Virginia Satir’s Enduring Legacy –
Exploring her Clinical Supervision Practices
Using Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics

Grace Sun-may Yung Tsang

Master of Education, University of Hong Kong
Bachelor of Science (Hon) in Psychology, College of Cheltenham and Gloucester, UK

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of the School of Health, University of New England, Australia

July 2011
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the support of my family, friends, and colleagues at Green Pastures Whole Person Development Centre, especially Rita and Esther, who shouldered many responsibilities in order to make room for my study. Without their constant support, this thesis would not exist. I would also like to give a warm vote of thanks to everyone I encountered at UNE: supervisors, fellow co-voyagers, librarians, I.T. experts, and many more. In particular, I want to express my sincere thanks to Professor Victor Minichiello whose precise and inspiring remarks helped me strengthen my thesis considerably; and to Associate Professor Linda Turner, who joined my journey in the most critical last six months and touched my heart with her enthusiasm and meticulous review which instrumentally helped me organize my thesis into this final version. I am most grateful to Professor Jeffrey Kottler, who tirelessly read and commented on my manuscripts, gave me critical feedback, kept having unyielding “faith” in me and my process, and encouraging me until his service with UNE ended six months ago. I am very, very much in debt to Professor Margot Schofield who gave me high quality supervisions right from the beginning, and encouraged me along the way till the end of her service with UNE. I also express my gratitude to Dr. David Leary and Associate Professor Matt Englar-Carlson who supervised me for a few months and also gave me some highly impactful feedback, and Dr. John Banmen who encouraged my endeavour and served as an honorary supervisor at the beginning months of this project.

I especially want to thank my teachers, friends and students who travelled with me along the journey of discovering the magic of Satir and of ourselves; in particular Au Chak Kwong for introducing me to Satir’s approach; Jane Gerber, Maria Gomori and John Banmen for being my first formal trainers and for their writings; Robert Spitzer for publishing Satir’s books; Barbara Jo Brothers for writing extensively on Satir’s teaching and her biography;
Margarita Suarez for providing me with historic materials about the Virginia Satir Global Network; William Nerin, Michele Baldwin, Steve Andreas, Jean McLendon, Laura Dodson, Sharon Loeschen, James Bitter and many others who wrote about Satir and her work; Ramon Corrales and others who produced audio-visual materials on Satir’s work; and Professor Agnes Wu Jiu Jun for bringing Satir to Asia and for translating the first Satir books into Chinese.

My gratitude also goes to the friends who provided or prepared room for me to work on my thesis when I travelled overseas or when I needed a quiet place in Hong Kong; they are the Paus, the Loeschens, the Kottlers, Rev. Man and family, and the Auyeungs; as well as David Russel, and later David Cartell, of the Department of Special Collections, Davidson Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Lastly, my gratitude goes to my children, Jonathan and Faye, who literally helped proof-reading and editing my manuscripts at different stages, and expressed that they found pleasure in reading the chapters; and to my husband Denny for his support by letting me have my time and space to follow my passion and dreams; and lastly, to myself for my unyielding positive energy and perseverance.

I dedicate this project to all the ‘angels’ in my life, especially to four significant ones who had been watching me from heaven: my grandmother, Tsang-Chow Yeuk-ming, my father Tsang Hin-fung, my mother Tsang-Yeung Ho-man, and Virginia Satir.
Abstract

This research explores clinical supervision practice of Virginia Satir (1916-1988), a pioneer and master of family therapy, through studying the lived experience of 15 of her first generation students and interpreting a 10-minute supervision vignette. Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics was adopted as the methodological guideline.

Satir’s supervision practice is found to be located in the humanistic-existential-transpersonal paradigm, which addresses the issues of being and the manifestation of the Self prior to the issues of ‘doing’ and ‘becoming’ in supervision and counselling. On a whole, it reflected her central premise of “peoplemaking” through her devotion in unfolding with supervisees their inherent “treasure” and “resources”. These processes call for supervisors to acquire a ‘super vision’ in the ‘control tower position’ and to co-explore with supervisees the possibilities that suit their unique situation. Satir’s supervision was a co-discovery process toward better understanding of the ‘selves’ of supervisees and was an enhancement to their “third birth”, which includes finding their own voice, freeing their “inner-healer” and being their own “choice maker”. In turn through this process supervisees can facilitate their clients to do the same and move toward Satir’s signature notion of “becoming more fully human”.

Satir was seen by interviewees as very loving, and encouraging, yet very tough at times. She evidently held steadfast beliefs about human potentials and was known for persistence in co-discovering with the supervisees what she referred to as “the magic” within each of them. Creating a growth enhancing environment, keeping an appropriate physical and psychological distance with supervisees, “leading by following half-a-step behind”, teasing out universal human themes behind each presenting issue, and guiding supervisees through experiential processes toward gaining new insights are identified as some of the elements that contributed to the effectiveness of her approach to supervision.
Certificate of originality

I certify that the substance of the thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signature: ________________________________

Sun-may Grace Yung Tsang
# Table of contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate of originality</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of contents</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview: The Research and the Researcher</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locating the Researcher</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satir’s Influence on my Personal and Professional Growth</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing to Study Satir’s Approach of Clinical Supervision</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paradigm Shift</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting in Peace</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding Research Questions</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding Principles and Philosophy</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision Outcome</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills, Techniques and Strategies used</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Use of selves’ in Supervision</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress of the Study</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Overview of the Research</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foregrounding the Researcher’s Pre-conception</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining some Key Terms</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Overview of the Thesis</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review - Virginia Satir and Her Work</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brief Account of Virginia Satir’s Life</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family of Origin</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from early childhood experiences</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact and learning from a life threatening illness</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daring to be different</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making sense of parenting and partnering from observing her parents</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with regrets</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distancing from her family-of-origin</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriages and divorces</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not seeking support for herself</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dying – the Last Lesson Satir Learnt and Taught</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satir’s Development as a Family Therapist</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Making of a “Real Live” Expert</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming a Family Therapist and a Teacher of Family Therapists</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching is the highest form of understanding (Aristotle)</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The historical context</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human potential movement and transpersonal psychology</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is expected of transpersonal counsellors and supervisors?</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transpersonal Supervision</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Therapy Supervision and Group Supervision</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since Satir’s supervision practices were mainly family therapy supervision in group form, I deliberately reviewed the literature on family therapy supervision and group supervision especially around her time. Below is an account of my literature review in these areas.</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Therapy Supervision – its Practice and Effectiveness</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live supervision – a popular mode of supervision in training family therapists</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other supervision modalities and techniques in family therapy supervision</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Supervision</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triadic Supervision</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essential Factors Affecting the Effectiveness of Clinical Supervision</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ‘Selves’ in Supervision</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Relationship</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing a safe supervisory environment</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics and Responsibility</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple relations or boundary management in supervision</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 4 ................................. 117

Methodology ................................. 117

Introduction ...................................... 117

The Axiological, Ontological, Epistemological, and Methodological Considerations ...... 117

Axiological Consideration ................. 118
Ontological Consideration .................. 118
Epistemological Consideration ............. 119
Methodological Consideration .............. 120

Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics - Guiding Methodological Principles of the Study ................................................................. 121

Key Concepts of Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics ......................... 122
The hermeneutic circle .......................... 123
The position of prejudices ...................... 124
Understanding, interpretation and application as a unified process ........... 125
Genuine conversation ............................ 125
Fusion of horizons .................................. 126
The significance of finitude .................... 127

Research Design and Research Process .................................................. 129

Identifying and Inviting Participants ................................................. 129
The interviews ........................................ 131
The demographic characteristics of participants .................................... 133
Locating a Matching Methodology ..................................................... 135
Becoming a ‘bricoleur’ in the research process ...................................... 136
Encountering Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics ......................... 138
Re-formulating a Structural Guide to the Hermeneutic Process ............... 139
My naturally emerged hermeneutic process ........................................ 139
Formulating a structural guide for subsequent hermeneutic processes ....... 140
An example of one of my hermeneutic circles in understanding a concept ............ 144
Locating the Secondary Source of Data.............................................................. 147
Re-positioning Data Collection and Data Analysis ............................................ 152
Re-positioning Participants ................................................................................ 156
  Researcher as a participant ........................................................................... 156
  Research participants as co-investigators ...................................................... 157
Using reflecting team to enrich understanding ................................................ 157
Foregrounding my Pre-conception for Deeper Understanding ......................... 158
Ethical Considerations ..................................................................................... 162
Reflectivity and Reflexivity .............................................................................. 162
Issues of Rigour and Validity ............................................................................ 163
Conclusion........................................................................................................... 165
Chapter 5............................................................................................................ 166
Understanding Satir’s Supervision through Interpreting Supervisees’ Experiences .... 166
  Introduction ..................................................................................................... 166
  The Contexts of the Participants’ Supervision Experiences ............................... 167
  Satir’s Earliest Formal Supervision Practice at the Mental Research Institute ...... 167
  Supervision in the Satir International Summer Institute / the Process Communities .. 168
    Background – supervising workshop trainers ............................................... 168
    Ambiguity concerning supervision ................................................................ 170
  Supervision experiences of the trainers ........................................................... 171
  Supervising Family Therapists in a Research Project .......................................... 173
    Background .................................................................................................. 173
    The therapeutic assignment and supervision arrangement .............................. 174
    The therapy setting and therapeutic intervention .......................................... 175
    Therapists experienced being trusted and empowered .................................... 176
    Learning from Satir’s overt disappointment .................................................... 177
    Learning from an unsatisfactory supervisory relationship .................................. 179
    Empowerment and freedom to have their own way ........................................ 180
  Supervising Therapists in Other Therapeutic Settings ....................................... 181
    Supervisees’ Personal Experiences with Satir ............................................... 182
    Satir’s Attitude in Supervision ....................................................................... 182
      Understanding supervisees’ comments of Satir’s attitude ............................... 184
    Meeting Their Need in Searching for Meaningful Changes in Life ................... 189
    Feeling Respected, Validated and Being Seen As Important ............................ 191
      The need for validation ................................................................................ 191
      Internalizing external validation into self-validation ..................................... 192
      Redefining validation and forgiveness ........................................................... 193
    An Awakening to Live Life More Fully ........................................................... 195
    Having the Courage to Challenge One’s Own Vulnerabilities .......................... 197
      Facing one’s own vulnerabilities ................................................................... 197
      Living through Chaos as well as living with Chaos ...................................... 197
    Affirming One’s Own Voice ............................................................................ 199
    Witnessing and Learning from Satir’s Weaknesses and Incongruity ................... 201
      Inability to co-work as a triad ...................................................................... 202
      Satir’s belief about learning through triadic experiences .............................. 202
In every unique situation there is a universal process ................................................ 275
Multi-sensory experiencing is the best mode of learning ........................................... 277
Supervision is a co-discovery process ...................................................................... 279
Supervisors and counsellors need to be teachers and to be seen as teachers ............ 280
Taking the “control tower” position .............................................................. 281
The significance of checking assumptions .............................................................. 282
Persisting and backing off – the importance of maintaining an optimal distance ...... 283
The supervisee is the “star” of the supervision process ............................................. 283
The Problem is not the problem and coping is not the goal in supervision .......... 284
Hanging on to the positive aspects while not ignoring the negatives ....................... 285
Always think and work systemically with clear boundaries .................................. 286
Taking charge of the process by leading half a step behind .................................... 287
Satir’s Supervision Outcomes .................................................................................. 287
Strengthened confidence – supervisees finding their own voice .............................. 288
Refined professional identity – supervisees discovering their own “magic” .......... 289
Increased therapeutic perception ........................................................................... 290
Expanded ability to conceptualize and intervene ..................................................... 290
Positive anticipation to co-discover new possibilities with clients ......................... 291
Strengthened supervisory alliance ....................................................................... 292
Satir’s Supervision Skills, Techniques ...................................................................... 292
Multi-sensory processing and connecting ............................................................. 293
Interrupting for early intervention and adjustment of direction and focus .......... 294
Tracking and following closely the supervisee’s internal process ......................... 294
Maintaining appropriate psychological and physical distance ............................... 295
Reframing ................................................................................................................ 296
Being directive, tough and persistent ..................................................................... 296
Sculpting, role playing and addressing family-of-origin experiences .................... 297
Using humour ......................................................................................................... 298
Reassuring, affirming, and anchoring .................................................................... 299
Teaching, educating and preaching ....................................................................... 299
Sequencing ............................................................................................................... 300
The importance of ‘Use of Self’- the best tool in supervision and counselling .......... 301
A Brief Summary of Satir’s Supervision .................................................................. 303
What Can Be Learnt from Satir’s Incongruity and Weaknesses ............................... 304
The importance of becoming a ‘healed’ healer ....................................................... 305
Making better use of learning and working triads .................................................. 307
  Process-checking as a built-in practice ............................................................... 307
  Adding a reflection period before closing up the session .................................... 308
Enhancing Triadic Supervision .............................................................................. 309
The Contribution of Satir’s Approach to Group Supervision .................................. 310
Conclusion – The Importance of Having a Clear Conceptualization ....................... 313

Chapter 8 ......................................................................................................................... 316
Conclusion – A Growth Oriented Approach to Clinical Supervision ....................... 316
Introduction ................................................................................................................. 316
The Naming of Satir’s approach ............................................................................. 317
Implications of this Study - its Relevance to Supervision Practice Today ............... 322
  Capturing Satir’s Enduring Legacies in Clinical Supervision ............................... 322