

# **Towards an Identity as Systemic Supervisor**

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**With a focus on personal style**

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## **Abstract**

In this dissertation I explore and describe my evolving identity as a systemic supervisor and argue for the importance of the connection to personal style. I review the systemic ideas, values, ethics and concepts for supervision and explore the connections between them and my personal style of doing supervision. I describe my personal values, ethics and basic assumptions which I see as a base for the methods and techniques I engage in. The adult learning theories I find useful connects to the supervision theories and my personal style which I see as socially constructed through my experience of life in continuous conversations with others. I give examples on techniques and practices that fit for me as a supervisor. The dissertation can be seen as “the thin book of systemic supervision” since it gives a broad overview of ideas and concepts in this field.

## Introduction

These past two years I have been training to become a systemic supervisor. The term “systemic supervisor” contains a range of meaning which is hard to grasp and often my mind slips away when I try to explain what the ideas are that inform my practice. Even though I’ve been studying systemic texts and using systemic ideas in my practice for more than fifteen years I have a hard time explaining when people ask me “What do you mean by systemic?” or “How do you do systemic supervision?”. There are so many different angles to start explaining these questions from, and the answer always seem to be different according to what my focus has been at the present time. I imagine the same dilemma occurs when someone asks an artist “how do you do to paint such a picture”? Like the artist I have been trying out many different techniques, worked with lots of different material (different methods) and copied styles from the masters of the field. Reading the contributions from well known practitioners when they describe their ideas and theories is interesting when you connect what they say to how their personalities appear. For example; the idea of “irreverence” fits perfect with how G. Cecchin acts and appears and P. Lang’s appreciative attitude fits excellent when he says “fantastic!”. T. Andersen’s slow but intensive style of exploring the meaning people give to certain words, he explains as coming from the culture of northern Norway with few people and astonishing and harsh country. Michael White explained on a seminar that he always have had a fascination for maps and the sailing explorers of the pacific in the sixteenth century, spending hours of his teenage years hanging over maps to understand the world. In forming his narrative theories he thus created maps to understand and explore the meaning people gave to the stories they expressed.

This fit between personal style and preferred methods and theories have become interesting and something I want to explore more. Not long ago I began to realize that there are certain ways of practice that fit better for me as a supervisor than others and I have a sense that I’m now beginning to find (or create) a personal style of performing supervision and an identity as supervisor which also is a combination between personal style and theories. I can see the contours of how I want to act and what I find useful in the position as a supervisor, what theories inform the practice and on what grounds and values my identity as a supervisor rests. At the same time, when I am getting the sense of having found this way of acting and thinking as a supervisor I get lost in all the parts (e.g. techniques, methods, exercises and theories) and loose the entirety. In practice this shows when I, after having had a supervision session realize that I could have done, or said something in a certain situation that I didn’t do in the moment.

I know I cannot do “the right thing” all the time and that the most important position is to be reflexive in what I do and put trust in the belief that my experience and former training will guide my spontaneous actions that suits the context I am acting in. Anyway I’m having a wish to become more accurate and focused in my position as a supervisor and reflect back on what this training has given me, so that the learning becomes more fluent in use. This last essay, the Master dissertation, I will therefore use as an opportunity to explore what the ideas, values, assumptions theories and actions are that inform me as a systemic supervisor and how they fit with me as a person. By doing this I also think my identity as a supervisor will grow further.

### Aims

My aim with this dissertation is to explore my thoughts, theories, and examples of my practice in the field of systemic supervision to get a hold on what I know and why I engage in the practice the way I do. Formalizing, or focusing my thinking through writing fits as a good learning process for me and by writing about this from a personal view I hope I will gain a grater focus on what I am doing because, to quote Peter Lang who quoted Wittgenstein; “I need to speak to know what I am thinking” (Lang, 2000). In “knowing supervision” I’m using Wittgenstein’s (1953), notion that *knowledge* means *knowing how to go on* which points towards seeing knowledge as an activity, and therefore as a process. The process of writing this dissertation will in this sense be a way to help me ‘know how to go on’ in my practice as a supervisor.

Another aim is to make a personal account of what ideas, values, and passions I have in my work that keeps me going and to argue for the idea that all practitioners have their personal style that guides them in the daily work. If we can see each other as unique practitioners, all with special and different passions about our work, we might easier appreciate what other in the field can give us. One point of this dissertation is to enable *you*, the reader to explore *your* unique style and application in doing supervision.

If the dissertation functions for other practitioners as a useful guide and inspiration in their work and a ‘guide in systemic supervision’ it would fulfill a great purpose, but at least it will function as a reminder and guide for me when I need inspiration.

## Audience and language

Audience for this dissertation is to begin with the examining boards of KCCF, GCK and the University of Bedfordshire. I am also writing for my college students on the course and other professionals in the field who are interested in learning more about systemic supervision.

I'm writing in English which is not my native language. This may shine through in thin sentences and poor language here and there. I hope the intentions of what I want to say will come through anyway, and that the reader will be indulgent with the language.

## Outline of the dissertation

I am inspired by John Burnham's thoughts about seeing development as a process where theory and practice influence each other reciprocally. Therefore I will interweave theories and quotations from writers with examples from my own practice throughout the dissertation and create a mix between practices and theories. Here is a short overview of the disposition of the dissertation.

**Chapter 1.** I outline what the **theoretical roots and world views** are that function as a platform in my practice as a systemic supervisor. I present the **values, ethics and assumptions** I have. These ideas I see as basic and function as the epistemology, or framework for the work I do.

**Chapter 2.** In this chapter I **connect the theories and values** described in chapter 1 **to the supervisory practice** and I outline how I **position myself as a supervisor** according to these values and theories.

**Chapter 3** focuses on the **adult learning theories** I find useful for systemic supervision. I am also connecting learning theories to practical examples in supervision.

In **chapter 4** I give **examples on some practice** I find useful in supervision. I focus on **stories** and the use of **storytelling** in supervision and will also give example of how I use drawings on flip charts and white board to enhance meaning.

**Chapter 5** is **reflecting back** on the process of writing this dissertation and what I have learnt by writing it.

Using John Burnham's framework AMT (Approach, Method and Technique) (Burnham, 1993), the first chapter can be seen as dealing mostly with *Approach*, the second and third chapter highlights *Method*, and the fourth chapter focuses mostly on *technique*.

## 1. Background theories, paradigms and epistemology

Here and there among systemic practitioners I hear skeptical utterances when it comes to the use of theories in the field of therapy and supervision. Once I heard a well known systemic practitioner saying that ‘theories are massage for intellectuals’. To me however, theories have a central role when I guide myself around in the practice. Direct and indirect they serve as an engine in my every day practice. Maybe, one of my preferred learning styles according to Kolb is “abstract conceptualization” (see below chapter 3). Personally, theorizing and philosophy have been a passion as long as I know and engaging in conversations about “who we are?” and “what is good living?” brings energy and meaning to my life. In the systemic and social constructionist perspective the main focus is that we live in a communicating world. We create understanding and meaning in communicating with others. The culture we live in and the societal discourses influence how we cope with the “truths” we create. We create meaning of words as “therapy” and “supervision” and how we should act as agents in the practice of these words. Every culture has their “right” and “wrong” behaviors and ways of communicate within the culture. This dissertation is created in relation to the current western cultural ideas of how to construct a dissertation. All ideas and theories have historical roots and next I will give a background from where the systemic and social constructionist ideas have developed.

### Modernist attitude towards meaning and knowledge

In the secularized Europe called the Enlightenment, the power of the church and their answer to “meaning” became questioned. Erland Lagerroth describes the “Copernican heresy” as central in founding the new scientific paradigm in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by placing the sun in the middle of universe instead of the earth. Since “every known society rests on a range of basic assumptions about *who we are, what kind of universe we live in and what it is that is important for us*” (Lagerroth, 1994 p.27, my translation) this heresy made a great impact. The period that followed when the power of the church was broken is called *Modernism* and the scientific method that was founded was called *Positivism*. “The scientific method” was created to generate clean, context free and universal truths (Penman, 1996, p.3). According to this scientific paradigm knowledge should be objective, impersonal, unhistorical, permanent and universal and it should produce grounded facts (Chen, Pearce, 1995). The positivistic method that has been the modernist scientific method above all has made a great impact in the



daily living the past decades. We live in a world that is constructed through this modernistic thinking and it has led to enormously increased material growth and increased wealth for many people. The thinking has also produced mountains of garbage, environmental damage, starvation, stress, war and conflicts about what is right and wrong, true or false. During the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were reactions against the modernist world view. These reactions led to a proposal for an alternative way to look at the world. The new paradigm got the name post-modernism.

### The post-modernist alternative

“The scientific method” was created to give us clean, context free and universal truths. Now we have understood that there cannot be any “clean” truths to find independently of human influence and the impact of the observer. In this new world we need to ask new questions about what – and how, we know what we know? (Penman, 1996) and epistemology (how do we know what we know?) has become an important focus. From the modernist perspective the focus is to give accurate answers and final truths. From the post-modernist view the focus is to ask questions to generate new meaning and “objectivity” is marked with quotation. Human science was changed from a focus about how human beings *are* and *function* to how we *do* and *communicate*. Instead of focusing on universal truths, focus was set on local knowledge and the influence of the context and different culture. “Descartes claimed that ‘I think, therefore I am’... Vernon Cronen made a more radical suggestion: ‘We communicate, therefore we are.’ “ (Pearce, 1999, p.11). With Bateson, Foucault, Maturana, Gergen and the Milan team (just to name a few) as starting points, post-modern ideas have continued to develop within the systemic thinking and the social constructionism.

### Systemic constructionism

The post-modern approach to therapy and supervision has many different labels. I have found that ‘systemic constructionism’ fits when I look for the theoretical roots to my positioning as supervisor and therapist. ‘Systemic’, because the focus is on people in relation to each other and influencing each other, and ‘constructionism’, because human systems and culture are constantly evolving in an ongoing process. I will now give examples of what I see as some of the concepts and values in the world view of a systemic constructionist:

- We influence other people and get influenced by other people. In con-joint actions with other people we create our social worlds and our identities (Lang, Little & Cronen, 1990).
- Truths about the world are not found things but are co-created in language, and are guided by our curiosity and reflexivity in a world that is seen as pluralistic and polyphonic. "...each person perceives the world differently and actively creates meanings from events. The 'real' world is therefore a different place for each of us" (Burr, 2003 p. 19) Instead of a universal view of the world, the constructionist talks about "multiversal perspective" and valuing all voices and not only a "right" voice (Gergen & Gergen, 1991).
- We live *in* communication, not *by* communicating. The language is not a carrier of information but function as creator in itself. "Language and meaning are *matters of use and doing in conjoint action* rather than codes or a vehicle for ideas" and "...to know the meaning of an utterance depends on the context in which the utterance take place" (Cronen, V. & Lang, P., 1994, p.6).
- There are built in ethical (and political, I would say) considerations because: If we influence other people in a world that we co-create, we have to consider how we want to influence and what world we want to participate in creating. We engage in social practice without ambitions of acting objective or create truths, but with an intention to create a better world. Ethic becomes immanent in the communicating practice (Penman, 1996). *What* we do, *how* we do it and what we think we *should* do becomes our priority tasks and in 'the doing' we show our ethics. "Thus memory, emotion and other psychological phenomena becomes things we do rather than things we have" (Burr, 2003 p. 17).

These assumptions are painted with a broad brush. They are mentioned here to give a picture of the development of the ideas that I see as a base for the more specific supervision theories that will follow later on in the text.

### My personal values, assumptions and ethics

"To talk of theory without relation to values and experience is like studying the small eddies in the river as it flows without looking to the banks. We would miss so much" (Wilson, 2007, p. 22). Another way to describe this is that "...human beings, in their interaction with one

another, *design* their behavior and hold theories for doing so. These theories of action as we have called them include the values, strategies and underlying assumptions that inform individuals' pattern of interpersonal behavior" (Schon, 1987, p. 255). I see the values and basic assumptions as intrinsic parts of the personality and the identity. When I ask myself: "What keeps me going?" or "Why do I get out of bed in the morning (often) with a hope of a forthcoming good day?" or simply "What am I passionate about?" I am dealing with questions about my *values* and *basic assumptions* in life. They are 'the bread and water' that engages my curiosity and keeps me going in a work that I did not choose because of the good salary, but because of interest and vocation. The following is an attempt of explaining these personal values, assumptions and ethics:

- I have, as long as I know, had a hard time accepting when people present final facts, or truths, about me or other people, facts that one should obey and respect. It's like obstinate thoughts comes to me automatically when these kinds of facts are presented. When stuck in discussions based on facts and truths I often find myself getting bored and tired. Personally and professionally, an explorative stance that gives room for new ideas to develop fits better to engage my curiosity. "Right and wrong" discussions have the tendency to make people evaluate each other in dichotomies as good – bad, smart – dumb, expert – novice, etc. and favors the expert position as the most important voice to listen to. One mission in life has been to raise the voice of the ones that aren't listened to very much. This is a political argument – just because I think it will make a better world if the power equals out between people.
- The belief that nothing is fixed and static and that we construct ourselves and the world we live in through communicating with each other, helps me maintain the curiosity for reflecting *how* we interact in the process of co-creating ourselves and our worlds. Personally, I have a lot of examples of how I have gotten different identities tagged on me and have experienced the joy of hearing good utterances connected to something I have said or done, as well as the entrapped feeling when someone has valued me as bad. The constructionist notion that we influence people and get influenced by people through communication points to an ethical question: How do we want to influence? and; What do we want to create? I want to influence people in

supervision to find their unique way further and for them to act as ethical agents when working with people in need of help.

- Connected to the last is the attitude that ‘systems are perfect’ in the way they act even if the consequence of the action is not preferable. This helps me maintain my curious stance when I slip into useless thoughts about what could be wrong in the system. It also gives an ethical account that we all act into social worlds which fits with the context we act from within. I’d like to quote Vernon Cronen saying we are “concerned with creating good life, for there is no legitimate reason to study the family, culture or social institutions unless we are concerned with creating good life for people” (Cronen, 1994a, p.8). Jim Wilson connects with this and says: “...pre-judging another person is dangerous without first trying to appreciate the logic in that person’s perspective” (Wilson, 2007, p.21).
- I am the youngest in a family of eight people, and I have had five siblings helping my parents to bring me up. This gave me a lot of room to play and to find out my own solutions and saved me from many obligations that my brother and sisters had. Play, fantasy and humor has been important in my life and I use it in my work as a therapist and supervisor. My big family has also served as a “playground of practice” (Wilson, 2007) where I as the youngest had the freedom to be “irreverent” (Cecchin et al, 1992) in my comments on what was talking about at home without having responsibility for the outcome of f. ex. an argue.
- In the post modern and systemic constructionist field there are many authors proposing an alternative way of seeing and understanding who we are and what world we live in that questions the ground principles of former traditional ways of thinking. This contradictory stance appeals to me in many ways. I get bodily moved and get goose pimples when reading texts by f. ex. Kenneth Gergen when he proposes another way to look at the concept of ‘self’ and says: “There is nothing that requires us to understand our world in terms of independent units; we are free to mint new and more promising understandings” (Gergen, 2009, p. 5). Texts like this makes me feel I want to be a participant in this ‘minting’ new and more promising understandings and work to influence the world to become a better place to live.

## **1. Positioning as a supervisor (methods and concepts)**

This chapter focuses on ideas that are useful for me as a guide when creating a supervision practice. It deals with the assumptions and preferences I have when entering the scene of supervision. The focus here is what theories and concepts I have that inform the practice of supervision and how my attitude could match these theories and concepts. I intend to explore the question: “How do I position myself to create a context of supervision that can be useful for the ones I meet?”

### The Swedish context for supervision

English supervision culture differs from the Swedish. When we talk about supervision in the Swedish context, the most common setting is group supervision and not very often supervision with individuals. Another difference is that in Sweden supervision is spread among many different professions such as teachers, other staff members in schools, counselors, social workers, staff on different hospital institutions, different kinds of inpatient units, and so on. Our primary work as supervisors in Sweden is therefore not to supervise in the context of therapy. The supervisee’s usually don’t have any experience of acting from within the therapeutic context. More often the focus is how to position oneself towards the ones they work with and to create a professional identity that fits with their duties and obligations. Since the supervisor meets supervisee’s from many different professions, the supervisory context has many different settings. The supervisor has to be fluent in adjusting the practice so that it fits with all these different contexts. We have to show reflection in action (Schon, 1987) and relational reflexivity (Burnham, 2005) by adjusting the content to the different professional cultures we enter.

### Developing identity and personal style as a supervisor

I have experience from having a lot of trainers and meeting other supervisors in practice. Even though they might have similar systemic theories and thoughts about what they do, what it is that is important to focus on and how to perform the practice, they all perform it in different ways and the context for supervision becomes different depending on who performs it.

G. Cecchin argues that working in a systemic frame for practice means adopting certain rules. The following rules point to the notion on the importance of the person of the supervisor: “The only reliable instrument we have are our own lenses, through which we examine the world” and: “Lenses are developed, created and organized by our past history, tradition, training and the experience of living in continuous conversations with other people” (Radovanovic, 1993 p. 255). Above (in chapter 1) I have given some accounts why, and how, my lenses have shaped my personal style towards a post-modern, social constructionist, systemic attitude towards therapy and supervision, and I will describe this further in the text. Personally and professionally, I wish to engage my curiosity through the amazements and wonders of life and this is best done for me when dealing with questions and reflecting processes in collaboration with others. We use common theories, methods and techniques in our work as supervisors but when our work is experienced by others it’s *how* we do it that matters – the personal way we perform the practice. Wilson (2007) explains this position as: “... how we, as practitioners, use every aspect of our being to communicate with the other in practice, how we shape and mould our words through gesture and other nonverbal actions in response to the gestures and words of others in a continually recursive process” (p. 2).

Drawing on Hedges & Lang (1993) I would say that the aim of supervision training is to grow in to the ‘identity’ of being a supervisor (p. 277). In developing an identity as systemic practitioner Hedges & Lang draws on Dewey’s notion that “the ‘professional self’ cannot be separated from the ‘personal self’ ..... In practice a person’s many life experiences and ideas may inform their action in different ways at different times.” (p. 278). They suggest that trainee’s in systemic therapy and supervision should ‘map’ their personal and professional stories because; “As participant in the co-creation of reality the therapist [and supervisor, I would add] must have some sense how he or she perceives on the basis of their own multiple stories.” (p. 288).

In an article by Jeff Faris he discusses his interest for processes that are highly elusive and says: “The relationship between the personal epistemology embodied in therapists’ practice and the discourses of espoused theory about therapy seems central to this process. [...] Personal epistemology I see as forming a history of a practitioner’s experience, prior training experiences, personal life events and beliefs, preferred responses and habitual reactions – what practitioners do in their work with clients and learn from this activity” (Faris, 2002 p.92). Connecting this to the supervision context he says: “In my view, an understanding of the self of the trainee therapist is intrinsically connected to the supervisor’s understanding of

her /himself within the supervisory relationship. This must be seen, too, in the light of what else is going on for them in their life (past, present, and future)” (p.97). I think ‘personal epistemology’ is a term that fits with my intentions with this dissertation. My focus however, is not to explore or describe my personal epistemology. Instead I want to describe my (at the moment) way of performing supervision connected to my values and passions for the work.

### My responsibility to create a useful context

When entering the scene of supervision I ask myself: “What can I do to perform in a way that promotes development, learning and growth for the supervisee’s I meet, and how does this benefit the ones they work with?” John Burnham has a similar question saying: “How can I practice so as to increase the chances of this relationship becoming therapeutic for the people I work with?” (Burnham 2005). These questions point towards seeing the supervisor as active in the process of creating a useful context for supervision in contrast to supervision theories that sees the supervisor as a passive receiver, only dealing with what the supervisee brings for supervision. As systemic supervisor I see myself as responsible in creating a context for learning and reflexive practices. Michael White (1991) says that to empower the other you have to de-center yourself as clinician by asking questions and create a context that guide them in finding their own way to go on. This position is reflexive in the sense that I like to adjust to every working context I enter by ‘joining their grammar’ (Cronen, Lang, 1994) in trying to see the world from their view and from this position engage my curiosity and create contexts that promotes professional development, reflexivity and new meaning to emerge.

### Working in between the paradigms

As supervisor I meet many groups, all with different experience of the systemic approach and with different approach to learning and truth. In a comment by Cecchin of an article by Radovanovic he explains: “The logic that a systemic teacher follows is a logic based on the lens of aesthetics and curiosity and she or he avoids carefully any form of deterministic logic. It is assumed, perhaps wrongly, that students who come for training are more versed in the traditional deterministic logic.” (Radovanovic, 1993, p. 254). My experience is that it takes some frustration going from a modernistic belief system and framework to a post modern systemic approach. When, for example, I join a group for supervision and they are used to

being supervised in a psychoanalytic tradition it takes some time to connect, and for them to find meaning in what we are doing. Often the participants get frustrated about all the questions I ask and the lack of answers, and their conclusion is often that I don't have very much knowledge since I for example, don't automatically give diagnoses when talking about clients. Their expectations is that the supervision focus is to explore how their clients *are and function* while my focus is to explore and elaborate how the system (including them) are creating meaning and understanding of what they *do* and how they *communicate* in their unique contexts. It may often take some time before "they appreciate and develop the richness of possibilities as they move from a need for certainty and closure to a sense of comfortableness with uncertainty and the yet-to-come" (Anderson, 2000). Working in this tension between the paradigms is something that I have to learn how to cope with, I came to realize. Some years ago I found this frustrating but now days I can feel a joy in this process accepting that it is a part of the creative learning that the supervision could open up for. The systemic notion that 'you can't change another person, only yourself', means for me that to be a supervisor, I have to learn from the ones I meet how I should adapt myself to be useful for them. At the same time I have a strong idea (prejudice) of what I think is a useful approach for practitioners – the systemic constructionist approach.

We all have our truths, prejudices, values and preferences to understand our world and these are matters for me as a supervisor to connect to and explore – both my own (being self reflexive) and the ones I supervise. An example of connecting was when one social worker in one of my supervision groups brought up a dilemma she had, working with a teenage girl that never left her bed. I knew that the social worker attended a therapy course in CBT (Cognitive Behavior Therapy) and she often referred to the connections between feeling-thought-action which is the ground principles of CBT. She had also expressed skeptical thoughts about the use of the systemic ideas. I started to ask her if she wanted to explore the connections between her feelings-thoughts-actions in relation to the work she did with the girl. A little surprised she said yes. I started to interview her using systemic circular questions and I was keen on using questions that included the three words. Afterwards she was very pleased with the interview and said that she had gained another view of her position towards the girl and that she now knew how to go on. After the session when I thought of what I contributed with, I realized the words from Tom Andersen when he held a seminar in Gothenburg saying that 'you should use the words the other one uses to connect to his/her world'. It also connects to



Peter Lang's and Wittgenstein's ideas about 'joining the other ones grammar' (Cronen, Lang, 1994).

On the November meeting 2008 at the course, we had Peter Lang as guest tutor and I brought up the question about connecting to other epistemologies and paradigms for understanding. When experiencing meeting a group that have a hard time accepting the systemic concepts, Peter suggested asking my self the question "what can I do differently to connect to the group, in my unique way". He quoted Wittgenstein saying that "meaning is emerging, context is emerging and we meet each other in what we are becoming" (Lang, 2008). From this I learn that: every meeting I have as supervisor is unique, it is an emerging process of knowing how to go on, and there are no universal systemic methods of how to relate to groups. Again, it's a matter of how I position myself to the ones I meet, using my curiosity to find ways to connect in a way that promotes the emerging of learning, meaning and new ideas. Another way to put it is quoting Chris Oliver when she explains the systemic position as: "acting wise in different contexts" (Oliver, 2000) which for me means learning to "know how to go on" in the different contexts I am a part of.

### Knowing how to go on

I have found Wittgenstein's explanation of knowledge and learning, '*knowing how to go on*' useful as a metaphor for supervision. The notion: 'Knowing how to go on' points directly towards process (Cronen, Lang, 1994). In supervision the supervisee often comes up with a dilemma, saying he/she is stuck and *don't know how to go on*. My task as a supervisor is to do something that helps them moving from the stuck position to a position where they get a sense that they *know how to go on*, or as Goolishian/Anderson says: a position where the problem "dissolves" (Anderson H. Goolishian H. A. 1992). Supervision can be a place where you explore, experiment, discuss, reflect on action and reflect on concepts, to find a sense of knowing how to go on. Or using Burnham's words: "Supervisory relationships as contexts for the evolution of reflexivity in relation to people, ideas, meaning and action may be thought of as one of its most important purposes (Burnham, 2005).

As a therapist I have had supervisors connecting to my position of *not knowing how to go on* in different ways. Some times I've been given direct advises and suggestions how I could go on. Sometimes I have gotten theoretical explanations saying that my stuck feeling is a sign of counter projection, that the clients projects their stuck feelings on me and therefore I get

confused and end up in a position of *not knowing how to go on*. Other times, another supervisor has started to ask me questions to explore the context in which the idea, or feeling, of *not knowing how to go on* had emerged. My personal style as a supervisor is similar to this last approach – asking questions to open up for the stuck position to dissolve.

#### Asking questions from a stance of curiosity and reflexivity

Curiosity and reflexivity are some of the key concepts in systemic supervision. The curious and reflexive position is the stance for exploring new meaning and ideas and I often use systemic questioning to lead me in this process. Having a curious and reflexive attitude means that “I ask questions to invite people’s description of their experience and meanings and then allow their talk to guide my listening and talking” (Fredman, 2004). In the conversation, by interviewing, my questions create a frame to bring forth the story, seen from the eyes of the other. At the same time I reflexively influence the story by the kind of questions I ask and by the way they are asked. My ‘engine’ in this reflexive process is my curiosity to help creating meaning and a sense of ‘knowing how to go on’ for both of us. The answer I get after asking a question guides me reflexively what the next question could be. “All knowledge, the social constructionist hold, evolves in the space between people, in the realm of the ‘common world’ or the ‘common dance.’ Only through the on-going conversation with intimates does the individual develop a sense of identity or an inner voice.” (Hoffman, 1992 p.8). Hoffman also explains the reflexive attitude saying that it; “indicate a preference for a mutually influenced process between consultant and inquirer as opposed to one that is hierarchical and unidirectional. In particular, this approach calls into question the high level status of the professional.” (p.17)

The systemic constructionist notion that we co-create ourselves and our social worlds in communication are brought forth in the way we use systemic circular questions. The intentions of the questions are not a search to find answers but to connect people, ideas, events and contexts to understand and create meaning to ‘know how to go on’ and to help position ourselves in the complex situation we work from at the moment. My position (and duty) as a supervisor is therefore to create contexts where meaning emerges, using my (and their) curiosity to find ways further. Having a reflexive attitude guides me in this process. Burnham explains this position saying: “Reflexivity in the therapeutic domain is facilitated when a supervisor or peer acts so to enable a therapist to reflect upon the effects of their own actions in ways which create differences in therapeutic and supervisory relationships” (1993, p.10).

### Relational reflexivity

John Burnham describes his concept of ‘relational reflexivity’ as: “the intention, desire, processes and practices through which therapists and clients explicitly engage one another in coordinating their resources so as to create a relationship with therapeutic potential. This would involve initiating... responding to...and developing, opportunities to consider, explore, experiment with and elaborate the ways in which they relate” (Burnham, 2005). By, for example asking questions about the questions asked, the therapist gives a “relationally reflexive space for the clients to experience empowerment in co-constructing with the therapist a relationship with therapeutic potential” (ibid.). As Burnham points out - asking questions about how to proceed in the process is a way to warm the context. I have started to use these ideas about relational reflexivity in the supervision context and found it helpful in many ways. For example, now days I always start an interview by asking some questions about how I can proceed in the interview to be of best help and if the interviewee has any special preferences for some kind of method I should use. By asking these questions in the beginning I am not only warming the context, I’m also saying that it has an impact *how* we talk and not only *what* we talk about. It also shows that I am willing to reflexively change and adjust my way of acting, and that there is no right way of doing it. I’d like to show two examples from my practice, one where I didn’t use the idea of relational reflexivity, and one where I used it. I start with the example where it would have been helpful to use it:

Sometimes my curiosity takes over and I get carried away by a theme and loose the connection to the supervisee’s learning process. This is an example where it would have been better if I restrained my curiosity about the content to connect to the process of the group in a better way.

The supervision group wanted to explore how they should go on working with a family they had started to work with. The children of the family lived on the child unit where they worked and they wanted to know how to connect to the parents when they came to visit. I got carried away in my curiosity about their story and started to use the white board, drawing maps while I interviewed them. Some of the supervisee’s got interested in the exploring and soon the whole white board was full of maps and ideas of how to go on in the work. At this point I realized that only two in the group were active and interested in the process and that the other three looked tired and bored. I had been creating a masterpiece flavored with great theories – but of little use, I realized. This experience made me think that I should have been keener on contracting with the group how we should work with the theme they brought up. If I had

asked each one of them what perspective they would like to put and how they wanted to deal with it in supervision I would have connected the issue to them instead of carry on in a way I thought was good. Some relational reflexivity would have created a different setting and engaged more of them, I think. Here is another example where I used relational reflexivity in a more fruitful way:

The supervision group working with teenagers with special needs in school brought up a case saying they lost the contact with one of the boys in school. Until recently they had had a good and trustful relation to him but now, they said, he didn't respect them or their rules anymore and they didn't know how to connect with him in a good way. Using the idea of relational reflexivity I started to ask them questions about the process like: In what way do you think we have to talk for you to be able to connect with him in a way so that the respect increases? Would an IOI- interview (they have done it before) fit for this purpose or any other method? Are there certain words we should use when we discuss this that would help the respect between him and you to increase? The questions I asked seemed to have the effect that the boy became present for us all in the room. It became obvious that what we talked about and how we talked about it would have an effect on their relation to the boy. It was not the boy we were talking about, but their relation to him and his relation to each and one of them. At the same time we talked about their relation to me. They had the influence on how the supervision should go on to fit their purpose of connecting with the boy in another way.

Adjusting to Burnham's ideas of relational reflexivity increases my curiosity about what effects my actions have on the ones I meet. It evens out the power between me and the supervisee when they are asked to influence the context of the supervision. It also influences my self-reflexivity since my interest is focused on how my action is perceived. Now I see self-reflexivity as one of the most important attitudes in the position as a supervisor. Burnham gives a good description of the self reflexive process when he says "I think of self-reflexivity as a process in which a therapist makes, takes or grasps an opportunity to ..observe ..listen to ..question ..the effects of their practice, then use their responses to their observation/listening to decide 'how to go on' in the particular episode or the work in general" (Burnham, 2005, p.3). John Burnham invites to a reflexive stance towards the process the supervisor and the supervisee are having. A kind of meta-perspective of what they do, how it fits the supervisee and if something ought to be changed in the way they work together. Instead of being a one-way process where the supervisor is the only one to have the power to influence the content and the context, the supervisees are invited to help the therapist to evaluate the process

(Burnham 2005). As a supervisor I constantly evaluate how the supervision is received, what they will bring with them from the session and how it can be a help in the daily work. This feedback process gives me guidance if we are on a track that fits for them and how we can move on. Asking for feedback and me being thorough in adjusting to their daily work and how I can create a supervision context that fits for them evens out the power issues hopefully. I hope I can offer a context where we can explore and use “speculations and meanings without the constraints of finding the truth” (Wilson, 2007, p. 18).

As I have said before, one purpose Burnham has when he introduces the concept of “relational reflexivity” he describes in the question: “How can I practice so as to increase the chances of this relationship becoming therapeutic for the people I work with” (Burnham, 2005). Scott Miller takes a similar stance when he proposes a “feedback attitude”, and he simply asks: “What works in social practice” (Miller, 2009). As I understand them, they both explore the question of reflexivity, and they both have a starting point seeing the world through the eyes of the client/supervisee, which is a reflexive stance.

#### Mutual influence – the ethics of reflexivity

I have recently become very influenced by Scott Millers thoughts when he describes a “feedback attitude” (Miller, 2009) in therapy. I have transferred these ideas into the supervisory field and found it to be a useful reflexive position to work from. In my continuing presentation of Millers ideas, “therapy” could be translated into “supervision”. As a starting point for taking his stance as a therapist Miller uses the collected research about *what works in therapy*. This research has shown that there is no method or approach that works better than another – the outcome is equal no matter what therapeutic method or technique used (Hubble, Duncan & Miller, 1999). What measures good outcome is instead “the quality of the therapeutic relationship, the strengths and resources of the client, and the person of the therapist” (Miller, 2004). In one research study there was a comparison between the three different domains: *Technique* (e.g. psychodynamic interviewing, solution focused interview, empty chair, IOI, etc.), *Allegiance* (the therapists’ belief in what she/he does) and *Alliance* (the relationship between therapist and client). It turned out that far most important for a successful outcome was the alliance. On second place came allegiance. And still we spend so much time learning different techniques! (Miller, S.D. 2009). With this in mind I think we should focus on how to create a good alliance with our clients and supervisee’s, and stay

allegiant to what we believe works. This notion about the importance of the alliance also puts the light on the person of the therapist; how she/he acts to create a good alliance. Adjusting these ideas to supervision means for me to constantly evaluate; “are we doing the right thing or should we do something else?” and “does this give you a sense to *know how to go on?*” and also; “how would your client benefit from us having this supervision?”.

To me, Burnham and Miller become theoretical participants around the same fireplace at the camp of therapy and supervision. Their approach is to involve the other (therapist or client) to guide us in how we should go on in our work with them. Around this ‘reflexive fireplace’ are more people with similar approaches: There is Tom Andersen with his reflecting team, Gianfranco Cecchin with his prejudice, Karl Tomm asking reflecting questions, Peter Lang and Elspeth McAdam appreciating and valuing peoples actions, Michael White empowering the clients, and Goolishian and Anderson saying ‘the client is the expert’. What all these approaches characterize is that they “indicate a preference for a mutually influenced process between consultant and inquirer as opposed to one that is hierarchical and unidirectional” (Hoffman, 1992, p. 10). These reflexive approaches to therapy and supervision show ethics by itself by putting the client/supervisee in the driver seat in the process. “In particular, this approach calls into question the high-level status of the professional” (ibid. p. 11). The long time tradition of putting the professional in the expert position seems to be broken by this new ethical, reflexive tradition where our interest is on; how what we do is conceived by the ones we meet. Words like ‘reluctant’ or ‘not motivated’ does not just fit as descriptions of the supervisee or the client anymore.

### AMT and Methodology, Values and Personal Style

John Burnham uses his concept of AMT (Approach, Method and Technique) as a framework in relation to the objectives and activities of supervision. “**Approach** relates to those personal prejudices, aesthetic preferences and theoretical concepts shaping the social construction of training cultures, team discourse and supervisory relationships. [...] **Method** relates to the organisational patterns used both to set forth and bring forth the approach. [...] **Technique** relates to those specific supervisory practices that can be observed and even "counted" by an observer of the activity” (Burnham, 1993 p.351). He explains that you can; “Simply put, approach concerns *why* something is done, method *how* it is done, and technique with *what* is done” (p.352). We all have different preferences when it comes to understanding and

exploring contexts. Peter Lang has a similar description when he explains the framework for our activities but using other words; *Methodology* (which paradigm for understanding the world we have), *Values* (what we want to achieve, and what morality we present in the work). *Personal style* relates to the unique ways in which we perform the practice (Lang, 2000). Both of these frameworks are useful when I think in broader terms of what I am doing and why certain action fits better for me than other. It also reminds me that the ones I meet for supervision all have their unique way of understanding the world and acting into it, and that I as a supervisor have to position myself in relation to this in order for meaning to emerge. For me however, there is a risk to become too technical when I go too deep in these theoretical frameworks and by doing so I lose the focus and content of what we are doing at the time. My way to use these frameworks is keeping them as guides in my mind when asking questions so that I can move from the different positions reflexively and make a fit for the supervisee's emerging meaning-making of a context.

Connected to these frames for elaborating in supervision is Kolb's description of different learning styles which I will describe further in the next chapter.

### Exploring social differences through CMM and 'social GRRAACCEESS'

The recent decades Europe has experienced an emerging influence of different cultures when people from outside Europe have moved in. "The complex and challenging demands on practice inherent in living in a multicultural society has made more urgent the need to pay attention to the cultural context that might give meaning to behaviors" (Burnham, Harris, 2002). As a supervisor I have experienced a lot of discussions in the supervision context concerning cultural issues. Using CMM and the understanding of levels of context (Cronen, 1994; Pierce, 1999) as a frame for understanding actions connected to cultural issues has been a fruitful way when exploring different meanings according to culture. One example was when a family who came from Iraq had to move in to an inpatient institution for investigation because the child guidance service had worries that the children got beaten by the parents. Since a little more than thirty years Sweden has a law against corporal punishment and physically punishing children is therefore a crime. In the Middle East culture corporal punishment is often an important part of being a good and caring parent and to neglect punishment when a child had behaved badly would be 'irresponsible'. It is also a way to teach the children respecting grown ups. The staff on the institution was situated in the middle of

different meanings and understanding of a context according to these differences in cultural beliefs. In terms of CMM the context of the society was the highest for the staff, while the context of their culture and family beliefs were higher contexts for the family. In the discussion we had in the supervision I brought up the notion of the ‘domains of action’ (Lang, Little & Cronen, 1990) as a way to free your self to act reflexively between the domain of explanation and the domain of production. I then interviewed them how they could explore other ways the parents in the family could act to be ‘responsible’ and ‘caring’ and that taught the children ‘respect’. We spent a whole supervision session exploring and elaborating how the staff could act to move between the different domains of action and maintain a curious and exploring stance towards the family. We also discussed how they esthetically could show all of the family member’s dignity and respect even though they were in a context of investigation. Two weeks later on the next session we reviewed the effects of the former session. They said they had managed to create a mutual explorative context with the family where the parents and the staff had discussions about how to raise children in a good way connected to different contexts. They also discussed the meaning of the word ‘respect’ in Iraqi culture and in Swedish culture with the parents. The staff group had come to an understanding that; “Every action and interaction is shaped and given meaning in a cultural context” and that we .... “meet with clients, whose cultural experience will bring their own meanings to what they experience of me and I of them. This intercultural dance continues as we strive to bring sense and purpose to our communication” (Wilson, 2007, p 134-135).

One of the key concepts in the supervision course has been ‘Social GRRACCEESS’ (Gender, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Class, Culture, Ethnicity, Education, Spirituality and Sexual orientation). “This prompt is useful in reminding us of the many strands that create a culture and that each one is important and may become foreground or background at different times” (Burnham, Harris, 2002). To me this acronym has become useful when exploring actions and meanings together with my supervisee’s connected to their work with clients as well as exploring our context for supervision. This is one example of how I have used it in one of my supervision groups:

I started to supervise this group of social workers (five women and one man) who were sent to supervision by their boss because they ‘needed systemic supervision’. The first time we met it became clear that they were skeptical to the systemic approach and that they over the years had the experience of many changes between different approaches that the boss wanted them to adapt to. Even though I tried many different ways to connect with them and create a



curious and collaborative atmosphere, I kept meeting an anti-attitude, especially from the man, expressed in almost whatever we discussed. I was beginning to feel stuck but decided to try to talk about the supervision process connecting it to the social GRRAACCEESS. I explained the acronym and asked them to discuss in pairs which ones of the socially constructed contexts in the 'Graces' they thought were foregrounding, and of importance in forming our supervision culture. When they made account of what they talked about there were two strands they recognized as foreground for the supervision context; gender and age. We discussed our context connected to these themes and the man said he have met many young supervisors during his years at work who have had a lot of ideas of how to work as a social worker and he was now getting more reluctant to engage in new ideas, thinking he had inherit enough experience through working with clients. The women discussed how they could use their difference in age as strength and not as a constraint which they might have done so far. The way we discussed these themes of social difference created an open and curios atmosphere which I hadn't experienced before in this group. It also opened up for personal stories to be told that gave meaning to what was important for them and what was important for me to respect and value. This particular group became very interested in the aspects and power of different gender connected to different contexts which were brought up several times after this session.

## **2. Reflexivity and educational theories in supervision**

The past years the educational literature has been a part of the training to become supervisor (Burnham, 2008). Since this literature explores the process of learning in action, it has become obvious that the supervisory field can benefit from it. In this chapter I will describe some learning theories that I find useful when promoting reflexive contexts, practices and exercises, and connect them to other systemic concepts for supervision.

### Adult learning and experiential learning

During the course I have come to think that to be able to grasp what is influencing learning has to do with personal experiences of learning as well as the more general learning theories. Since learning, growing and development are natural parts of what it means to be a human being it is hard to separate it from other parts of life. Knowles connects the adult learner's life experience to the possibility to learn, in his "andragogical" model and says: "Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it" (Knowles, 1990). Knowles argues that the principles of andragogy can be useful in developing learning contexts not only for adults but also for the youth. In fact, in my children's Montessori influenced school I can see the inspiration from Knowles ideas when they create new tasks from the experience they got from former tasks. In adult learning Knowles argues for the importance of connecting the learning to the experience of the learner and the learner's position in life. The adult learns by dealing with problems that they confront in their daily life situations. "...they learn new knowledge, understandings, skills, values, and attitudes most effectively when they are presented in the context of application to real-life situations" (Knowles, 1990). Some years ago I attended a course in systemic therapy held by GCK / KCC in Gothenburg. The practical part when we invited clients for live consultations, using reflecting teams, discussing personal and professional matters, and watching therapy on videos, were all examples of connecting practical daily matters to the learners' position in life that Knowles would approve. I see Knowles ideas as a base for the other learning theories that I will describe.

### Reflection-in-action as a way to gain professional artistry

When I as a supervisor engage in the presentation of a "stuck story" my duty is to help the supervisee to an unstuck position. At the same time I engage, I get ideas of how to work to get

to know how to go on. Schon writes about this and calls it reflection-in-action which is an action on the road to inherit “professional artistry” and he explains: “When someone learns a practice, he is initiated into the traditions of a community of practitioners and the practice world they inhabit. He learns their conventions, constraints, languages, and appreciative systems, their repertoire of exemplars, systematic knowledge, and patterns of knowing-in-action” (Schon D.A. 1987, p. 36). I can rely on what I have seen other experienced systemic supervisors do and act according to my experience of that. By “knowing-in-action” Schon means the tacit knowledge we for example show when we ride a bike. We don’t know how to ride a bike until we actually learn how to ride it. And when we have learnt it, we can’t explain how we can perform the riding, and he says; “our descriptions of knowing-in-action are always *constructions*. They are always attempts to put into explicit, symbolic form a kind of intelligence that begins by being tacit and spontaneous” (ibid. p. 25). When Schon describes ‘reflection-in-action’ he uses the picture of jazz musicians improvise together; “they ‘feel’ where the music is going and adjust their plying accordingly”. And: “Like knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action is a process we can deliver without being able to say what we are doing” (ibid. p. 31). By reflecting on our reflection-in-action we can get closer to, what Schon sees as the last developmental stage – “professional artistry” which means “the kinds of competence practitioners sometimes display in unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations of practice” (ibid. p. 22). A way to increase the possibility for professional artistry as a supervisor is to engage in practices that are designed to be reflecting on practice (Burnham, 2008). Reading Schon gives me a deeper insight in how learning happens through reflection and how reflexive practices can create professional artistry.

### Reflexivity and different learning styles

Reflexivity is a relational activity and showing ‘professional artistry’ as a supervisor means doing something in relation. Kolb (1984) draws on the relational notion saying that the ...”learning process must be imbued with the texture and feeling of human experiences shared and interpreted through dialogue with one another” (p.2). It has become clear to me that we all have different learning styles as well as we have different styles as practitioners. John Burnham draws on both Schon’s theories about reflexivity and Kolb’s ‘experiential learning’ and says: “Experience by itself does not necessarily lead practitioners to learning. It requires the ability to reflect on that experience, in ways that lead to actively experiment with difference in the performance of their practice” (Burnham, 2008, p 8). Burnham have

constructed a 'curiosity compass' based on Kolb's ideas that we all have different preferred positions to learning which are: *Concrete experience* (affective or visceral, e.g. what we actually see, feel or hear), *Abstract conceptualization* (metaphoric and symbolic, e.g. using theories), *Reflective observation* (intentions, e.g. connections we make of the experience), and finally *Active experimentation* (extending, e.g. 'what action can we try now?') (Burnham 2008, p. 11). One way to learn as adult is to step in to one of these positions at a time and talk about a theme from the different angles. John Burnham had an exercise on the course which he based on this model. It became an interesting experience and it was easy to see the usefulness in how to explore ones favorite positions for learning and also to extend the capacities of learning by trying positions that I usually don't try. The following is an example of how reflection-on-action about the difference in learning styles made me as a supervisor change position to become more useful for a supervision group:

I am having a group of teachers in supervision. They work with young children with special needs. When I started to see the group, they were not very experienced with supervision. Some of them, in the beginning even questioned the purpose of it, saying that they also needed more time to plan their work. I took it as my task to make them experience the benefits of supervision. I struggled with them for more than half a year, trying to make them speak from a reflecting position using interviews and reflecting team, introducing the idea of multiple perspectives and so on. I realized that what I tried to do was too unusual (Andersen, 2003) for them, and I felt stuck. The more reflecting my attitude became, the more they asked for universal truths and facts. I even began to give room for my prejudices (Cecchin, Lane & Ray, 1994), in my mind saying: "Teachers don't have room for reflexive thoughts (I do have a sister who is a teacher), all they can understand are facts". Up to this point in my work as a supervisor I had been able to rely on my personal style and my thoughts of what works in supervision. In frustration I talked to a colleague supervisor about the "un-systemic" group I had. "Maybe they need a small course in how to think in a systemic way so that they know what you talk about", she replied. She asked me to change position, according to Kolb's model from *Reflective observation* to *Abstract conceptualization*. The idea of introducing new concepts and ideas in supervision was part of my thoughts of what a supervisor could do, but to give a "small course" wasn't. Not totally convinced, I decided to try this idea anyway. What else could I do? The following session I therefore asked them if they wanted to hear some of the ideas I have that informs me as a supervisor and a therapist. They were (surprisingly for me) more than willing and fetched notebooks and pencils to take notes. This

first time I focused on the “domains of action” (Lang, Little & Cronen, 1990) and CMM and “levels of contexts” (Cronen, 1994). They thought it was very interesting and in the end of the session we had time to discuss one of their pupils according to CMM. The group showed a curiosity and energy that they had never shown in supervision before and they said they wanted more ideas presented in this way. One of the teachers said, “we’ve been wondering when you’re going to learn us something, so far you’ve been asking us a lot of questions”. My prejudices of “how systemic supervision is conducted” had led me to a dead end with this group. Being irreverent (Cecchin, Lane & Ray, 1992) to my own ideas about how supervision should be, helped me find a way ‘to know how to go on’. Their interest had never been in the therapeutic context and the *reflective observation* (Kolb, 1984) where I so far had tried to squeeze them into. They were teachers that enjoyed a “good lecture” and *abstract conceptualization* to be able to go on in a better way with their children. By using my reflexivity and joining their grammar (Cronen & Lang, 1994) as a supervisor, setting up a teaching situation, we could begin to create a common language for action in the supervision that followed. My colleague gave me a suggestion that made me reflect-on-action (Schon, 1987) and challenge my prejudice about teachers and what is legitimate and not in supervision. To be honest, I’m not very used to act from a “teaching position” and this situation made me stepping out of my “comfort zone” (Wilson, 2007) as a “question gun”, which in turn changed the context for supervision. Since this first “lecture” I have had a few more, now connecting the themes to the cases they have brought up. I guess this experience has increased my ability to reflect-in-action (Schon, 1987) next time I find it hard to connect with a group and to try a different position for learning when one doesn’t fit. It also gave me a practical experience that there are different learning styles, and that I as a supervisor have to “join the grammar” (Cronen, Lang, 1994) of learning styles to be able to ‘go on’ in supervision.

#### A collaborative approach in supervision and learning

Similar to Burnham, Kolb and Schon, Harlene Anderson (2000) argues that learning is a social and co-creative process. Learning happens when we reflect on action and create meaning of it. As supervisors our task, she says, is to facilitate collaborative processes where this can happen. She talks about supervision and human communication where there is room for the wonders and the “yet to come” (Anderson 2000). Anderson’s dialogical learning style is collaborative also when it comes to responsibility: “When responsibility is shared – as

participants connect, collaborate, and construct with each other – the learning relationship and process are more mutually gratifying and rewarding” (Anderson, 2000). In this tradition, inspired with the ideas from Burnham, Schon and Anderson, I would like to give an example of how saying fare well to a client was dealt with collaboratively in one of my supervision groups:

I started to supervise this group in September this year and we had met twice before this session. The staff group consists of six social workers working with children on an inpatient unit. The children have moved into the unit after being taken into temporary custody. Lately they have had only one child, a ten year old boy enrolled. The boy had been acting out a lot towards some of the staff members and connected in a trustful way to others. He had now left the ward and moved in to a custody home and the staff group said they needed now to take farewell to be able to go on with their work with the other children. After discussing with them what they meant by ‘taking farewell’ I understood that the ones that the boy had acted out against wanted to get rid of the bad feelings this had created and that the other wanted the staff group to be “equal” and not divided into “good and bad” staff members. Due to our contract and ethics we had agreed to speak of non present people with dignity and respect. In the spirit of this I suggested that we should map on the white board what each of them had learnt about themselves through the relationship with the boy. I interviewed them for about ten minutes each, mapping on the white board the words that was described what they had learnt about themselves and also what they think/hope he had learnt through his relationship with them. The picture grew on the white board and the participants that had already been interviewed wanted to complete by adding words after having heard other stories about the boy. It turned out to be a picture that everybody felt satisfied with, and it became a description that gave the boy dignity and respect. In collaborate way (Anderson, 2000) they were able to reflect-on-action (Schon, 1987) to create stories about their experiences with the boy that made them ‘know how to go on’ in their work with other children. The exercise was an example that “relationships and conversations are inseparable and influence each other” (Anderson, 2000).

### **3. Emerging meaning through stories, and other practices that fit for me**

Intrinsically to what it means to be a human being is to engage in story telling. Gregory Bateson explains the value of story telling by telling following story: “Once upon a time there was a man who had a computer which he asked: ‘Do you expect that you are ever going to think as a human being?’ After some time of harping and beeping a piece of paper came out of the computer with words which said: ‘This reminds me of a story’ ...” (Bateson & Bateson, 1988, my translation). Another way to say it is quoting Simon Burton, one of the tutors in the Systemic Therapy course I attended 1997, when he said: “People are made of words. Well, they are made of flesh and blood too, but that’s words too”.

In supervision we are engaged in story telling practices lots of the time. As soon as a supervisee brings a case for supervision a story soon gets created. The supervisor becomes co-writer of the story that gets created according to the way he/she asks questions. The questions become a part of the creation of the story. I will continue with the intrinsic connection between the stories we tell and the stories we live.

#### Supervision in the tension between actions and meanings

Through stories our worlds and realities get created. The stories we tell about the future influences how the future becomes as well as it help us create meaning of the present. In our work with people ...”We have a moral responsibility as to how we create each other and how we create the world through the language we use and what we choose to focus on” (McAdam, Lang, 2009. P. 110). McAdam and Lang connect to the idea that there is an inter-related relationship between *Story lived*, and *Story told* (Pierce, 1999) (see figure below). We tell stories about the life we live, and the life we live depends on what story we tell about it. “Conversations are a fluid result of the interpretations of these two worlds. They include both the dream-stuff of the stories we tell and the physical-stuff of the story we live. Neither is complete without the other; neither is reducible to the other” (Pearce, 1999, p. 30). McAdam and Lang (2009) connect to this and say: “We would say that we live not only in telling the story – we actually live in the story. We are the story. If you want to understand and make sense of things people do then you need the stories that they are living to understand the things they do (p.77)”. In the practice of supervision I am using the ideas about story lived and story told a lot when I ask future oriented questions like: “If, one day, you find that the relation between you and your client has become less tense and more open, how will that

show in your relation?” or “If the family we are talking about would benefit from us having this conversation, how would you recognize they would show it?”. Another way I use it is asking ‘activity-questions’ when people use abstract words. The questions can be: “What does he do for you to feel *neglected*?” or “What do you do for him to understand that you *admire* him?”

### Future stories creates the present

I have adopted many of Peter Lang and Elspeth McAdams (2009) thoughts about using future stories to create paths ‘to know how go on’ in the daily life. They work from the notion that it is “the *stories of the future that create the present* more than the stories of the past” (McAdam & Lang 2009 p.8). Like McAdam and Lang I see “language not only as describing but also as *creating* and *doing*... Language has the power to move us to laughter, to bring us to tears, to lead us to feel with others in their lives. Thus it follows that we have a moral responsibility for the worlds that we create through the stories, which are lived and told through our questions and the language we use” (ibid. p.2). When explaining the use of future storytelling Peter Lang (2000) gave the metaphor of how to use a bow and arrow. When you aim towards the red spot on the board you adjust all the parts of your body and the bow and arrow to hit the red ring on the board. Your mind is already there on the red spot when the arrow leaves the bow. According to these ideas McAdam and Lang have developed a method for interviewing called ‘end-in-view interview’ where the focus is to help the interviewee to ‘dream a future’ in detail. They position the interviewee in a future spot, five – ten years ahead and ask ‘dream’- questions of how it is living in this dream. After having painted this picture, they move on to interview in detail what the steps were that took them there. When situated in the future, having formulated your ‘dreams’ in language, it is easier to focus on the actions that needs to be taken in the present to ‘know how to go on’ towards the dream. By telling the story of a preferred future it is easier to see how to live the story at the present.

The method of interviewing inspired by ideas from the AI-tradition (Appreciative Inquiry) suits McAdam’s and Lang’s personal style, and maybe the English culture, very well and it is easy to see the benefits of the method and the impact the interview has on the interviewee. I often use their ideas about future questioning in the supervision context, especially when the story that has been presented shows little hope and lacks salvation. At these times the only



way further seems to be looking at future hopes and possibilities. One example is when I engage the staff at a school for pupils with special needs, in an exercise as follows:

The children often come to school accompanied by “bewitching stories” (Lang 2000), having failed in the former school and showed some kind of anti social behavior. My experience of starting to supervise the staff on the school is that the problem stories ‘sticks’ and becomes dominant in the conversation. To find ways to move on I have tried an exercise where I ask them:

“If you were about to meet this child in ten years from now, and she would say that she is doing fine and that it is going well for her, what abilities do you think she have used to get a good life – abilities that you can spot a little of already?”

After letting the group talk to each other two and two, for about five minutes, I collect their thoughts on a flip chart using a linguagram (see below) with the child’s name in the middle. The story that brings forth is always (I would say) a story that is positive and filled with hope and possibilities, and since this dream is as true as any other prediction of the child’s future it creates a possible way to start connecting with him/her from. The result of this exercise is often that the staff finds ways to connect to the children that promotes their development. The staff members say they feel a relief from the ‘depressing stories’ of the children and find ways to ‘know how to go on’ in a better way. As McAdam and Lang say: “We ‘unpack’ or explore the grammar of the abilities to see what other abilities are hidden in the more obvious ability” (2009, p. 8). Later when they bring one of these children for supervision again, I often have kept the map we made, and together with them I review what we ones talked about when we described the abilities of the child. Since I have been the supervisor at this particular school the past years it has been an ongoing ritual, requested by them, to do this exercise every time they get new pupils to the school.

### Using story telling in supervision and teaching

Story telling is a way to give pictures or images that gives meaning in a certain context connected to a certain issue or theme. It is also a way to set the context for an exercise and, can serve as “warming the context” in supervision and training (Burnham, 2005). Using personal stories gives the participants a possibility to grasp the content of f. ex. an exercise easier. I have used story telling in many different contexts in both training and supervision

and found it useful, especially when I manage to match the story well to the context. I have also ‘stolen’ stories I have heard colleagues tell and told them when I have entered a context where they fit. The more I have told stories, the better I have become in telling stories I think. I will now give some examples on story telling from my practice:

The group I met for supervision was working with children on an inpatient unit but lately they hadn’t had many children enrolled. The next door unit that already work with families have asked them to start co-operate with them in the family work. The theme for the supervision session was to start focus on how to work with families. Instead of starting to talk about working with families in general I wanted them to get a personal experience of how it would be to move in to a family unit for investigation with their own families. In setting the context for the exercise I told a personal story about being questioned as a parent. It went like this:

*It was ten years ago and I got a phone call to my work from my children’s daycare center. They said that there must be something wrong with one of my sons. He was just sitting in a corner with no energy, not wanting to participate in playing with the other children and maybe it would be best if I came and picked him up. It was spring and when I came to the daycare center to pick him up all the other children were out playing and one of the teachers came to meet me. “Has anything unusual happened the last couple of days?” she asked with a (what I thought) cold, stiff and questioning tone in her voice. I said “no, not that I know of anyway”, and it felt as I needed to convince her that we...or I... hadn’t done anything to harm our son. She said he was inside and I could pick him up to take him home. I looked around in the yard and there were two more teachers looking at me (as if I was a perpetrator I thought) when I went in to fetch him. I drove him home and for some reason I don’t remember I checked his temperature and it showed 40,3 degrees Celsius, which is a lot. From this experience I learned how it can be to be a family going to an institution (where I was working at that time) for investigation. My story was only a small incident that could be sorted out the next day when I told them about his fever. The families moving in for investigation often have had many meetings with social service and child guidance where they have been questioned and looked skeptical on many times.*

After telling this story I set up the following exercise:

I asked them to imagine that they were about to move into the family unit the next day together with their close relatives and that there was a reason why the social service wanted them to live on the unit for investigation. I asked them to imagine that they had been to many

meetings with the child guidance staff where they had experienced skeptic attitudes. The question I asked was: “How would you want to be met by the staff when arriving to the family unit”?

After this I introduced the linguagram (see below) and suggested that we should collect thoughts that came up while they were imagining moving in to the unit with their families.

While writing the words that came up on the white board I asked questions to make meaning of the abstract words (e.g. “how would you recognize you had been shown respect?” or “what would the staff do to make you feel welcome?”). The linguagram in this exercise was an activity where the participants got into a position to explore and elaborate with different ways to relate according to a given context. The exercise gave room for reflections about ones own- and the participants- values about how to create a good and respectful first meeting of a family moving in for investigation on a family unit. We explored, experimented and elaborated how different attitudes would affect us as family participants moving in for investigation. After about 20 minutes the white board was full of words and meanings and the group wanted to connect them to theories and systemic thinking. We spent about ten minutes doing this.

I then told another story about a social worker I know who took a child into custody from the mother. Ten years later the mother called up the social secretary to say that she now had changed her life and was going to request to get her child back. She pointed out that a help in making the change was the way the social worker treated her with respect and that she felt her dignity was preserved.

I have a few other personal stories that fit for certain kinds of contexts. I try to be thorough not to tell too many or too personal stories and stories that I haven't thought through how they fit an audience. Telling a personal story can work perfectly to lift a whole session or it can be a disaster if it is mismatched or feels too close with a lack of integrity from the story teller. I have witnessed (and experienced) embarrassing moments when this has happened.

### Metaphors

Another way to use story telling is to use metaphors to lift what is talking about to another level. Using metaphors brings people to a position where it often is easier to elaborate and play with ideas that might be too irreverent to the other (real) context that was talked about. In

both therapy and supervision I often look for and use metaphors when listening to peoples stories about their presented dilemma. If the metaphor fits for them they often become co-writers, filling out the gaps or extending it to give it new meaning. If the metaphor does not fit, it usually drops by itself and does not come back. Next I want to show an example when a metaphor matched the context and the process the supervisee was in:

When supervising a social worker he presented that he felt stuck in the relation to a young client. He said he had tried lots of different approaches but couldn't find the paths to connect with this client. "I can't find my way to connect to this boy and he rejects all my attempts. It's like I am lost and don't know which way to turn, but I really want to get a good relation to him", he said. After interviewing him for a while I connected his story in my mind to a personal event when my wife and I had been to the forest the past weekend looking for mushrooms, and I told the following story for him:

*We didn't find many mushrooms in the beginning so we went further into the forest hoping for better luck. Having walked for a while further in to the woods without finding very much, we decided to turn back to the car but realized that we didn't know the exact direction. We had to zigzag in the direction we thought was the best. While we zigzagged we entered grounds we hadn't been on before and we found quite a lot of mushrooms doing that. Finally we got to the graveled road where the car was near by and we could drive home. By being lost we found more mushrooms than we hoped to find, and we found them when we weren't looking for them.*

By telling this story I felt that I took a little risk. I stepped out of the 'comfort zone' (Wilson, 2007) and was not sure whether he found it useful to connect to it or if he was going to sit with a zero-expression in his face. He said:

"Maybe I don't have to have such a rush, I mean, I am going to meet this boy every day the coming weeks and I do have time to find a connection with him that's going to fit, I usually do. Now when we talk about it I can imagine that it might have been tuff for him to meet a clinician with such an eager to connect. If I would have been him, I would probably have been rejecting the same way to be able to keep some integrity. I think I can zigzag for a while and see what I can find and make it possible for him to connect to me in his own way and in his own pace".

We talked for a while about how he would zigzag and how that attitude would influence the context in which he was working with the boy. Two weeks later, when we met for supervision again he said the zigzag metaphor had been a help for him when he got too eager to connect. He also said that he thought he and the boy had gotten a relationship where they could safely explore each other from a small distance that he thought was good for the boy. Not all metaphors work out this well and I have learnt not to try to enforce a metaphor that does not seem to fit, but to try them in a gentle way and let them drop when they don't seem to fit.

Sometimes stories and metaphors come to me coincidentally and they seem to do it more often the more experienced I get as a supervisor. I think it is part of gaining “professional artistry” (Schon, 1987) to be able to connect different contexts to each other, and it fits with my style as supervisor to develop the ability to play with metaphors. I will give another example when I connected a story from the morning news on the radio, to an exercise I presented in supervision:

The group had talked about the importance of the words we use and the stories we tell about the people we meet and they wanted to talk about this even more. Spontaneously I connected their talk to a headline on the morning news where a philosopher was interviewed about how it was possible for the police to pick up a sick, apathetic child refugee from the hospital to deport her from the country. The philosopher said that - by using ‘de-humanized’ language we legitimize actions that we otherwise would not approve of. The de-humanizing language makes the ones we work with ‘less human’ and therefore we don't need to act as ethical as if they were humans. If we for example say that; “the family lived like monkeys in their dirty apartment” they become less human and lose some dignity in our eyes. We talked about language that “dehumanizes” people and what language we could use to “humanize” them. Connected to this discussion I thought of an exercise that would help humanize the families we work with and help us preserve their dignity through the language we use.

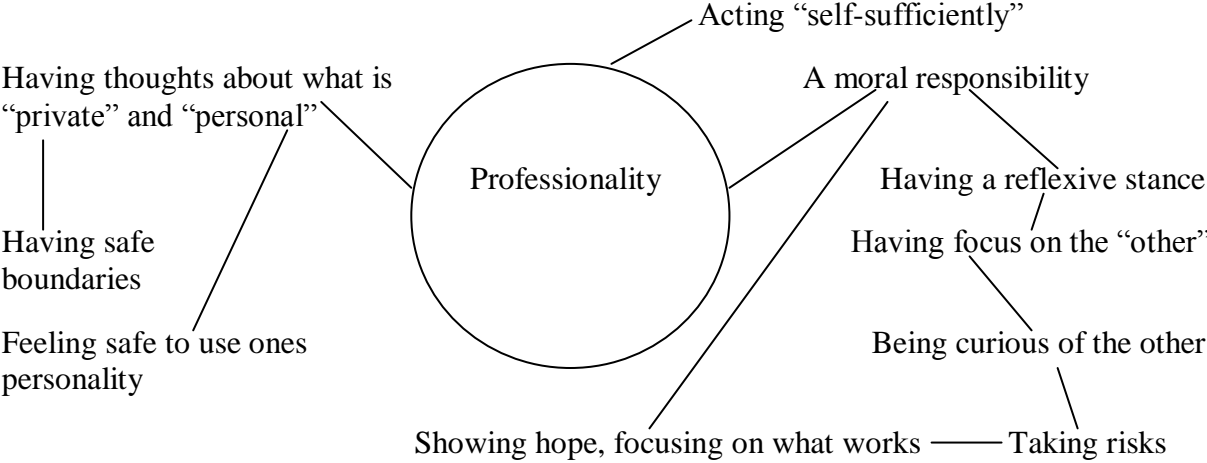
### Using flip chart and white board to create stories and meaning

An important tool I use in supervision is visualizing what we talk about by writing words and creating models that connects to what is being said in supervision. When there is a lack of energy in the group I often try to connect what we talk about to some kind of writing on the board. To my personal style as a supervisor it fits with a mix of sitting and talking/

interviewing and to stand up, being active and do some kind of exercise, using flip chart or white board. I will give some examples of how – and when, I write on the board.

Linguagram - a co-creative model in supervision

As a systemic, social constructionist therapist and supervisor I have my roots working from within the post modern paradigm. This means: I work on the supposition that we co-create the meaning and the world we are a part of. As mentioned before, Harlene Anderson (2000) argues that learning is a social and co-creative process. Learning happens when we reflect on action and create meaning of it. Linguagram (or mind map) is one way to reflexively explore and elaborate meaning and action and how we can create new meaning about a word. Peter Lang draws on Wittgenstein when he explains “there is an ocean of meaning in a drop of grammar” (Lang, 2000). This example shows how the supervision group and I explored (and co-created) the meaning of the word “professionalism”.

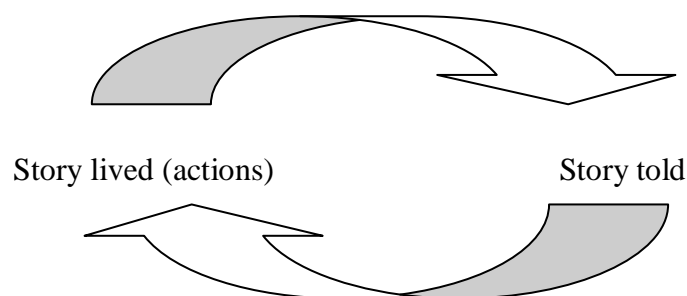


While drawing a map like this, I am asking questions to explore the meaning of the words and to create new meanings: What is a sign that you are acting self sufficient? How will ‘the other’ benefit from you being self sufficient? Are there times when you have experienced being ‘private’ was a good thing? Have you experienced moments when you haven’t been ‘professional’ that turned out to be good?

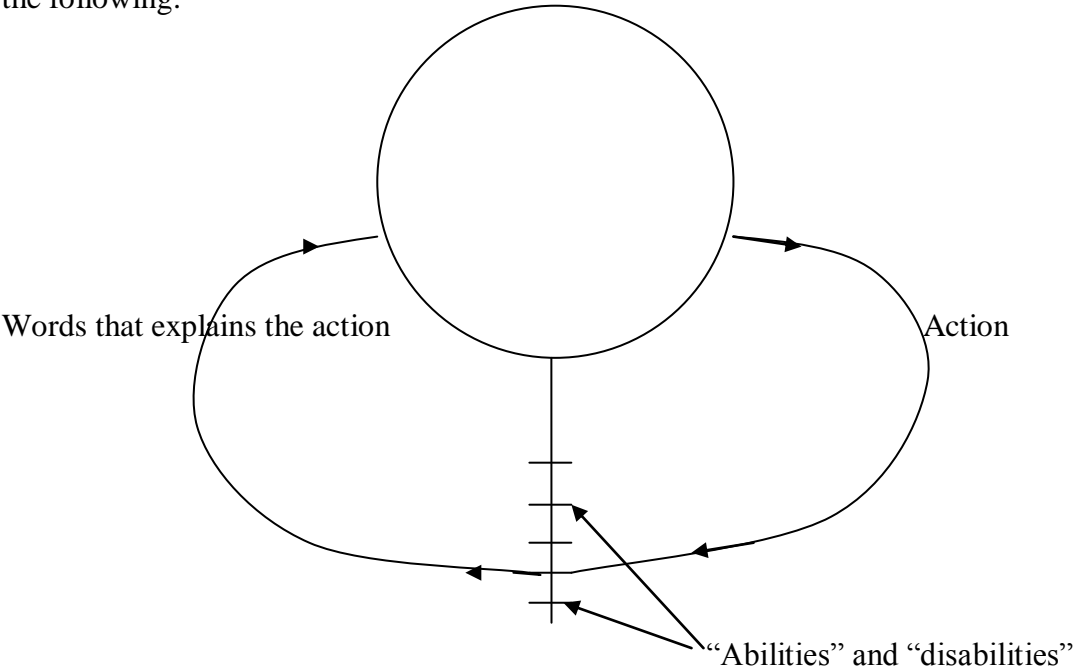
I am trying to have a playful, explorative and irreverent (Cecchin, Lane & Ray, 1992) attitude when I am asking questions to give room for people to feel free to explore, and not get stuck in right – wrong discussions. A feedback from the group after having experienced the collaborative exploring of a theme or a word through linguagram is often that they never thought they would find so many different meanings and that one should not be so sure of an exact and common understanding of a word and that it is a good thing to ask the other about their meaning before saying “yes I understand”. My way of asking questions also becomes a model for them how to construct an exploring context.

### Other drawings to emphasize the influence of stories in our life

When teaching and sometimes in supervision I draw different models that shows the connections between our lives, our identities and the stories we tell about them. This model is inspired by CMM and B. Pierce (1999) and shows the interrelation of meaning and action. It gives ideas that we can elaborate and reframe a certain action to open up for new meaning to emerge. For example; acting ‘stingy’ can be reframed being ‘economical’. Authors from the narrative field connect with this and explain the connection between the stories about our life and the life we live (White, 1993, 2007; Morgan, 2004) saying that you can change the life by changing the story about it.



One picture I use to show how our identities are co-constructed in the actions and meanings is the following:



This picture shows how our identity is socially constructed by how our actions are valued and named. Example: The teenager sleeps until noon (action), and has a “disability” to get up in the morning. His parents calls him “lazy” (words that explains the action), and the boy inherits the identity “I am lazy”. When he does other things, like refuses to tidy up his room, he confirms the “lazy” identity. Another example: The girl plays football (action). She runs fast and is a good dribbler (abilities). Her proud parents says that she is “healthy” and “sporty” (words that explains the action). With the identity as “being sporty” she most often dresses in sports clothes and “likes to work out”.

These pictures are just examples of some of the ones I use. Thinking in pictures often makes me invent new ones spontaneously. This fits with my style and I think it enhances learning to picture what you are talking about.



#### **4. Reflections and discussion**

Writing this dissertation, focusing on systemic supervision and personal style has been a journey in many ways. First of all it has been an opportunity to spend time and focus to review my thoughts and how I have used this course to enhance my repertoire of performing supervision in a way that fits with my values and style. What I didn't think of as much when I started to write was that my values and personal style are not fixed entities but evolves in the ongoing conversations I have with colleagues and supervisee's. Having this notion, however, points to a value and style which means; 'I want to be a person that depend and participate with others in enhancing learning, and that I rely on constant evolvement between people when we co-create our worlds'. When I engage in activities as teaching and supervision this shows when I try to create contexts which enables exploring, curious, wonderer and the yet-to-come attitudes to occur. As vehicles in this process I have the adult learning theories, the idea of reflexivity and the notion of 'social GRRAACCEESS' and not least Cecchin's idea of irreverence. Writing about this, connecting it to own examples from my practice has given me a deeper understanding of how to move between actions and meanings in supervision and how to act for meaning to evolve.

During the months it has taken to write this dissertation I have continued working with my supervision groups. Focusing on the writing combined with practicing has been an active reflexive journey moving between practice and theory, which have created a context of intense learning. It has moved me from a position of 'acting as a systemic supervisor' to reflect upon 'myself as a systemic supervisor' which for me is a developmental step further in the emergence of the identity as a systemic supervisor. Several times I have experienced myself doing things in supervision which I haven't done before; spontaneous and courageous actions that has brought the process further in a fruitful way. One example was when I, a couple of days ago had a group saying that they didn't like the way they talked with each other on their staff meetings and that they wanted to change it. After a while I came up with the idea that half the group could sit and talk about how they wanted to communicate on the staff meetings while the other half of the group were to listen to how they talked and then reflect about this. Focusing on the process (how we talk) and not on the content (how we should talk) made a difference and afterword's they said that this focus made both groups aware of how they talked 'in the moment' which would help them the next time they were having a staff meeting. I don't think I would have come up with this idea if I hadn't been in

this writing process – and if I would have come up with the idea I would not have had the courage to try it on the group. I think this is what Schon (1987) calls emerging “professional artistry”.

Writing this paper has given me the sense that by taking a reflexive position as a supervisor I will never come to an end; my learning process becomes ongoing and mutual, with no purpose to end – and I feel a joy in it. The educational literature also gives me ideas how I could help the supervisee’s enhance their reflexivity by being reflexive myself. Reflexivity is a way to use my curiosity to explore how I can be of help for people wanting to “know how to go on.” I will do this by engaging in - and introducing - reflexive exercises and by having more focus on, and asking, how my actions are perceived by the ones I meet. When I reflect on what this position means in practice I feel a relief. I can go on in the way I do today, including humor, spontaneity, and misunderstandings’ as long as I’m keen on checking out how it’s perceived, and how we can go on from there to enhance meaning.

One development I recognize when writing this paper is a deeper understanding of the constant evolvement of concepts, ideas and also on ‘personal style’ and ‘identity’. Even though I had this idea when I started to write the dissertation I have to confess that I also thought of my ‘personal style’ and ‘identity’ as concrete and fixed entities which I could explore as objects. When I was writing about ‘working in between paradigms’ it became more clear that also personal style and identity can be seen from different perspectives. Like Hedges & Lang (1993) I believe it is important as a systemic supervisor to constantly map your personal and professional stories. Doing this focuses on myself and my evolvments as a supervisor and not just my supervisee’s developments. This can be done through gathering with other supervisors regularly and interview each other about these personal developments. Doing this would also prevent the idea that supervisors are on the top of knowledge about systemic practice.

One conclusion I would draw after writing this paper is: Being a supervisor means for me engaging in professional contexts influenced by personal ways of acting that are in constant evolvement which develops through reflexive practices guided by me. I agree with Jim

Wilson when he says: “I have become clearer about what works for me as a supervisor and even more clear that this vision is likely to shift in some small way in response to my next training experience” (Wilson, 1993 p.187).

Writing a paper like this has made me go through a lot of literature which has been an intense period of learning. I have learned that I enjoy this process and that I find it easy to connect between reading theories and practicing. Indeed, I think this link between reading-writing-practicing is something I need for me to develop in my profession and to ensure that the curiosity lives on.

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