ANSE

Ethics of supervision and coaching

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1. Introduction

Supervisors and coaches generally exercise their trade in a responsible manner. In the course of their work they follow - consciously or unconsciously - personally integrated moral imperatives. But what are these about? Are they sufficiently strong to deal with ethical problems? And would it not help the profession forward to have these rather implicit morals formulated expressis verbis?

My approach to this question will be as follows. To introduce the subject properly, I will open with a few remarks on the specific *characteristics* of supervision and coaching. As learning in supervision and coaching always involves the personal and professional *identity* of clients we are bound to act with justice and care.

This calls for *professional ethics,* which, as I propose to show in a third paragraph, ought to be an integral part of our methods and professional conduct. As this is a demanding challenge, it may help us to have the basic principles of our ethics formulated, for instance in the format of a code of conduct, an ethical code or any such document.

Formulating a code is not just a matter of adding a number of more or less legally worded articles in a more or less logical sequence. It needs some sense of perspective. From which frame of reference are we looking at our ethics? Which dimensions, levels and perspectives are there? What should be our approach? Some terminological clarification may be helpful to address these questions in good order. I will deal with these matters in the fourth and fifth paragraph.

Following this, in paragraph 6 will be dedicated to the major aspects of the ANSE Code of Ethics as it is now ready to be brought forward to the next General Assembly (2012). I will conclude with a few remarks on the possibilities and the limitations of codes of ethics.

2. The inherent ethics of supervision and coaching

What is characteristic of supervision and coaching? Both formats can - on a practical level - be described as more or less systematic trajectories of determined psychosocial guidance of, and support to, 'normal people with normal challenges, encountering normal problems in the context of normal professional labour and learning'; the term 'normal' referring to the absence of pathology.

In general, supervision is aiming more at the enhancement of experiential learning processes in connection with professional labour (such as in social work, medical or paramedical professions, clerical work), while coaching focuses more on the improvement of professional performance (such as in management or highly skilled professional labour).[1] Whatever the differences, supervisors and coaches are both dealing with *identity issues*: human growth, learning, self

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[1] With this description I follow the conception of supervision and coaching as it is commonly understood in The Netherlands. Definitions of coaching and supervision may differ in other countries. Changing definitions will, however, not alter the fact that supervision and coaching are inherently ethical activities.

reflection, one's place as professional in society, the meaning of one's life and work, one's prospects, the 'good' use of one's talents, proper insight in one's limitations, solving morally charged problems, and the way people (learn to) understand and construct their (public and private) 'selves'[2]. Reflective learning from one's experiences is also learning about oneself.

To enhance these highly personal learning processes we have to address the *personal and the professional identity* of our clients. At the same time, our own personal and professional identity - in all it's socially constructed *authenticity[3]* - is unavoidably at stake. Supervisors and coaches *'use their person as the most important instrument of their trade'* and challenge their clients to follow their example. Supervision and coaching, therefore, are inherently ethical activities[4], heavily dependent on the quality of contact between professional and client. This calls for '*justice and care[5]',* the more so because even if people may be individualised to a lesser or greater extend, yet for their very existence they depend on others. People may be strong, talented and purposeful, yet they are also essentially vulnerable. This 'human condition', which we all share, deserves careful methodical handling and needs to be supported by professional ethics[6].

3. Basic values and professional ethics
Supervision and coaching require more than a set of more or less correctly implemented methods and techniques. The work we do is morally charged and multilayered. As supervisors and coaches we are, of course, responsible for our part in the learning processes of our supervisees or coachees. But they in turn have clients and colleagues too. Whatever they learn in contact with us should also be beneficial to their clients, their colleagues, to their company or institution, and, if at all possible, to society at large.

Consequently, supervisors and coaches carry a heavy responsibility, both professionally and socially. This, I would think, requires astute ethical awareness. It is our moral obligation to take every possible care. We have to see to it that 'justice is done' to all directly or indirectly concerned persons, meaning that they will get - not always what they ask for - but what they need. The difference between what is asked for and what is needed in itself already poses an ethical challenge, which supervisors and coaches encounter daily.

A sweet burden, indeed. But however sweet it may be, we are well advised not to carry it all alone. We need exchange and discussion with, and support of, our colleagues, which is a major rationale for the existence of our professional organizations. In turn, these organizations enhance the process of further professionalization, including the institutionalization of professional ethics.

Once we organize ourselves in professional associations, we are collectively able to promote our 'personal' ethics - so to speak - to the level of a shared professional ethic. Professionalization goes hand in hand with the clear and unequivocal formulation of what collectively is seen as the *proper exercise of the profession* on both the methodical and the ethical level. Thus, professional ethics are part and parcel of the institutionalization of our trade.

Naturally this has been recognized by most, if not all, national associations of the ANSE family. Most associations already have codes, many of which are rather elaborate. In the national codes ANSE reviewed, careful attention is given to what supervisors and coaches should do, or on the other hand are prohibited to do, in order to act methodically and ethically right[7]. *Proper*

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[2] See Appiah, 2004, Taylor, 2006
[3] See Taylor, 2004, 2006
[4] See Knopf & De Roos, 2009
[5] See Tronto, 1994
[6] See Tronto, 1994
[7] See ANSE office, 2010

(professional) conduct is the subject matter of these documents; they show the behavioural boundaries of our trade.

Codification reflects the attention to professional ethics within the ANSE family. But what should be said about the character and quality of these codes? Are they practicable? Are they sufficiently addressing the inherent morals of our trade? Are they enforceable? To put it shortly: what should our codes - at minimum – contain, and what does this mean to ANSE as a supranational body?

4. Codification: perspectives

In recent years several member organisations have pressed the ANSE board to lay down a code of ethics, which could be used to compare their own codes with or to help formulate one. Of course ANSE has responded to these requests. But if ANSE is to formulate a sensible code repeating what has already been done on a national scale is of no use. Therefore, we need a different perspective from which we could approach the subject of the fundamental ethics[8] of the profession.

Any perspective consists of three interdependent levels: the level of reasoning or philosophy, the practical level of desirable effects and the level of formulation. To begin with the first level: should we reason deontologically or teleologically? Deontology - or the ethics of duty - stipulates absolute rules which are valid in all possible circumstances. According to Immanuel Kant, for instance, torture is always wrong, even if other lives could be saved by it. As Kant[9] puts it in his categorical imperative: *an act is moral if one could at the same time want any other person to act in the same way.* I will not torture, and I would want all mankind to refrain from it too.

An opposing perspective is the teleological one. Morally right is any act that delivers the greatest advantage. A strong example of 'liberal teleology' can be found in Mill's utilitarianism. He would add: *the greatest advantage to the greatest number of people.*[10]

This seems to leave us with a clear cut choice, but we need to be careful. In both perspectives there is no such thing as a preordained, absolute 'good'. Deontologically, one can only act ethically right by consciously and willingly obeying ethical maxims, and teleologically one has acted ethically right if the greatest advantage to as many people as possible turns out to have indeed been delivered.

In both perspectives the practical effect is of the essence. In the deontological perspective ethical behaviour is a result of following absolute laws - or rather maxims - which should lead to the desired outcome (justice), in the teleological perspective the desired outcome determines ex post facto the ethical quality of the initial act. Because desired outcomes will obviously have to be assessed beforehand, we could call this approach 'prospective consequentialism'.

What does this entail on the level of effects? We may focus more on the ethical quality of our professional conduct, or more on the desired outcome we strive after. It is possible to take yet another, more pragmatic position. We could also focus more on the situational demands we meet. There are good reasons for the latter: as people differ and situations change continually, the appliance of absolute rules may produce injustice - as sometimes happens - and in doing so we may inadvertently produce results or bring about consequences that are unethical[11] in both the deontological and the teleological perspective.

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[8] See Rawls, 2001
[9] See Kant, 2004, 2006
[10] See Mill, 1992
[11] See Amartiya Sen, 2009

5. Codification: societal aspects
As Kant's categorical imperative already strongly suggests, there is more to it than just the individual level. 'Doing the right thing' is far more than 'doing things right', it needs the *virtue* of empathy, the *values* of respect, justice and care, and *norms* to weigh, manage and judge professional conduct.

Empathy is an innate human quality which most people are capable of. The famous biblical maxim '*do not unto others what you do not want to be done unto you*' presupposes this quality. *Values* have to be socially accepted, otherwise they could not be recognized and appreciated as such, and *norms* apply only on the basis of collective acceptance. So clearly there are social consequences which we have to also address on the societal level – yet another reason for the existence of professional organisations. Professional ethics require social acceptance, and therefore depend on organization and institutionalization.

ANSE aims to lay down a code of ethics that national organisations could use to compare their own codes with. To bring this about, we should clearly distinguish between the levels of reasoning, practical effects and formulation. Or, to put it differently, between virtues, values, norms and written rules.

Most codes of national organisations are normative and could therefore be characterized as 'codes of conduct' or 'regulatory codes'[12]. What might be needed, and could be useful as a yardstick, is a code on the levels of virtue and values: a code of ethics. To name one important aspect: accepting people as they are or want to be is a virtue and respect its corresponding value. As we deal with a Europe of many speeds, should we not take the differences in the development of supervision and coaching between our countries in account? The situation in Lithuania, for instance, is very different from the Spanish situation.[13] Equal treatment includes attention to and respectful approach of diversity[14].

It follows that, on the level of formulation, we have to distinguish between a 'top down' regulatory approach and an approach that challenges professionals (and professional organizations) *to aspire to:* the aspirational approach.

ANSE has chosen for an aspirational formulation, based on deontologically inspired prescriptions with room for situational ethics. Laws are always valid, but should be applied according to ever changing circumstances of time and place. In other words: all practitioners are expected to follow three basic guidelines: always act according to the code of ethics of your organization, always see to it that you know in which specific situation you do this, and always carefully check if the outcome does justice to the client (and other directly or indirectly involved persons).

The main reasons for the choice of ANSE are: the legal position of ANSE, the differences between our countries and the desirability of ongoing cross border discussion and debate on the ethics of our trade. ANSE holds no power over national organizations and cannot, nor would want to, prescribe ethical rules top down. Neither is ANSE capable of formulating situationally specific codes of conduct in detail. But ANSE most certainly could promote ongoing discussion within and between national organisations. To be able to support this and to inspire, ANSE *has to be* aspirational.

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[12] See De Roos & Rinke, 2010
[13] See De Roos & Rinke, 2010
[14] See Appiah, 2004, Dworkin, 2000

6. The ANSE Code of Ethics: aspects of content
The ANSE code of ethics is now in the process of final formulation and will be brought forward at the next GA for discussion, amendment and adoption. Inspiration was found in the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights[15] and the various protocols of the 'European Convention on Human Rights'[16]. As all national organisations of the ANSE family are signatories to the Universal Declaration, and most countries affiliated with ANSE are signatories to the protocols of the European Convention on Human Rights, coaches and supervisors are bound by these declarations. The basic aspects of content are power, trust and responsibility.

To start with: all supervisors and coaches wield *power*: the power of their specific knowledge and competence, the power derived from their role and position vis-à-vis the supervisee, the power of formal judgment invested in them, the power of their professional experience, and so on.
Secondly, to act in a just and careful manner (and to avoid useless power games) supervisors and coaches will invest in *trust*. They will not only show trust in their own competences, but see to it that they are *trustworthy* in the eyes of their clients, colleagues and constituents. They will radiate trust in the client, in his or her potential, uniqueness and humanity, and they will actively substantiate it in *contact* with the client (and others). As trust - or faith if you want - implies the recognition of shared humanity, the client may be able to feel accepted, to feel at home with himself, with others and the world around him, and to be free to be (or become) what he is or wants to be.
Finally supervisors and coaches mediate power and trust by *responsiveness*. They will always feel *responsible* and will act accordingly. As integral part of their professional attitude, supervisors and coaches will take on the *responsibility* for their support to the learning process of the client, for the maintenance of their skills and for the reliability of the profession they exercise. They will not shirk away from being taken to account. On the contrary, they will gladly respond to that.
In dealing with power, trust and responsibility, supervisors and coaches can only maintain their personal and professional integrity if they position themselves autonomously vis-à-vis constituents, clients and colleagues, at all times guarantee confidentiality and always avoid to become a party in conflicting interests. No one can serve more than one master at the time. It would, therefore, be very unwise to accept orders from a constituent which are at odds with what the client needs.

There is, however, more to be done on the institutional level. ANSE does not directly deal with individual supervisors and coaches, but operates on the institutional level only. This raises questions about the direction ANSE would favour our European family of supervisors an coaches to take.
To give an indication: ANSE favours the development of 'professional honor', and therefore calls upon national organizations to actively support supervisors and coaches to be proud of their trade, stand publicly for it and take honor in it. Honourable professionals are autonomous, take their trade seriously, keep on learning, are responsive, show integrity, and know how to position themselves in between conflicting interests and expectations. Shortly: they show high ethical aspirations. To be more precise: they show the ethics of their trade in all their actions. In this way they are socially recognizable as 'honourable' representatives of their profession. They may even

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[15] United Nations, Palais de Chaillot, Paris, 1948
[16] EEC, Rome, 1950 – Strassbourg, 1961

help to advance the ethical quality of society[17], for instance by their influence on the human quality of labour relations in a globalizing world.[18]

Next to that, ANSE views professional ethics as a collective 'good' which deserves to be socially and institutionally guarded. Therefore, ANSE would like to see national organisations develop, install and maintain proper mechanisms of control and enforcement. At best these arrangements should be independent, because independent judgement and arbitration heightens transparency and social credibility[19]. To top this all off, ANSE proposes an 'ethic of international contact' between our organisations, such as acceptance of, and due respect for, the cultural and organizational diversity of the various supervision and coaching situations in our countries.

6. Ethics in practice: examples
Beautiful words, certainly, but it is in everyday practice that ethics are really put to the test. Let us, therefore, have a close look at a few dilemmas and see how far we get.

1. Consider the classic tragedy[20] of King Agamemnon. Bound by honour and duty, with his fleet he set sail to Troy to save Helena, daughter of Zeus, and to punish the Troyans that abducted her. Halfway the trip the wind suddenly fell, and the fleet made no progress for days on end. Food and water supplies ran out, sailors began to mutter and morale went down with alarming speed. In despair Agamemnon consulted a sayer. The priest consulted his frogs bones and urgently advised Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenea, to the Gods. Should he choose not to have his daughter killed, there would be no wind, he would betray his men and he would not be able to fulfil his holy duty. This oracle put Agamemnon in a terrible spot. Whatever his choice, the outcome would always be disastrous.
Now just suppose you are his coach or supervisor, how would you guide and support him? And: what support would you yourself expect from colleagues? If there is a professional code, what should be in it to help you?
2. Let us now move on to a problem every one of us could come across every working day. Suppose you are contracted by a firm to coach and supervise staff members and middle managers. The general idea is to help them reach their full potential and so to benefit both the company and themselves. Alas, due to economic bad weather the firm has to cut staff. The director calls for you and asks you to take a number of employees in coaching, and to help them leave the company 'out of their own free will'. Without really saying so he subtly makes it clear that there are, of course, always other coaches. So you feel your contract might be at stake.
What are you going to do? Why? Do you find support by your colleagues, your organisation and by the ethics of your trade? How?

Ethical problems are always difficult, and dilemmas have no easy solution, if at all. Yet we are bound to act professionally, that is also: ethically. That is why we need support from each other,

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[17] See Appiah, 2010,
[18] See Senghaas-Knobloch, 2010
[19] See Montesquieu, 2006, Rawls, 2001
[20] See Borst, 2010, Nussbaum, 2001

and why we may find guidelines in our ethical code. But no code will ever solve problems for us; that we will have to do all by ourselves. In the end, ethics have to be lived in real life, and therefore, to be integrated in our personal and professional identity.

7. Conclusion

Ethical codes are helpful as guidelines, but it would be naïve to expect that ethical conduct can be regulated by protocol alone. Too much belief in codes could even - as often happens - lead to a practice of 'ticking off items on a list'. But if we tick off all the prescribed steps, would this mean that we dealt with our dilemma in a just and careful way, let alone that we found a solution? I don't think so. Codes will never guarantee good conduct. Again: 'doing things right is not the same as doing the right thing.'

Codes, therefore, should be used sensibly; not as problem solving protocols, not as an automatic pilot, not as a replacement for personal and professional responsibility, but as guidelines, as points of reference, as maxims in the sense of Kant's categorical imperative.

To enhance professional honor, which is based on methodical and ethical sound foundations, codes are helpful but not enough. Continuous attention to the ethical aspects of our trade should be part and parcel of supervisory education. Permanent awareness of our professional ethics - both individual and institutional - is a conditio sine qua non for the advancement of our trade. We need to be well organised to live up to that responsibility.

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