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Dialogue and Heroes: Bakhtin and existential perspectives on supervision

Anna C. Rédei

Abstract

The purpose of the essay is to explore the possibility of using some insights of the Russian philosopher of the dialogic word and literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin in supervision, from an existential perspective. The essay ends with a case. Translations from Swedish and French are mine, when otherwise not stated.

Key Words

Bakhtin, dialogue, existential supervision, existential psychotherapy

Introduction

This essay starts with an overview of Mikhail M. Bakhtin's (1895-1975) philosophy of the dialogic word and continues with reflections on how to integrate Bakhtin's philosophy with existential supervisory practice. It ends with a case analysis before concluding.

The Russian philosopher of language and literary scholar Bakhtin criticised what is called structural linguistics as early as the 1920s. Structural linguistics has its roots in the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857-1913) work *Cours de linguistique générale* [*Course in General Linguistics*], which was published posthumously in 1916. He formulated the idea that language could be understood in terms of being a system, a structure, and studied through two concepts: *langue* (language/the system) and *parole* (speech/how the system is used). However, according to Saussure, only the former, the system, could be the subject of linguistic studies without denying that language was also social to its nature. It was the French-Bulgarian psychoanalyst, linguist and semiotician Julia Kristeva who introduced Bakhtin in the West in the essay 'Le mot, le dialogue et le roman' ['The word, the dialogue and the novel] in the book *Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (1969). Kristeva (1969: 146), being inspired by Bakhtin, elaborated the concept of intertextuality, a concept that has played a decisive role in the humanities. An intertextual study of texts implies, in short, that a text needs to be studied in its context with other texts, contrary to the structuralist approach to the study of language. This idea is at the core of Bakhtin's philosophy of speech, which is based on the relationship between the self and the other, and is thus fundamentally existential: it is in dialogue with the other that we can apprehend ourselves (Rédei, 2024). Kristeva writes:

Bakhtin is one of the first to replace the static cutting of texts with a model in which the literary structure is not but in which it develops in relation to another structure. This dynamisation of structuralism is only possible on the basis of a fundamental idea according to which the 'literary word' is not a point (a fixed meaning), but a crossroads of textual surfaces, a dialogue between several scriptures: the author's, the recipient's (or character's), the cultural context's – present or past.

(1969: 144)

When Bakhtin introduced the word as a unit for textual studies, he made dialogic analyses of texts possible. He writes: "All these object-worlds [social, political values, aesthetic values, ethical values and so on] determine the values of the totally for the act-performer himself" (1995: 138). This leads to what the existential psychotherapist Emmy van Deurzen (2009: 94) defines as the existential dimensions: the physical, the social, the psychological and the spiritual. These are starting points for a deeper understanding of a person's life situation as he or she understands it and expresses it. Bakhtin and Deurzen demonstrate how the relationship between inner and outer speech forms the writing and/or speaking subject. In sum, it comes down to the idea that language is dialogical to its nature. So how does Bakhtin's philosophy of language manifest itself in this dialogue?

Bakhtin and dialogue

Psychotherapy that draws on a Bakhtinian understanding of a dialogical self and a consciousness that is dialogical, as process in movement, could begin to reclaim psychotherapy as a human social practice, rescuing it from the stranglehold of psychological theories that categorise, normalise and marginalise (Pollard, 2008: 38).

Bakhtin's idea of the dialogue between the self and the other is illustrated by the concept of author and hero in his analyses. In one of Bakhtin's early essays, 'Author and hero in aesthetic activity' (ca. 1920-1923), he elaborates the idea of dialogue between a self and the other based on his readings of Dostoyevsky's works. Thus, it is in dialogue with the other that the self/author is defined: 'Pure self-accounting—that is, addressing oneself axiologically only to oneself in solitariness—is impossible;' (Bakhtin 1995: 143). This way, the other is of a fundamental existential nature to the self. Moreover, the evaluation of the self also needs to be transformed aesthetically, which makes it a useful source for artistic works, or for psychotherapeutic and supervisory work: the therapist and the supervisor as existential others in relation to the client. We will never reach a point where we do not have more to learn about ourselves from another person's perspective, the perspective of the other (Pollard, 2008: 38).

According to Kristeva (1969: 145) a word has two directions: horizontally, the word in a text belongs to both the author and the addressee; and vertically, the word in a text is directed to an earlier or contemporary literary *corpus*. Translated into the psychotherapeutic or supervisorial dialogue, this means that the utterance belongs to both the utterer and to the receiver, and the utterance is in dialogue with, on the one hand, earlier and contemporary stories in the client's life and, on the other hand, literary texts/films and other artistic corpuses important to the client. Thus, it is impossible to separate the autobiography from the biography since there can be no 'I-for-myself' relationship in either of them; it is always the dialogic relationship that forms the organising factor of the text (Bakhtin 1995: 151). Bakhtin's philosophy of narration, thus, rests on dialogue, and all narration encompasses the self in relation to the other. On the aesthetics of lived life, he says:

The author biography is that possible other by whom we are most likely to be possessed in lived life; the possible other who is with us when we look at ourselves in the mirror, when we dream of glory, when we make plans for our life; the possible other who has permeated our consciousness and who often guides our acts, our value judgements, and our vision of ourselves side by side with our own I-for-myself; the other in our consciousness with whom our external life can still be sufficiently active [...]

(ibid: 152)

Bakhtin and the two types of life narrative

Bakhtin also emphasises that empathy is crucial for the biography and makes up its features. To my mind, this has ethical implications for the psychotherapeutic as well as for the supervisorial work. This is in line with how I understand what Deurzen & Adams (2016) write about empathy – one of the central aspects of working phenomenologically – in the encounter with our clients. The authors point to the importance of the insight that we share similarities with our clients, but we are also different from them, and this insight could help us in our work as psychotherapists and supervisors (Deurzen, 2009: 89) to 'throw new light on' the fundamentals of life that we share with each other (Deurzen & Adams, 2016: 51). This thought of empathy being grounded in the insight that we share similarities with others, while also differing from them, is important in understanding Bakhtin's definition of the two types of biographies, the heroic biography showing too little of this concern, as we will see next. Thus, his philosophic and literary analyses might also be of help in further analyses of, and reflections on, life narratives at large, oral included. How?

According to Bakhtin there are two different types of biographies: the adventurous and heroic, and the social everyday. The adventurous one is

dominated by the heroic strive for glory:

Striving for glory organises the life of the naïve hero, and it is glory that also organises the story of that life – its glorification. To strive for glory is to gain consciousness of oneself within the civilised mankind of history (or within a nation), it means to found and build one's own life in the possible consciousness of this civilised mankind; to grow in and for others, and not in and for oneself; to assume a place in the proximate world of one's contemporaries and descendants [...] In rendering others heroic, in establishing a pantheon of heroes, I seek to become a participant in such a pantheon, to place myself in it, and to be guided from within it by the longed-for future image of myself that was created in the likeness of others

(1995: 155).

Other features that organise the adventurous and heroic type of biography are the hero's striving to be loved by others (imagining him or herself in desired situations) and to be a central part of other people's lives. Moreover, Bakhtin says, the heroic type of hero wants his or her life to be rich and thus does not want to miss out any of the possibilities that life can provide. This type of orientation in life leads to a naïve individualism, according to Bakhtin (1996: 155-156): the hero cannot be separated from the other, from the other's world, there is no contrasts, no tensions in the narrative (Rédei, 2024). A third dominant organising principle are the "fabular" possibilities', that is, strivings for a rich life as the organising principle for the hero, his or her actions and the narrative as a whole (Bakhtin 1995: 158). In short, the heroic biographic form is "the endless and thoughtless fabula of the pure form of adventure" (ibid: 159) and as such resemble more a dream about life than a reflection upon it.

In contrast, the social everyday biography concentrates on social values: familiarity is key; to have a good reputation in the community organises the narrative of this type of biography. The narrative is characterised by being descriptive in its nature and pays tribute to the ordinary life: "The point is not – to be in the world and to have significance in it, but – to be with the world, to observe it and to experience it again and again" (ibid: 161). To conclude, the two sorts of biographies that Bakhtin defines are put up against each other as two types of narratives, in the sense these are depicted as two models of narration. It is important to remember that models serve as vantage points to further analyses and are not decisive in themselves. As such, these models work well. For instance, they could fruitfully be understood in the light of the concept of authenticity/inauthenticity, in the sense that the heroic biography is dominated by life goals that are

set in the imagined opinion others, in contrast to the social ordinary one. The latter's concern is the hero's inner ideas about a good life where the relationship to others plays a significant role. In connection to the problem of authenticity versus inauthenticity, Barnett (2009: 58) writes about the relationship between client and supervisor, with reference to Martin Buber: "For Buber, truth and authenticity arise in the interhuman realm when people show themselves and communicate without putting up a façade or barriers, and genuinely give of themselves."

Buber and Bakhtin, two of the most important philosophers of dialogue, share a great deal in the way they regard the relationship between an I and thou, as for instance, the idea of the inviolability of another human being. Pollard's (2008: 25) observation that, for Buber God is a given whilst for Bakhtin God is a possibility, is important here. What Bakhtin defines as the *superadresse* (a third part, a higher other in addition to the second part, the other) might be God (or any other voice of absolute truth) but needs not be, in contrast with Buber's concept of the 'eternal Thou' (Friedman, 2001: 28). Bakhtin was deeply influenced by Buber and had read him already when he was in the gymnasium (ibid: 25). Another important philosopher interested in the I and Thou problem was Paul Ricoeur, and his approach was intriguingly expressed in his philosophy of translation. Translation here is to be understood in a wide meaning as a dialogic process going on between an I and a Thou, between an I and the Other. This philosophy is neatly summarised by the philosopher Richard Kearney:

This means that the question of human identity, or more exactly the answer to the question 'Who are you?'. Always entails a translation between the self and others both within the self and outside the self. Every subject, as Ricoeur puts it, is a tapestry of stories heard and told. This makes of each one of us a narrative identity, operating as both authors and readers of our own lives. Which is another way of saying, translators of our own lives

(2006: xix-xx)

For a more detailed account of Ricoeur's philosophy of I and Thou in connection to existential psychotherapy, see Rédei, 2023.

Bakhtin, dialogue and supervision?

In what way could Bakhtin's philosophy of dialogue be relevant to the supervisor, supervising the supervisee in his or her work with a client? Bakhtin (1973: 38) said of Dostoevsky: "For Dostoevsky the important thing is not how the hero appears to the world, but most importantly, how the world appears to the hero and how the hero appears to himself." That, I believe, analogically, would be central to the existential and

phenomenological supervisory inquiry into the supervisee's worldview on the one hand and his/her relationship to the client's world view on the other. Of course, this approach demands that the supervisor brackets hers/his preunderstandings of the world (Vos, 2019).

If we now take a closer look at one of Bakhtin's later texts, 'The problem of the text in linguistics, philology and the human sciences' (1986 [1979]), it seems that Bakhtin's theories on a general level do not contradict such an understanding. Moreover, we will be provided with some further insights into his philosophy of dialogue of relevance to the therapeutic and supervisory work.

The other two subjects are needed for understanding, in contrast to explaining the other, which only demands one subject. The former is a dialogic process, the latter is not. Bakhtin writes:

The 'inductive' approach, which is assumed to be inherent in realism, is, in essence, a reifying causal explanation of man. The voices (in the sense of reified social types) are thus simply transformed into signs of things (or symptoms of processes); it is no longer possible to respond to them, one can no longer polemicise with them, and dialogic relations with such voices fade away.

(1986: 112)

The monologue word is not addressed to anyone, has no recipients and does not expect any answers. However, Bakhtin argues that there are monologue texts of varying degrees, but there cannot be monological works in the absolute sense.

In the discussion about author and hero in biographical texts, Bakhtin brings up his critique against linguistic analyses, namely that these excludes extra-linguistic connections inherent in all utterances which encompass both context and speaker/author. Thus, utterances are embodied (Bakhtin, 1973). Moreover, meaning is dialogical, as is understanding and, meaning is mediated via signs. Words are signs: "We do not address inquiries to nature and she does not answer us. When studying man, we search for and find signs everywhere and we try to grasp their meaning" (Bakhtin 1986: 114). Thus, the relationship to meaning is always dialogical. There are also things to which no dialogical relationship can be formed in their purest form. The semioethicist Susan Petrilli (2021: 90) opposes the Bakhtinian 'substantial' dialogism (independent of the dialogic form) with the formal Socratic dialogism (depending on the dialogic form): "This substantial dialogism of the word is connected with the capacity for otherness and is the origin of the philosophical word."

The unique nature of dialogic relations. The problem of the inner dialogism. The seams of the boundaries between utterances.

The problem of the double-voiced word. Understanding as dialogue. Here we are approaching the frontier of the philosophy of language and of thinking in the human sciences in general, virgin land.

(Bakhtin 1986: 119)

According to Bakhtin (1973: 151), “Dialogical relationships (including the dialogical relationships of the speaker to his own word) are a matter for metalinguistics”, which points to analogies between his philosophy of dialogue between an I and thou and the one between the existential psychotherapist and the client. Moreover, metacommunication is important between the supervisor and the supervisee to secure the dialogic relationship.

In conclusion, the supervisor working within the frames of a Bakhtinian philosophy of dialogue might consider the following assumption as a point of departure: the client’s utterance is directed to the psychotherapist/supervisee as the second party whose response is sought out and next asked, how is the supervisee responding as being the second party to the client’s utterance? And who is the client’s more or less conscious *superaddressee* to whom the client addresses him or herself to seek out the “absolutely just responsive understanding” (Bakhtin 1986: 126)?

Secondly, in what way does the client organise his or her (auto)biography? What is the ‘hero’ like? How does the client describe the hero? Who is the hero? Does the hero borrow traits mainly from what Bakhtin called the heroic biography, or from the social everyday biography or, from something in between these two biographical types? And as types, can the hero be found in the popular culture of the client’s socio-cultural context? Contemporary narrative theory would support this way of approaching psychotherapeutic dialogues. The Norwegian philosophical practitioners Helge Svare and Henning Herrestad show how a narrative can influence our conception of reality and as an example of that the refer to “a man who sees himself as a hero”. They write:

Typical for this character is that he also succeeds in everything he undertakes, and that the success is explained by the specific gifts and forces of the hero. The man who sees himself as a hero has formed this narrative to an interpretative frame that everything he experiences is related to.

(Svare & Herrestad, 2004: 88-89)

Another consequence of this type of hero’s view of him or herself is that failures can never be attributed to him or her, only to circumstances beyond his or her control: “the resistance became too hard” (ibid: 89). On the contrary, the hero that views him or herself as a loser, in what framework

does the hero interpret his or her failure?

It is when he fails his true nature shows itself. When he occasionally succeeds in what he undertakes, it is mostly explained in terms of being a coincidence. The hero and the loser might from the outside be living similar lives, but since they interpret everything that happens from different interpretative frameworks, they experience their lives in totally different ways.

(ibid: 89)

Svare & Herrestad also highlights the crucial role of narratives in our work with interpreting and understanding events in our past: “Life is given a meaning, through the narrative” (ibid: 91). This is in line with what Smith, Burr & Leeming (2023: 4) write, with reference to Irvine Yalom, about the goal with education, which is to enable the trainees to explore how existential issues such as death, freedom and choices, meaning-making and isolation influence the client’s view of him or herself and of others, and how the clients might be supported in developing more constructive ways of telling their life stories.

If we could accept the narrative as the ‘royal road’ to an understanding of ourselves and others through dialogic inquiries, how could we then assist a hero that seeks help because his or her life story has come to a point where it gets harder and harder to sustain it? More importantly, how could we understand this from an existential psychotherapeutic perspective based on Bakhtin’s philosophy of dialogue? More specifically, what would characterise a hero who is left with a halting heroic life story?

The heroic life story, perfectionism and life dilemmas

There seems to be similarities between the Bakhtinian heroic hero and the existential psychologist and psychotherapist Dan Stiwne’s (2017: 12) description of a depressed person characterised by “perfectionist worries as well as by perfectionist strivings [...] In case of the former there is difficulties to tolerate failures, deep doubts about one’s own capacity and worries about others’ critique or broken expectations”. In the latter case, a depressed person/hero is characterised by rigid demands put on her or himself in combination with the idea that one needs to be “almost perfect [...] On top of that many depressed persons also think that others ought to be better than they are; more understanding, more patient and tolerant” (ibid: 12). Moreover, the hero thinks that other people should be able to understand him or her no matter how he or she is expressing him or herself in terms of clarity: “Some also expresses that they wish that the world was a better place and that they are disappointed with the world’s indifference” (2017: 12). Now, could not the ‘perfectionist strivings’ and

the need to be ‘almost perfect’ be part of how Bakhtin characterised the heroic biography where the hero strives for glory (failures not tolerated) and to be loved by others (to let go of others’ expectations not tolerated)? And could the disappointment of other people’s perceived indifference be part of Bakhtin’s third characteristic of the hero in the heroic biography: the wish to have a central role in other people’s life? If we could agree with Bakhtin’s conclusion that the heroic narrative represents a ‘naïve individualism’, characterised by the absence of a relationship between the hero and the other due to the lack of a clear dividing line between the ego and the other, could we accept Bakhtin’s definition of the everyday life biography as being a fruitful complement to an existential approach to the inquiries into the problem of lived life? I think the answer to that question could be yes. In comparison to the heroic biography Bakhtin (1995: 161) writes: “The point is not to be in the world and to have significance in it, but to be with the world, to observe it and to experience it again and again.”

As a starting point, “clients come to therapy because they are unable to come up with viable alternative points of view about their issues and the therapist is there to provide this new perspective” (Deurzen & Adams, 2016: 45). In the following section a case will be presented, triadic in its nature (du Plock, 2009: 114), where a supervisor is supervising a trainee therapist working with a client struggling with her strivings for perfection, which have started to become untenable.

‘Sara’ and the double-voiced word as acting out inner conflicts: Reflections on a case study

The case that will be presented here is from a psychotherapy I had during my training to be an existential psychotherapist. Thus, I will reflect upon my supervisor’s reflections on my work with the client ‘Sara’ through a Bakhtinian lens – hindsight. The purpose is to explore the fruitfulness of the Bakhtinian double-voiced word and dialogical philosophy.

‘Sara’ (age fifty-five-plus) was seeking help because she felt that her social interactions with colleagues at work were difficult for her. The only interactions she could handle were the strictly professional ones, others she would withdraw from. Work was important to her, and she had high expectations on herself to deliver at work. At some point she suffered from severe exhaustion and obtained antidepressive medication. According to feedback from her colleagues she was appreciated in her role as project leader, which gave Sara confidence in her professional role. But that confidence was fragile: worries about not living-up to her colleagues’ expectations were lurking behind. Sara’s social

private dimension was limited to the relationship with her husband. Initially she described their relationship as very close, they could share everything with each other – in contrast to her family of origin to which Sara has, and always had, a problematic relationship. She has strong memories of her parents not accepting her and, as a result, she withdrew from them and her siblings and suffered from feelings of inferiority because she felt different from them. She felt they looked down on her. Sara was a high achiever in school and later took an academic degree. She left home early (in her upper teens) to go and live with a friend. They did not talk about emotions in her family and Sara describes a family life with very limited interaction. The parents had a difficult marriage and did not get along very well. The parents divorced when Sara was eleven years old.

The connection between childhood and a good life in adulthood is emphasised by Stiwne (2015) as being very strong, something that Sara became aware of in therapy. The professional dimension took most of Sara's time and energy, she enjoyed work and her career was going well. She had always been working hard and occasionally she had felt close to exhaustion. When discussed a bit more in detail, Sara told me that although she felt that the relationship with her husband was close, she could not talk to him about her feelings. Their conversations were mainly intellectual. Sara explained that she was afraid that her husband could not handle the truth about her anxieties and depressive thoughts.

The therapy had a shaky start. Already after the first session Sara said she wanted to discontinue the therapy. After exploring her wish, it turned out that Sara had misinterpreted my intentions when I was trying to understand her dilemma of withdrawing from social events while at the same time seeking help to alter her behaviour by asking too many questions. The working alliance could be saved and therapy could continue.

In supervision my supervisor helped me to see that the client did with me, her therapist, what she had done with others – withdraw – but without really wanting to break with others. The working alliance was challenged yet another time in the therapy when Sara wanted to discontinue the therapy for the second time; this time she said that she did not want to continue to talk about what she had been talking about so far – her relationships at work. Sara wanted to go deeper. The working alliance could be saved also this time when we could explore her longing for being authentic in therapy, and with me as her therapist.

Reflected in a Bakhtinian (1973) framework, and the concept of the double-voiced word, my supervisor's attention to the way Sara has reacted

when she wanted to discontinue the therapy the first time can be further explored. Sara's inner conflict, or dilemma, of wanting but not trusting her relationships with other people could have been further developed by listening more closely to the different voices driving her to act, that is, the impulse to withdraw/discontinue when she felt that she was not understood. Was it the inner voice of the little Sara that came forth in therapy which made her withdraw after she was rejected, as she felt it, by her parents? Yet at the same time, was another voice in parallel wishing that her parents would receive her and embrace her, although they had difficulties in accepting and understanding her? The second challenge to the therapy could also have been fruitfully explored in the sense of the double-voiced word was whether Sara had an inner voice saying that she is not allowed to talk about emotions, with another inner voice expressing her longing to talk about her emotions and to be authentic in her relationships? Stiwne's (2017) definition of 'heroic' (see Bakhtin's concept of the hero, 1995) perfectionist strivings, Sara's problems with working too hard and worries about not being accepted by her colleagues (worries she also had at home when growing up) and by her husband (not daring to say the truth about her emotional state) is helpful to understand her dilemma. She might have had high expectations of her therapist, wishing me to be perfect and to understand her better without Sara needing to say.

Case study conclusive reflections

Explorations directed to possible inner double-voiced words could, in short, fruitfully have deepened my reflections on my supervisor's attentive apprehension of Sara's inner dilemma acted out in the relationship to me, her therapist. They could bring awareness of the inner dialogues going on within our clients, and in all of us, and further explore the double-voiced words making up those dialogues, allowing for deeper understandings of past and ongoing relationships, with ourselves and others, understood as dialogic translative processes between an I and a Thou as in the philosophy of translation, in the sense that Ricoeur once defined it.

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