
Soul and identity in supervision

Manu Bazzano
challenges the view
that identity is static
and welcomes affect
into the supervisory
space

The consolations of identity

To own one's sense of agency; to value one's own sense of belonging; to cherish subjective experience – these are important aspects linked to a basic notion of identity. One could ask, however, whether we have gone too far in prizing identity, to the point where it has morphed into subjectivism, the shielding of *me* and *mine* – my feelings, my emotions, my perception, my group and so forth – at the expense of shared values. If there is some truth in this, has therapy contributed to this state of affairs? Initially it helped us understand how crucial it is to own and express what is subjectively true. But the tide has turned, and we may have become incapable of seeing beyond our own backyard. Strands of humanistic psychology have historically been inclined to *universalise* subjective identity. But can subjective identity become a prison, particularly when it sings along to the blinkered tunes of nationalism? Or when it fails to be open to societal and political challenges?

Identity politics

In the public arena, this has resulted in the championing of identity politics at the expense of *soulful* solidarity. Writing about racial discrimination, the investigative journalist Asad Haider, defines identity politics as 'the *neutralization* of movements against racial oppression'. It reflects the replacement of 'mass movements... with a placid multiculturalism'.¹ What once constituted a unitary front against the commodification and exploitation

of human life in the name of profit for the few has now splintered into subgroups that cannot see past their particular experience. While it was once natural for a marginalised group to feel solidarity with another equally marginalised group, thus creating a united front of women, gays, blacks, the poor and the disenfranchised, it is now customary to think and breathe within the confines of one's own group. To be a *subject* has come to mean to be subjugated to an existing order that defines my identity *before* I can begin to define myself. Identity is only partly what *I* choose. For the most part, it is assigned to and imposed on me by the 'Powers'.

Soul is a process

Anna, a transpersonal therapist, often mentions the word 'soul' when presenting her clinical work in supervision. One day, I asked her: 'What is soul?'

'Something you come into the world with. It is a divine spark that inhabits the body and travels on at the moment of death'.

'How does this idea help your work?'

'Intuition tells me whether a client lives according to her/his soul or whether this has been forgotten or neglected'.

'Is soul subject to change?'

'No. The body is, given that it is mechanical, perishable, and imperfect. But the soul is *unchangeable*'.

I asked: 'Could the idea of something unchangeable be a consolation to a person struggling with our impermanent

and unpredictable world? Is consolation enough? And, is this idea a *belief*?'

'Yes, it is a belief', she conceded, 'and as such, it is subject to change...'

I believe this rather unusual conversation deepened our work, even though I do not share Anna's view of the soul. As I see it, notions of identity and/or an individual soul often end up being constrictive, while the notion of a collective soul is expansive. In one of Heraclitus' fragments, we read: 'It is impossible to discover the limits of the soul, or psyché, even if we travelled every road to do so – such is the depth of its meaning.'² For Heraclitus, soul cannot be individual; he questions the image of a separate entity. Instead, it encompasses the whole of nature and the world. This view found echoes in the 18th century, at the dawn of what was to become *quantum physics*. For the Jesuit priest, polymath and diplomat Boscovich, author of *Theory of Natural Philosophy*,³ we must leave behind the idea of matter as indivisible, a symbol of which is the atom. This had consequences in philosophy. Nietzsche saw the idea of an indissoluble human soul as a remnant of this outmoded atomism.⁴ While honouring the ingenuity of the 'soul hypothesis', he went on to suggest new descriptions: the *mortal soul and the soul as multiplicity* of the subject; he speaks of soul as a social structure of the drives and emotions.

We may then consider soul on *two, interrelated levels*. On an intrapsychic level, soul reflects the intrinsic multiplicity of what we call 'me'. This

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multiplicity is directly connected to the second aspect: the multiplicity of the world as a ground of natural forces. Both these aspects are characterised by what is essential to soul: its immediate link with transformation or *metamorphosis* (changing shape).

Psyché (Greek for soul) means butterfly, a tangible symbol of transformation. A butterfly's life cycle is one of complete metamorphosis. In one of its three fundamental stages of growth (from caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly), known as *molting*, the caterpillar faces a tremendous challenge; it makes a new, larger skin and then sheds the old skin. From the point of view of the caterpillar, this process of transformation is disastrous. Its body is dissolving and a whole new being emerges after two weeks: the butterfly. This example is relevant to the human organism if one takes on board the fragility of growth and the tremendous amount of risk and adventure present within the process of actualisation. In this sense, *soul is a process*. This notion counters a view of identity/individual soul as static and separate.

Affect and vicarious trauma

At some point in his deeply humane and learned book, *When the Sun Bursts*, Christopher Bollas writes of a workshop he used to conduct in New York in the 1980s. I have adopted the exercise over the last few years in supervision group settings, with surprising results. In Bollas' workshop, therapists from various backgrounds meet in a group and discuss a clinical presentation, but the process is rather unconventional:

'The presenter was asked to eliminate all of his or her own comments and associations. No background information of any kind was to be provided; no history, no explanations of names mentioned, not even the patient's gender or age. All we would hear would be the stream of ideas, in the patient's words.

Every few minutes I would stop the presenter and ask the group to associate. Interpretations were forbidden. Instead people were

encouraged to offer associations from life, or feelings, or images, or to dwell on what might be evoked by individual words that struck them. We were not to ask the presenter questions of any kind, and when voicing our associations, we were to avoid looking at the presenter so that we would not be influenced by any facial expressions. While we were speaking, the presenter would take notes... Then we had the task of summing up what we thought we had thought... Then the presenter had half an hour to tell us about how what we had thought linked up to the case.'⁵

The above example fosters a view of supervision that is not management, but open exploration. Bollas understands the above in terms of the unconscious; I understand it in terms of *affect*. Through being affected, therapist and supervisor can unfasten the artificial separateness of client-therapist-supervisor. That is when experience may be more genuinely accessed. This accessing of experience is soulful in the sense of allowing us to be affected within the shared domain of soul.

For this to happen, we must reconsider the current 'professionalisation of supervision' that has tended to frame 'the difficult experiences of therapists as deficits'.⁶ We must bracket our pathologising of suffering and reassess our need to protect ourselves. This is most evident when working with vicarious trauma. Zoë Krupka writes:

'The concept of vicarious trauma... cements the idea that some trauma... is surrogate or derivative experiencing and needs to be challenged through various means including compassion, reducing empathic connection and sometimes more physiologically distancing and buffering strategies...

But why shouldn't we be traumatised by the brutalisation of others, either known or unknown to us? Why should our witness pain be pathologised in this way? Should we be protected from the impacts of forces that are much greater than the individual?'⁶

Soul becomes more than a belief or an idea – it becomes tangible, provided we allow ourselves to be affected by our

clients' suffering and our supervisees' own difficulties in dealing with that. What becomes clear, in the process of letting go of our parameters of isolation and exclusion, is that there exists a permeable, soulful area of experience.*



BIOGRAPHY

Manu Bazzano is a psychotherapist, supervisor and visiting lecturer at Roehampton University. He facilitates men's groups as well as workshops on Zen and

Phenomenology in the UK and abroad. He has a background in philosophy and rock music and is the author/editor of several books, including *Zen and Therapy: Heretical Perspectives* (Routledge), *Re-visioning Person-centred Therapy* (ed), (Routledge), *Therapy and the Counter-tradition* (co-editor) and the forthcoming *Nietzsche and Psychotherapy* (Routledge). He has studied Eastern contemplative practices since 1980, and in 2004 was ordained in the Soto and Rinzai traditions of Zen Buddhism. www.manubazzano.com.

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