Chapter 5

Exploring Intuition

The soul can not think without a picture
Aristotle 384bc–322bc

Intuition is a challenging concept to describe, which reflects the
difficulty most people have putting into words what their intuitive
response is. People tend to say things like 'I got a really strong gut
feeling', 'I walked into the house and the hair stood up on the back
of my neck and I just knew something was really wrong'. This
lack of empirical evidence has resulted in intuitive responses often
being dismissed from legal or medical contexts, with intuition not
seen as scientific or factual. However, as Eileen Munro suggests
we have two separate methods for processing data in
our brains, one analytic and the other intuitive... both
are necessary for highest level of reasoning... neither
intuitive or analytic reasoning are 'the best' but each has
different strengths and weaknesses, and in reality we use
both in most reasoning tasks... these both contribute
to and develop our 'higher level reasoning'. (Munro
2008, p.3)

As supervisors we need to give attention to articulating this type
of reasoning with those we supervise. This chapter will explore
what is meant by intuition, how if unexplored it can lead to
unrecognised/unacknowledged biases in our thinking, and ways
that we can further work with intuition to help increase moments
of transformative change in supervision.

Defining intuition – from the brain to the gut
I see intuition as first a neurological function involving rapid
sensing of usually nonverbal information that is directly linked
to the amygdala. This processes and connects to emotions and
memories of nonverbal information to determine whether the
sympathetic nervous system via the hypothalamus needs to activate
docrine function to support the body's stress response. It is likely
this neurological function was originally part of primitive human
survival instincts designed to quickly read nonverbal information
and come up with a rapid response to respond to physical danger.
Primitive human beings with eyesight not as well developed as
other mammals needed to rely on other methods of sensing such
as hearing and smell to protect them from danger. Signals of
danger were then stored as emotional memories and possibly these
processes have been passed down through evolution to help with
human survival.

Intuition is usually described as 'pre conscious', which explains
people's difficulty initially in articulating it. As it tends to be a
response to something perceived as immediately dangerous or
worthy of our attention, there isn't enough perceived time to come
up with a carefully worded analysed assessment of the situation.
Generally the first sign of an intuitive response is via our emotions,
which is why I describe emotions as the voice of our intuition. This
tends to arrive as a feeling; we feel something about a situation that
we then translate into an emotion. It is interesting that people say
that they had a gut feeling about something given this appears to
be happening in the brain. This could be about a hormonal surge
of energy to our large organs or as Eastern philosophy suggests
an activation of 'chakras' or energy centres in our body. This is
illustrated in this quote by SETA (Society of Eastern Thought and
Awareness) from their magazine 'Knowledge of Reality' issue 18:

...the ‘nabhi’ or ‘Manipur’ chakra...its physical location
is at about the level of the navel...physically, it deals
with our organs of digestion...psychologically it deals
with our sense of satisfaction, and spiritually it deals
both with our 'prosperity', 'generosity' as well as with our 'dharma' or our innate sense of right and wrong...

In relation to this, Daniel Goleman also talks about how the intuitive signals that guide us come in the form of limbic driven surges for the viscera that Antonio Damasio calls 'somatic markers'—literally gut feelings. The somatic marker is a kind of automatic alarm, typically calling attention to a potential danger from a given course of action. More often than not these markers steer us away from some choice that experience warns us against, though they can also alert us to a golden opportunity. (2006, p.53)

These 'gut feelings' are powerful and greatly influence decisions we make in our lives.

It is fascinating that universally when people talk about having an intuitive response they tend to touch their abdominal area. It could also be that an intuitive response is felt deeply within us, hence pointing further down toward into the abdominal cavity. It is a wonderful reminder of how our bodies, minds, and spirit are linked. I can recall having the opportunity to work with a group of people on a long term project but the more time I spent with them, the stronger feelings and 'gut' responses I kept on getting to not pursue the project as something wasn't right. Finally the feelings became so 'loud' they caused me to make the decision to pull away from the group. Almost immediately I was flooded with a blissful sense of relief and peace. These people meant me no harm, so where did this powerful reaction come from? To answer that we need to examine the sources of knowledge that informs intuition. Otherwise, without this examination, intuition can be used as a justification that hides a lack of analysis, or as a means to resist incorporating theoretical knowledge and increasing self awareness.

**Places of intuitive knowledge**

I see there being three places of knowledge that inform intuition in a professional practice context. The first is that already suggested of a more primal, universally human response based on physical survival. Located in our senses and strongly connected to our hormonal stress response, this is knowledge we are born with as human beings and is reflected through our instincts often linked to our need for physical protection. This explains how facial expressions are similar across the world such as happiness and sadness, as these provide a predictable base for us to 'read' and determine what is safe and what isn't in human interactions. This knowledge helps us make rapid fire decisions about information and to act immediately especially if we perceive some type of threat.

We see this primal knowledge in action in babies when they are faced with someone pulling a scary face or loud shouting. Generally they will begin to cry and become upset, sending signals they need to be protected from the object or event that is frightening them. Unfortunately when children live in situations where violence is often present these instincts become so highly developed that children often end up in constant state of arousal and can over react to situations which do not carry a threat. An example is a child who lives in a home containing violence and at school, when a teacher accidentally drops a book, the child flinches and has an increase in their heart rate. Being constantly attuned to danger and having little experience of a safe and secure base leads to short term survival based thinking and often a misinterpretation of behaviour in others (Perry 1997).

As professionals we still hold this more primal survival base of knowledge that does inform our intuitive response. We often scan situations, 'reading' the emotional energy or temperature in the room, and forming quick judgements about this. It makes sense; our instincts are there to protect us physically and psychologically and tell us if it is ok to stay or not stay in a situation, and aid us to decide how we will approach the situation to potentially reduce danger or threat that may be present. While closely linked
to body awareness it could be suggested this is also linked to wider human consciousness. It is difficult to describe the concept of what is called spirit, love, energy, or even God, but being in connection with a greater energy than ourselves by being truly present in our self, may also inform this type of primitive or natural intuitive knowledge.

The second place of knowledge I see as forming part of an intuitive response in the workplace context, is to do with our socialisation, personal histories, and the beliefs and values that we have developed from these. This is where we learn what is important, especially in relationships, how we get on with others in the world, and what determines right and wrong. Jerome Wakefield and Judith Baer suggest that 'people have cognitive/ representational mental contents including conscious beliefs and desires, sometimes irrational, that motivate and guide their actions' (Wakefield and Baer 2008, p.22). They go on to say that people are shaped in ways they may not be aware of by cultural and family rules and other interpersonal processes that form the context and background for their actions, and provide implicit rules that may be followed without awareness.

These influence our mental models or schema, which help us quickly develop views or judgements on situations in order to prioritise, organise, and manage information. We tend to look for patterns or connections that relate to previous experiences and perceive them through a lens coloured by our socialisation. We are also more likely to seek evidence that confirms our deeply held beliefs, just as we tend to socialise with people who are like us, and support our personal constructs of the world. The idea of personal constructs was developed by George Kelly back in 1955 and is a means by which a person makes sense of, shapes, and controls his or her world (O'Donoghue 2003, p.77). We often look for information that confirms our personal construct of a situation and we need to remember as supervisors that we too will be operating from our own mental models and personal constructs. This doesn’t mean these will be negative or unhelpful, but it does mean we need to be self aware and transparent in our observations and own what is our interpretation.

In some ways our values and beliefs become like our personal, moral and ethical code of operating, often closely linked to our self identity, and because of this, we must be able to connect them with more structured ethical frameworks that underpin our chosen professional groups. We are unlikely to work in a profession if we cannot align its ethical framework with our own, at least initially. How I perceive a situation based on my ethical thinking and values and beliefs about it will inform my actions and I am likely to be more convinced of my position on it linked to my actions. Our early socialisation is generally where this knowledge is formed. It is where we learn social and emotional competencies to help us function successfully in the world and where we learn right from wrong. It is also where our psychosocial reality is constructed, supported by often early thoughts and feelings internal to a person and shaped by their interactions (Ruch et al. 2010, p.221).

It is important to recognise that this type of ‘ethical’ knowledge is often built from a place of emotional response, behaviour, and consequent learning. As children we will all be able to recall highly emotive situations where we felt wronged in some way. We may then have chosen to behave in a certain way to ‘right’ this. My five-year-old nephew had this experience recently when another five-year-old boy put his sunhat in the toilet. My nephew, feeling understandably wronged, got this boy’s lunchbox and put that down the toilet. Both got into trouble. What my nephew had to learn was that behaviour of retaliation only gets you in more trouble and that other ways of resolving an issue need to be considered. All very logical as adults but not so when you are five and someone just flushed your sun hat! I hope my nephew builds a value into his ethical knowledge base about how it is not ok to do hurtful things to other people’s property and that revenge is not always the best strategy — and also to slow down and not react too quickly when you are hurt about something.

This is hugely valuable area of exploration in supervision that can lead to transformative work as our beliefs and values are often
deeply held and we tend to fight to protect them as they form a key part of our identity. This is fine if they serve us well, but sometimes our personal constructs may need further development and examination. They may at times be too closely linked to our ego and be serving an old set of socialisation messages and experiences. Again because they are deeply held, they are quick to rise as a response to a situation - 'That’s not right!' we say, absolutely convinced, 'But why isn’t it?' asks someone else and we say usually indignantly 'It just isn’t!' It can take a while to unpack why we really believe that, as we are usually sure that we are right about it without any self examination. If these views become a pervasive belief system, we tend to apply them uniformly to all situations with little analysis, which may lead to professional dangerousness (Reder, Duncan, and Grey 1993).

The third place of intuitive knowledge in the professional context arises from our practice experience or wisdom born out of experience of working in our given field. As we become more competent in our work, the ways of doing it become more familiar. Practice wisdom is often developed through linking, connecting knowledge and finding patterns within our work that match with our existing thinking. Malcolm Payne describes this as 'informal practice theory that draws on ideas and experience gained from our work. It is applied inductively, that is, the theory derives from particular situations and is generalised to other relevant practice situations, and requires decisions about similarities and differences between situations to decide 'if the generalisation is relevant' (Payne 2008, p.17). We become less conscious of how we do things as we are more competent at just doing them. We don’t have to think a great deal about what we are doing, as we almost automatically operate from the knowledge place that we have built and practised so it becomes 'second nature'.

The most obvious everyday example given of this is driving. We will all remember the painful process of having to master the various tasks of driving and how it seemed it would never become a natural process that we wouldn’t have to think so hard about, one action at a time. But one day it does, and it isn’t until we try and teach someone else that we are reminded just how many steps and what a complicated cognitive and physical task we have mastered. We just do it and don’t really think too much about the physical task of driving until something untoward happens to throw us off – like losing steering or braking power, for example.

Eileen Munro (2008) talks about practice experience becoming part of 'intuitive wisdom'. As professionals start out they tend to operate more from the analytic end of the reasoning continuum but as they gain experience and have their knowledge reinforced this shifts to being more intuitive. In my diagram in the introduction I talked about practice based evidence and suggested this as a source of information for developing personal practice theory. Practice based evidence is the knowledge we have built from practising. It usually begins more from us consciously applying evidence based practice and this always feels a bit bumpy and takes time for it to flow naturally. We build up practice based evidence from doing the work and seeing what does and doesn’t work. Eileen Munro emphasises that different profession groups have different levels of knowledge needed to begin working. She notes that social workers 'hopefully have the key skills of being able to engage and relate with others to help gather information, assess, plan and carry out identified interventions. New doctors on the other hand can not just go straight in and do complicated brain surgery' (Munro 2008, p.5). What workers need is to be consciously exploring their practice based evidence and linking this to evidence based practice to best inform personal practice theory which in turn can create new evidence based practice if described and written about. This is best achieved through professional development opportunities, mentoring, and supervision.

Another way of looking at this is through the concept of tacit knowledge. The philosopher and scientist who coined this phrase, Michael Polanyi, said 'We know more than we can tell' (2009, p.4). Sveiby (1997) talks about tacit knowledge as the 'old and well known', the background knowledge, skills, know how, subtle methods, and expertise that inform our practice. It is the knowledge we have acquired through learning by doing and is often implicit
in what we do. It often contains skills learnt through observation and is not easily taught. It is more oral than written, so not usually gained from a textbook but from experience. It is found more often in interactive narrative contexts such as group case reviews and supervision. By unpacking and articulating tacit knowledge in an environment such as supervision there unfolds an extremely useful opportunity that not only brings this knowledge closer to the observable surface of practice, but also creates opportunities to pass some of the method behind it on to others. As the supervisor is likely to be supervising others, they could, with permission, share this type of skill and knowledge with them, thus sowing it more widely.

I see these three areas of knowledge (primal, ethical, and practice) linking together to inform our intuitive reasoning in our work. An example of this was when I was called to see a three-month-old baby who had been admitted to hospital with bruising to her face around her cheeks. This bruising to her face was suspected to be non accidental, and my role as a social worker was to try and get further information to ascertain if this was the case. I remember walking into the room and immediately my survival primal knowledge was activated. There was a physically strong looking man lying casually on one of the beds in the room who didn’t say anything when I introduced myself. He just stared inexpressively at me and then back at the baby. Although he looked relaxed he also looked like he could spring across the room, and the casualness almost seemed contrived or rehearsed. The young woman in the room spoke quickly, sat forward with a degree of urgency, appeared physically tense in the way she held her hands, and made little eye contact with me when talking about what had happened. On an instinctive level something felt very wrong; there was no warmth in that room, just tension and something unspoken and secretive. I could feel myself tensing up in response to this. Essentially my immediate primal intuitive response said ‘Get out or if you have to stay, keep near the door and be very careful not to aggravate anyone’, which is what I did.

The next knowledge area that influenced my intuitive response was from my practice knowledge. I asked how the little girl had gotten the bruising. The explanation given by the young woman was that ‘baby knocks her face when she moves her head from side to side in her cot, on the bars of the cot, and she grabs her cheeks and kind of pinches them.’ The young man, who I found out was the stepfather, said nothing and just stared at the baby. The explanation felt somewhat desperate in its delivery, and developmentally, calling on my practice knowledge clearly didn’t fit with the age of child. My practice knowledge from talking with other parents who were being questioned about possible non accidental injuries told me that this was a lie, probably to protect another adult.

My own ethical knowledge told me that something wrong had happened, small children do not ever deserve to be injured and as adults we must be responsible for managing our frustrations or unmet needs. These are not the responsibility of children, especially ones who cannot protect themselves.

My overall intuitive response to this situation was: ‘This was a non accidental injury, she’s lying to protect someone, and I bet that guy lying on the bed did it because wow, he has this really aggressive suppressed energy about him.’ This intuitive reasoning happened very fast, and needed further investigation and slower, more deliberate, analytic reasoning to make it come from a more rational place of decision making. Talking with the paediatrician was a next step to help strengthen the analytic aspect of it. As it turned out, we were right, and the young man was charged with assault on the little girl who was put under child protective services.

This story unfortunately has a tragic ending. About four months later the paediatrician and I learnt that that the young man had unsupervised access to the child and during this one hour visit, picked her up and smashed her head against the wall and she died from a massive brain injury. I remember standing in the hallway with the paediatrician when he told me the news and us both nearly being in tears about how this could possibly have happened. What it makes me wonder is whether another worker ran with an
intuitive response to this man, perhaps informed by a pervasive belief that led to a perception that he had the right to have time with the child and that the unsupervised time was perhaps due to untested trust in him. Were his needs put before the safety of the child? I don’t know and can only speculate about what happened to contribute to this tragic outcome.

Checking for bias in intuitive reasoning

Intuitive knowledge, because it is by nature rapid, needs careful scrutiny and the bringing of analytic reasoning to it. Supervision is ideal for this process. It provides a safe forum for the unpacking of the three types of knowledge I have described to enable further analysis and check accuracy. If we have through our own experiences developed a bias or untested value or belief, the objectivity a supervisor can bring to help us examine this is both invaluable and critical. Liz Beddoe writes that moral reasoning and a more nuanced exploration of emotional responses and concerns can strengthen supervision practice (2010, p.10). It also brings more validity to our interpretation of what has occurred. Our brains have evolved to keep us not only physically but also psychologically safe, and our emotions are generally accurate messengers of our intuitive reasoning. However, at times we may be over or under responsive especially if our values and beliefs are involved, and if we have a high emotional response connected to the situation (i.e. feel passionately about something).

This can also lead us to being fixed in an early impression or view of a situation or person, and possibly reluctant to change this. If we form views too quickly and then don’t examine them, we often miss out on other key information and experiences. The problem with holding onto a first impression or assessment is that we can ignore additional information or possibilities that may challenge the impression. This can also lead to practice becoming professionally dangerous and inflexible. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) suggest that ‘detached deliberation about the validity of decisions will improve decision making’. Supervision can remind us of the importance of staying flexible in our thinking and open to adapting our assessments. We should always apply our sources of knowledge with care and responsibility, as Malcolm Payne says ‘... use that knowledge and theory in a caring, emotionally intelligent and supportive way with the aim of disentangling the various elements of a complex system and enhancing the resilience both of the people involved and the social and organisational systems they are entwined with’ (2008, p.20). As supervisors we need to apply this type of approach with supervisees.

The importance of giving voice to intuition, which is often via our emotional responses, is also reinforced by Davis-Floyd and Arvidson (1997) who say that ‘we need to develop a language to talk about these things [intuition] and talk about them well!’ (Davis-Floyd and Arvidson 1997, p.192). Eileen Munro writes about how ‘intuitive reasoning can be dominant but workers need to take time later to stop and reflect in quieter circumstances’ (2008, p.6). She quotes Thiele (2006) as offering the image of seeing our analytic capacity as a ‘personal trainer’ for intuition, working on it to attain a higher level of rigour. The supervisor can help to be this trainer, assisting reflective learning around the intuitive response, and in turn helping the analytic reasoning of the supervisee come to the fore. This can, in itself, provide for transformative moments as connections are explored and made.

Further application to identify and strengthen intuitive reasoning

The purpose of greater examination of our intuitive reasoning is to develop a stronger base of personal practice theory in our work. By looking more closely at this side of our reasoning we can articulate and have more clarity about the sources of knowledge informing it. So as supervisors how do we do support this? First we must pay attention to the emotions that are in play and explore these using the type of questions suggested in the previous chapter. This will help reach the intuitive thinking behind the emotional response. Here are five suggestions that can support us to do this:
1. ‘What is/was your intuition telling you about this?’
   This is a first step in asking someone to focus more deeply and listen to themselves. It is about naming their intuitive response and then further exploring it to build analytic reasoning to support or question it.

2. ‘What would a wise woman or man say to you about how to respond to or think about this issue?’
   This is a question that was shared with me from a friend who attends the School of Philosophy in Wellington New Zealand and what I find it does is cause a pause and a consideration of what a sensible, wise and rational approach would look like. What I particularly like about this question is that it connects a person to their internal wise woman or man - the place of wisdom within them, reinforcing that we often have the answer and do not need another person to tell us. This can be very powerful for people and hence contributes to transformative change.

3. Unpacking an event. When a supervisee talks about an event, issue, or situation, take time to guide them through looking for the messages, the patterns, personal constructs, previous associations and events that link to it.
   This is about slowing down and looking deeply. A good analogy for this is when you go to a river and sit down beside it and look into the water. First you will observe the speed of the water, perhaps some rocks, and perhaps the depth. As you look more closely you might start to observe the light and how it falls on the water and influences the colour of it, how the water moves around a stone or rock so it isn’t blocked, you may even see a fish! When you look up from focusing on the river you usually feel more peaceful. This is another way of engaging in transformative work - moving from one current of feeling or response to another that perhaps is gentler and feels more in flow with who we are. It is about observing and noticing to help us grow and develop.

4. ‘What are the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, reactions that you didn’t name/couldn’t name/aren’t naming? What is their source (or the core belief) behind them?’
   This is about giving our intuition knowledge further voice. It asks that a person go beyond the often required rhetoric of daily human interaction and say what they really think even if it might be a bit shocking. This relates back to the idea of ‘honest honesty’ in Chapter 2, and as supervisors we must not sit in judgement of the person with what is shared, simply guide it if necessary, to ensure that it can serve the worker better (if it needs to). I see this as ‘shining the light’ on what we often keep hidden. This is wonderfully described by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham in 1955 in their ‘Johari window’ tool which suggests that there are things that we know and everyone else knows about us (like our height), things we know but others don’t (hidden), things others know that we don’t (blind), and things we and others don’t know yet (unknown). Working in a transformative way is about bringing the hidden and the blind to light. It is essential to have the type of supervisory relationship discussed in Chapter 2 to support this.

5. Always work from the premise in supervision of: ‘Worry more about unquestioned answers, than unanswered questions’.
   This excellent quote came from a participant at a programme held by Peter Senge (Senge et al. 2005, p.214). It encapsulates what I referred to in the introduction as dogma, where we go along and do not question and hence preserve the status quo, which may not be serving anyone well, and may also be hindering personal and professional growth. There is also a risk of fundamentalist attitudes here that can lead to polarised attitudes and views. As supervisors we need to look for times when a worker may be accepting their own and others’ values, beliefs and methods without question. As I have discussed the challenge around beliefs and values can be a delicate one as people do tend to have an identity connection to their core values and beliefs. The best place
Conclusion
As mentioned in the previous chapters we cannot do this work with those that we supervise without also applying it to ourselves. Everything that has been discussed in relation to intuition comes to bear in our work as supervisors as we too are having intuitive responses all the time to information being shared with us. Throughout a supervision session we need to be paying attention to what our intuition is telling us and be prepared to share this with our supervisee through an offering on the topic or issue at hand, while clearly owning it as our response. Our intuitive take on a situation is very valid as it is likely if we are supervising that we will have an amount of practice knowledge or wisdom that we might rapidly respond from. The slowing down and applying a more analytic approach to our intuitive reasoning emphasises why it is so important that as supervisors we are having regular supervision which we are prepared to utilise in transformative ways ourselves. However, an observation I have made around this is that as we progress into greater roles of responsibility within an organisation, our own support often reduces and forums such as supervision are less utilised or available. I find this fascinating given we are actually holding more responsibility and therefore should have even greater levels of personal and professional development. This leads us to the next chapter, which explores the environment and organisational context that supervision and workers accessing supervision operate within, and what we as supervisors need to be aware of in relation to this.

So far what we have looked at to function of supervision has been personal levels between the supervisee and supervisor when working in these types of environments and contexts that as we explore the wider context where supervision does not occur within a bubble, Michael Eraut describes as 'socio-ecological' (Eraut 2005, p.178) that are the focus of our attention occurs. There are a number of environmental factors that impact both positively and negatively and that we can find the best way to explore and apply a simple social ecological perspective in the context of our understanding of social ecological thinking consists of the systems that a person 'interacts with. Payne suggests that people both through adaptive processes through maladaptation to environment (Payne 1997, p.146). This chapter explores social ecological thinking first exploring how characteristics a person may bring to the dynamics of teams or services, and...