

Motivational Interviewing in supervision

How the spirit of MI invites reflection in supervision



■ **Marlies Jellema**

In this article the author argues why reflective learning in supervision can be enhanced by applying the spirit of Motivational Interviewing (MI). MI is specifically designed to evoke, support and strengthen the motivation to change and therefore may be valuable to sustain transformational learning. The author shows the similarities between supervision and MI. Against the background of our VUCA world, she argues how nicely MI and supervision fit together and moves on to demonstrate how MI could reinforce experiential learning processes to the benefit of supervisees if the principles of MI are thoughtfully combined with supervisory techniques.

Introduction

In this article I set out to describe how 'Motivational Interviewing' may greatly contribute to reflective learning in supervision. I will focus mostly on the theoretical foundations and the underlying attitude of MI and the importance thereof to professionals in the social field, the term 'professional' to be understood as referring to supervisors, coaches, social workers, teachers, therapists and similar practitioners, and wherever I write her' I also refer to 'him'.

What is Motivational Interviewing?

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a "directive, client-centered style for eliciting behavior change by helping clients to explore and resolve ambivalence" (Miller Rollinick; 2012). MI is a

scientifically researched approach to interviewing, which strives after continuous growth in efficiency. It started as a methodology to cure problem drinkers in the USA. The fundamental principles of MI have since been applied and tested in various settings. Research findings - including more than 1200 publications about effectiveness, 200 randomized controlled trials and six meta-analyses - clearly show its efficacy above advice based approaches or other forms of treatments (Van der Pluijm; 2018). It developed into an evidence based practice in the field of human change processes. The founders, Miller and Rollnick, created a worldwide network to keep examining the application of the method in a variety of contexts and cultures.

In MI, motivation is described as a combination of *trust* and *interest*. Both are needed make complex and sustainable change possible. As is the case in positive psychology (Jellema; 2017, Bannink; 2012) trust in the strength of the client, coachee or supervisee will positively influence the learning process. That doesn't mean we should ignore or deny weaknesses and imperfections. We accept these as part of life. But it does not help to focus on *what's wrong with you*. Learning and changing is supported far more effectively if we focus on *what is useful to grow*.

Why is MI important?

Nowadays we live in what is often described as a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous world; in short a VUCA-World. The world around us is unpredictable and demanding. For us to survive it is necessary to adapt to change, think ahead, learn from feedback, to be creative and to create a vision. We have to make complex decisions and we need to be social and empathetic. On top of that we have to be connected to our feelings and we should be focused if we have to. But we should just as well be able to let our focus wander, if needed (Sitskoorn; 2014).

This is challenging for the brain, the more so in a world which forces us to process a daily overload of information. To handle this challenge, neuroscientists such as Sitskoorn and Geraerts (Geraerts; 2016) strongly advocate sound 'brain care' (Sitskoorn; 2017). Yet under the daily pressure the necessary time for reflection may be lacking. Simultaneously we see a growing awareness to develop certain coping skills. Social researcher Brené Brown describes humans as "wired to connect". Her studies show, that the ability to connect with your own emotions and those of others is an indispensable skill (Brown; 2010, 2018). Alas, reflection and connection can easily be repressed by the dynamics of our time. To counter this threat, (social) practitioners should develop a 'professional attitude'.

In science and politics we see a growing awareness of the value of a strong professional attitude

What does this mean? Not surprisingly, in science and politics we see a growing awareness of the value of a strong professional attitude. In itself it is not new to focus on attitude. Changes in society, as nowadays in our VUCA World, always challenge us to adequately adjust our basic attitudes and behavior. Until recently we focussed strongly on evidence-based work, which indeed made practice more effective. But we also learned that even a sound methodology can fail to provide effective and satisfactory

service to clients. Relations between client and professional - for example in a learning situation such as in social work supervision - are crucial. However brilliant the methodology may look on paper, it will only wield success through proper human connectivity. This of course is well known since Rogers (1956, 2019). Current developments make us more aware of its value. We see an upcoming awareness of the value of connectedness in professional relationships (Bart, Beurskens & Van der Linde; 2019, Remmerswaal; 2019, Miller en Rollnick; 2012).

But not only sciences and politics influence the social field. Although all over the world financial inequality is rising alarmingly, including in western societies, social equality is on the rise. Teachers, doctors and other professionals are seen as experts rather than authorities. Clients approach professionals no longer as all-knowing or leading, nor assign them a higher position or superior status. Moreover, authoritarian professionals - even if they still should have any influence at all - would only create dependence and uncertainty. This of course weakens clients in stead of strengthening them. Up to date professionals realize the true power of learning and learning is a quality of the client. Most of social practice is centered around due great respect for autonomy of the clientele. Coaches and other professional counsellors, for instance, are also aware of the value of relational equivalence (Van Beek & Tijmes; 2013). The client is approached as expert on her own life and the professional sees herself as expert on the (supportive or learning) process. For the professional, equal partnership like this, is based on a developed professional attitude.

MI in Supervision

MI aims to support *self-efficacy*. *Self-efficacy* means believing in ones ability to achieve a certain behaviour outcome (Hohman, 2016). In supervision it stands for professi-

onal self-esteem and for being self-directive. To be able to practice - quite often alone - in a complex, ever changing and critical (social) field, the professionals needs to fully trust in her skills, abilities and her professional autonomy. Self efficacy makes the professional resilient; a quality that she can't go without in our present day VUCA World. In supervision (future) professionals are invited to learn from their personal work experiences by way of reflection. Reflection is the most effective tool in supervision. Reflection on past experiences enables supervisees to learn from their practice and helps them also 'to learn how to keep learning from future experience in their own personal way'. Consequently, the supervisor focuses on the learning abilities of the supervisee, but just as well on what is needed for the best possible service to her (future) clients (De Roos; 2010). While the supervisee step by step struggles to improve her professional conduct independently and in a sustainable fashion, the supervisory learning process sharpens her awareness, and deepens her understanding of the professional demands at stake (Van der Boomen et al; 2015). Taken together this leads up to 'triple loop learning'.

Triple loop learning takes place when values and reasons are explored. You not only focus on **what** you learn but you also create awareness of how you learn, as well as on the meaning and values underneath it. In triple loop learning you reflect on the ways and means of changing your (professional) self. Entering a process of change like this requires motivation. That's where MI comes in. With MI you start building up motivation to change transitionally. In the next phase you then commit yourself to a 'change plan' (Hohman; 2016). Along these lines, supervision invites transformational change.

Although aims and outcomes in MI and supervision may differ, they fit nicely together. Both methodologies use

systematic questioning and both offer reflective insight as tools for changing and further learning. In both formats, existential values and beliefs are explored to reach a deeper level of change. The relationship - or rather cooperative partnership - between therapist and client (in MI) and between supervisee and supervisor (in supervision) is deemed critical to success. As do clients, supervisees generally know best which support they need. Their motivation is higher if they are self-directing in learning (Kwakman; 2003). Autonomy is strongly conditional for personal growth. Therefore, in both MI and supervision, forging partnership on the basis of respect for each others autonomy is essential.

The Spirit of MI

How does MI work and how does it enhance the effectiveness of the supervisory process? The spirit of MI rests on four major principles, which are shared by supervisors (Miller and Rollnick; 2002). The first one is **collaboration or partnership**. The supervisor is supportive rather than persuasive. She works side by side with her supervisees and respects their professional and personal autonomy. In our VUCA World it makes no sense for a supervisor to pose as expert, things have changed before you know. To express or underline partnership the supervisor shows trust in the ability of her supervisees to take responsibility for their learning process. Thus, the collaborative partnership looks like this: the supervisee is the owner of her learning process and the supervisor expertly handles the supervisory process; she is responsible for a safe and powerful learning climate.

The second principle is **acceptance**, for which insight MI is indebted to Carl Rogers (Rogers; 1956, 2019). Acceptance can be subdivided into 'absolute worth', autonomy, support affirmation, and accurate empathy. *Absolute worth* stands for deeply understanding that each person's

dignity is equal to all others. It is the task of the professional to see, understand and always respect this. Acceptance creates an atmosphere in which the sometimes vulnerable process of experiential learning may blossom. *Autonomy* means that the responsibility for learning and changing lies by the supervisee. The supervisor facilitates the process, which is a very active task based on *support affirmation*: the supervisor keeps looking for ways to reinforce the learning process of the supervisee. Acceptance can only be done through *accurate empathy*, through which supervisees feel accepted and understood. This may be achieved by non-judgemental reflective listening, which enables both supervisor and supervisee to learn about – and from - the thoughts, reasons, values, goals, fears, and uncertainties in supervision. Reflective listening reinforces reflective learning, which helps the supervisee to feel motivated on a deeper level.

The four major principles of MI are collaboration or partnership, acceptance, evoking and compassion

Evoking is the third principle. In MI, building the relation is called engaging. Once the relation is sufficiently solid, the positions and roles are clear and a trustful collaborative partnership is established, there will be room for deep reflection. Thus it is possible to examine conflicts or discrepancies between the values of the supervisee and her concrete professional behavior. From the supervisor this requires that she will evoke doubts and ambivalences

and confront the supervisee if needed. By mirroring in this way the supervisor supports the supervisee develop a professional attitude, and a deeper sense of her professional identity (Ruiters; 2015). In other words: the supervisor states the reasons for change and (transitional) learning (Miller and Rollnick; 2002). Evoking also encompasses *rolling with resistance*. Resistance is a huge source of information on both the relational and the content level. In supervision (as well as in social work and therapy) people often explain at length why they *can't, shouldn't or don't need to change*. Trying to convince, persuade, correct or warn may undermine partnership. But reflection on their feelings, reasons and thoughts behind their resistance and on their ambivalence could clear the way. *Sustain talk* should become *change-talk* to enhance the learning process.

The last principle is **compassion**. Being compassionate is being non-judgemental, non-blaming, non-shaming. The supervisor mobilizes empathy for her supervisee. She will pit her ideas about the situation, her assumptions and well-meant advice between brackets, and start listening.. Compassion goes further than just sympathy. Compassion means understanding on an emotional level what the world is like from the other's point of view. The supervisor must be able to separate her own emotions from those of the supervisee. This of course requires mature reflective competence on the part of the supervisor.

Summary and conclusion for supervision

The spirit of MI can support and sustain a powerful learning atmosphere in supervision. Supervisees benefit from a secure context in which their autonomy is respected and in which they are motivated to freely - and in their own, self-directed way - develop a solid professional attitude and –by extension - form their professional identity. The supervisor can be their role model. Informed by the

basic principles of MI, she demonstrates a specific way of creating learning partnerships. Both MI practitioners and supervisor know that listening is more valuable than any intervention (Miller & Rollnick; 2012, Van der Pluijm; 2018). I believe supervision and MI have a natural fit, consistent with the VUCA world we live and work in. In combination, they answer to the needs of strong professional autonomy with a steep and steady base and with the ability to connect to oneself and the other. ■

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