to those that combine and move between various media and creative areas such as drama, movement, visual art, music and narratives, and incorporate a combined-arts approach (intermodal). The therapist should be able to use various artistic media /styles when conducting different therapeutic interventions, and be able to combine and move between them. Another basic assumption of the approach is that the combination and the shift from one medium to another develops flexibility, and expands the perspective as well as the creative languages of the person (Berger 2014, 2015; Knill, Barba, and Fuchs 2004; Knill, Levine, and Levine 2005).

Before presenting the practical significance of the ‘Talking in a variety of creative languages’ approach, and its applications, I briefly present two drama therapy models

that, in my view, are relevant to all kinds of arts therapy, and in particular those integrating the arts. These arts-based models are the BASICPh, developed by Mooli Lahad and Ofra Ayalon (Lahad 2002, 2015, 1992; Lahad, Schaham, and Ayalon 2013), and the Embodiment-projection role, developed by Jennings (Jennings 1998, 2010). The two models define their basic therapeutic aim as developing and expanding communication channels and languages in tandem with the client's stages of development of dramatic acting. Each of them claims in its own way that the very existence and development of communication channels and the stages of this development can strengthen and help the individual contend with difficulties and crises, and grow and develop. As arts-based models, their basic goal is to develop and strengthen creativity, playfulness, social, physical, imaginative beliefs and values, cognitive and emotional skills, and not necessarily to resolve mental conflict and/or to gain insights. The BASICPh model posits that a person is born with the potential to use six languages or channels: Belief, Affect, Social, Imagination, Cognition and Physical (body) to communicate with the world, develop coping mechanisms, and successfully confront pressures and crises. Over time and subject to the norms present in Western technological society, some of these channels are reduced and forgotten, which leads to a withering of these languages and coping channels, followed by the development of phenomena such as anxiety, depression and others (Berger and Lahad 2010, 2013). The BASICPh model defines three states when languages are available to a person. The first state is called the 'present language'. It represents the languages available to the person that can be used routinely. The second state is called the 'intermediate language' and refers to the languages and communications channels that are not readily available to the person but when really needed and/or in crisis can be accessed and harnessed for expression. The third and last state is called the 'forgotten language' and refers to languages that are no longer available to the person, because the individual has forgotten how to make contact with them and how to express him or herself through them. Individuals have their own repository of languages and means of expression that develop and crystallise throughout life. The primary goal of the BASICPh model is to remind clients of languages they have forgotten and to make them available. The state of availability of languages is not static and can be expanded and changed with practice. Similarly, the ERP model considers the person's dramatic development in terms of maturation from infancy to adulthood. It covers the development and transition from the embodiment stage, during which the communication of the infant is purely physical-corporal and is based on gestures, rhythm, movement and physical contact (up to about 18 months), to the projection stage, in which children can communicate, express themselves and explore the world by symbolically attributing elements from their internal, imaginary world to objects, items, animals, people, etc. At this stage children play imaginary games with objects that embody roles in the stories they invent and tell. The third stage, that begins at around two-and-a-half to three years, is the stage of role playing. This stage expands the two previous stages, when toddlers begin to embody the roles previously projected onto objects or drawings or expressed in a story (Jennings 1998, 2010). The role stage is also connected to socio-dramatic development in which play develops further into social play and communication. Like

Lahad's basic assumption, Jennings also argued that some of these developmental stages may not be sufficiently well-developed during the child's spontaneous development or, alternatively, are forgotten because of restrictive socio-cultural norms and messages (Jennings 1998, 2010). These two diagnostic models, the BASICPh and the ERP, can be used to reveal and understand client languages and stages of dramatic development. Thus they help the therapist to choose the creative language with which to begin work and to use later.

These two models can also direct the appropriate choice of artistic medium in therapy – one that speaks in the client's present language. At the appropriate developmental stage, it will be perceived as a safe, comfortable space to express themselves, whereas the choice of an artistic medium that invites clients to speak in a forgotten language is likely to produce frustration and resistance.

The 'Talking in a variety of creative languages' approach uses these assumptions when choosing artistic media in therapy. It focuses on questions of form when examining whether the choice of a particular creative medium matches the client's dramatic-developmental stages by relating to content and psychological issues. Supervision using this approach also relates to the client's indirect and unconscious motives that influenced choice. It may be the case that the therapist's selection of a particular medium was not made out of a conscious choice but because it was easier for the therapist, as a person, to express him/herself in a given particular artistic language which is then imposed on the client. The example below illustrates the choice of an inappropriate artistic medium and its effect on the process.

Example # 1: choosing an inappropriate artistic medium

Ruth (fictitious name) is a young movement therapist who came to me for supervision of her work in a boarding school with a group of girls 'at risk'. The group was made up of 12 girls, aged 15–16, who were referred to therapy for low self-esteem, communication difficulties and difficulties in accepting social norms. A few had experienced abuse and/or severe violence from their parents and were dealing with anxiety and/or post-trauma.

As a movement therapist, she constructed the activities around movement work that developed in stages. She included a structured physical warm-up that she directed, followed by a movement series in which the girls were supposed to create and move from one to the other. Ruth planned to continue the activity with more open work in the space, combining movement work on images of a safe and enhancing place that could continue as work on content that the girls raised. Her intention was then to return to the circle and to do movement and voice work with the girls, with the circle constituting a container and witness for personal processes.

Ruth came to me for supervision after the fourth meeting, in a state of helplessness and distress. She said that the group was resisting and did not cooperate. She said that she felt helpless and was considering leaving the group. Ruth explained that the girls did not want to get up from their chairs and opposed all movement work. She put it

down to the girls' difficulty in handling authority, the framework, and the fact that she was assertive, all of which seemed to strengthen the girls' transference to her. As a supervisor it seemed to me that two issues should be explored and addressed: the first related to the relationship and transference level (content) and the second to the choice of artistic medium (form). Given that Ruth did not have much experience, and as she asked for direct and clear guidance, I chose a direct supervision style and explained the main idea behind the 'Talking a variety of languages' approach. Then I asked her to examine the girls' resistance from a formal perspective. This meant focusing on the match between the choice of artistic medium and the characteristics of the group. I asked her to explore whether the choice of artistic intervention suited the group's language and developmental stage. Ruth realised that her choice to use physical work in a space that invited great visibility alongside free creative expression and a high degree of interpersonal interactions threatened the girls, and was not suited to the stage the group was in, their anxiety, and could be a significant cause of their resistance. It also made sense that the girls' resistance to the activity was connected to their difficulty accepting Ruth's authority, the group and the activity boundaries. Reflecting on these issues helped Ruth understand that the actual choice of the creative medium was intimately connected to their resistance.

Ruth said she had thought about all this before but as a movement therapist, she always thought that movement was the only medium that she could work with. Relating to this and knowing that this viewpoint is commonplace among art therapists who believe that they can or should only intervene in 'their medium', I said that perhaps she could use different kinds of movement-based interventions that were more cognitive and structured and less open and expressive, such as some childhood physical games (involving names and common issues), repetitive movement and/or rhythm exercises. In addition, and related to my personal standpoint and agenda as a teacher and supervisor, and thinking that perhaps a shift from interventions that included direct and exposed body work could help reduce anxiety and foster a sense of security, I suggested she could also start by using visual arts such as painting and creating in hard materials on small to medium-size surfaces. I shared my thought that at the beginning, giving them a personal space to express themselves (and not via direct interactions with each other) could help to foster a sense of personal 'safe place' within the group. Ruth recoiled, saying that she was not a visual arts therapist, she could not paint, and was not good at it. Ruth said that she liked doing movement work with groups, including interpersonal interactions, and that individual work with visual arts in the group was a sort of avoidance and escape she was not willing to try. At this point, I decided to talk to her about the stages of group development and the concept of 'joining and leading'. I explained the importance of developing a sense of a safe, personal space and the process of crystallisation of the group, from pairs to subgroups to a complete group. By relating to the EPR approach, Ruth was able to see the significance of each creative medium and the qualities each focused on and sought. For instance, we discussed how work with visual arts in the group allows each individual safe time by herself and with the

material, thus encouraging introspection and creating an experience of safe personal space in the group. By contrast, she saw how movement and drama work strongly reveals the body, focuses on interpersonal processes and demands extensive physical visibility and willingness for interaction. By looking at it in this way, Ruth was able to see how visual artwork could be safer for the girls who were dealing with issues regarding body image and/or had difficulties with interpersonal relationships in groups.

At this point the question of Ruth's personal and professional ability arose again. She said that she did not know how to paint and was not skilled or qualified in visual arts therapy and therefore could not work in the medium. I asked Ruth if we could explore the issue via artwork in plastic materials in the here and now. I asked her to choose what materials she wanted to paint with, what size, and what type of surface she would choose for her experience as the group therapist. She chose gouache paints on a large white board. She drew a box with a lock, in which there was a creature that wanted to get out but did not know how, and was worried. Then she spoke about the sense of suffocation she experienced after the sessions with the girls. It was not clear whether she was in the box or perhaps the girls were, or who really wanted to get out and who wanted to remain inside it as a shelter and place of safety. To explore the issue further and show Ruth ways to shift from art into movement I asked if we could continue through movement. I stuck a piece of white adhesive paper to the floor about the size of the box Ruth had painted. I asked Ruth to move inside it and not leave it. The work shifted between rest and entry into the box and attempts to break out of it, and between stages of extensive activity and movement and passivity, convergence and rest. At the end of the experiment, I asked Ruth to do some associative writing. Ruth, who was still panting from the movement work, took a pencil and immediately wrote a verse from Dafna Armoni's Hebrew song: 'Loving you, leaving you'.

I want to dance, want to sing,
 Spread my wings, fly over the city,
 Return to Chushi,
 Relight my soul,
 And alone, to know what's with me,
 To save my life ...

When she had finished she cried and then sat for a moment in silence. Then she shared with me her feeling that it suddenly occurred to her that she had a deep connection to the girls and why she wanted to work with this population. She told me painful stories from her childhood, about her experiences of loneliness and non-acceptance by her parents and the kibbutz where she grew up. She told of her extreme, rebellious behaviour in high school and her great desire and need to express and tell about herself and her story to the world. She told of her sense of detachment from inside the box and outside it, and sometimes the opposite. She also talked of the way in which these experiences motivated her to learn dance and perform in a circus, from where she chose to learn movement-dance therapy. She said,

Now I understand my desire to work with girls 'at risk', and my insistence on working with them through movement. I understand that I actually did not see the girls, their place and their needs. Just as my parents and the kibbutz tried to force me to behave in the way they saw fit, I tried to do the same to the girls. I tried to get them to talk in a language and in a way that suited me and seemed good to me, so I did not actually hear their voices or see what they wanted. It is good that I have now seen and understood this. I can relinquish my ego a bit and be more flexible ...

Ruth accepted my suggestion to begin to integrate visual art processes into the work. We planned the activity to start with a quiet physical warm-up, some sort of guided visualisation with physical awareness in chairs, while introducing subjects Ruth wanted to work on during the meeting. The next step was to invite each of the girls to paint a picture that expressed her feelings about the chosen subject. At first Ruth only gave the girls hard materials such as coloured pencils, felt-tip pens and pastel chalks for use on A4 paper. This constituted a limited, creative space that suited the girls and did not threaten them. After the drawing and the presentations, where the girls were invited to look at and witness each other's work, she invited the girls to join the circle that formed around their drawings. Then each girl was invited to move and/or make a sound that emanated from her drawing, with the other girls echoing the sound. This structure was used in the next six meetings, but the time for the personal-creative expressive drawing and in the cooperative movement circle was lengthened each time. At one of the meetings, the girls created a collage from their art works, and at another meeting, they composed a shared poem. These activities reflected the similarities in their experiences and contributed to the consolidation of the group. In the course of the meetings a sense of a safe place emerged that allowed Ruth to expand the work to include more open movement work on images in the space, together with the suggestion to move to softer art materials such as water colours and gouache and larger paper. This process continued until the end of Ruth's work with the group that year and expanded the girls' creative language. The process took place together with the development of the experience of safe group space that also enabled the expression and exploration of deep personal and group issues.

An example of choosing an inappropriate artistic genre

Adina (fictional name), a dramatherapist, told me about a crisis she experienced during the treatment of a 14-year-old boy with a cognitive disability after she used a face mask in one session. She had been meeting with the boy for about six months and although it seemed they had built up trust, when Adina wore the mask for the first time the youngster became anxious, crept into a corner of the room and began shouting. Even when Adina took off the mask and tried to calm him, he did not calm down, and ran out of the room. After this meeting, the youngster refused to come to therapy. Adina felt confused, frustrated and guilty, mainly in connection with issues she linked to the quality of their relationship. Because she took it very personally and did not reflect upon the choice of artistic medium and its possible implications I chose to introduce this idea. From our talk, it appeared that although the youngster

was 14 years old, on a cognitive and emotional level he was at a much lower developmental stage, similar to a child of three or four. At this stage of development the process of object permanence is still developing, so when she wore the mask, it may have been that the 'boy' experienced a death fear and/or abandonment anxiety when she 'disappeared' (Axline 1969; McMahon 2009). Adina said that perhaps it would have been preferable not to use a mask at all with a boy like this at this stage, or alternatively, to use a different type of mask, such as one where a sizeable part of the face and the eyes can be seen, and/or to put it on gradually so that the real person does not disappear. Apparently her choice to work with a mask was grounded mainly in terms of psychological content that took the boy's background and story into account. However, it did not include the child's developmental stage, which did not match her choice of aesthetic form of intervention. After we discussed the subject and the development stages of socio-dramatic play and the development of object relations, she understood the root cause of the crisis from a perspective not necessarily connected to transference, which she had thought about and felt guilty about. This aesthetic explanation did not contradict issues of contact and transference, but highlighted how the choice of inappropriate artistic genre was significant and could lead to empathic failure and a treatment crisis.

These examples illustrate how the 'Talking in a variety of creative languages' approach can help to understand resistances and difficulties that crop up in therapy and in group work combining the arts. The approach identifies difficulties from a perspective that considers the choice of artistic medium and does not rely solely on psychological perspectives. These vignettes show how these arts-based approaches can advance supervision processes and help therapists with their work in the field. The examples also illustrate how psychological thinking dealing with 'content' can be integrated into arts-based supervision, and how a particular intervention can be constructed within a chosen creative medium. They highlight the vast potential inherent to supervision including arts, not only in furthering the therapist's understanding and awareness processes, but also in providing creative tools for the therapist's work and in giving inspiration to arts-based work.

Discussion and summary

This article presents 'Talking in a variety of creative languages' as an approach to assisting arts-based supervision processes. The article presents the theoretical framework of the approach and illustrates its possible implementation by offering detailed examples from practice. It shows the value of using creative tools and perspectives in supervision. The article discusses the ways in which this type of supervision, which focuses on questions of 'form', can contribute to the development of awareness and understanding of processes in addition to illustrating possible ways to implement this thinking and these tools in therapy. The very fact of integrating creative experimentation and the use of artistic tools into supervision can enable the therapists-supervisees to experience the therapeutic power of the art itself, thereby expanding their belief in the tool and inspiring them. The

article also shows how arts-based thinking and techniques can be integrated into psychological thinking and how the art-as-therapy approach can exist in combination with, and in parallel to, other psychological approaches.

In this approach, the issues of characters, creative language and the choice of creative medium apply to the work of the individual therapist as well as to the group therapist. However, because groups are made up of people with a wide range of creative languages, the work of the group therapist is likely to be more complicated than the work of a one-on-one therapist. It is likely that the former will have to find and give expression to a wider range of artistic media, and be able to use them when facilitating. In this connection, working cooperatively with a facilitator who has different artistic expertise can have many advantages.

The two approaches I have developed for supervision, 'Talking in a variety of creative languages' and 'Playing multiple roles', exist as independent approaches and it is possible to conduct supervision based on only one of them. However, combining them with other theories and approaches is possible, and can expand the effectiveness of the supervision and contribute to the therapist's effectiveness. The approach and the examples given here will hopefully support the observation processes in the work of therapists-supervisors in the field. I also hope other supervisors will conceptualise the approaches they implement in supervision, publish them, and thus to contribute to the development of the field of arts-based supervision.

Notes on contributor

Ronen Berger is the founder of Nature Therapy, Drama therapist, Dancer, Researcher, Supervisor and Ecologist. Founder and head of the Nature Therapy program at Tel Aviv University (2009-2015) and the Drama Therapy MA program at the College of Arts and Social, Israel. Head of Nature therapy, Art therapy and Play therapy conferences including the international 'Art as Therapy' Conference. Ronen has developed national therapeutic programmes that took place in the Israeli Ministry of Education. He is an active therapist and group facilitator working with various populations. He has published many articles and books and is considered a leading figure in the fields of Nature therapy and Drama Therapy in Israel.

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