SIMULCAST

Journal Club Summary November 2017 "Sticks and Stones"

Expert Opinion : Dr Chris Nickson

"Psychological safety is not something you say, it is something that grows from what you do."

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The Article :

"Establishing a Safe Container for Learning in Simulation"

Rudolph, J., Raemer, D. and Simon, R. (2014).
Simulation in Healthcare: Journal of the Society for Simulation in Healthcare, 9(6), pp.339-349.

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Simulcast Journal Club is a monthly/ series heavily inspired by the ALiEM MEdIC Series.

It aims to encourage simulation educators to explore and learn from publications on Healthcare Simulation Education.

Each month we publish a case and link a paper with associated questions for discussion.

We moderate and summarise the discussion at the end of the month, including exploring the opinions of experts from the field.

The Case :

Joe jumped at the sound of the tree branch crashing and his son's scream, but Nimali had somehow managed to pick him up off the ground before Joe could even assess what was going on. She glared at him with maternal rage. The beer can in his hands wasn't doing great things for his image.

"How's his arm?" he asked meekly.

"Hopefully fine." Nimali said hotly. "No thanks to your parenting. I saw you paying more attention to getting another beer than watching our 6 year old climb a tree, and I'm concerned you don't comprehend he could break his neck up there. Any thoughts on that?"

"Don't A.I. me in front of our kids." he growled. Being married to a Simulation Instructor had been mystifying at first, but 6 years into their marriage he was pretty comfortable with the lingo.

"I just don't understand how little concern you have for his safety!" snapped Nimali.

"I care about him just as much as you do!" he snapped back. "But you think you can protect him from everything! I have a duty to let him learn to take some risks too. Every kid should climb a tree in their childhood. And anyways," he said, "I need him to know I'm not going to be there to catch him every time."

Nimali paused. Her son's tears were drying and she felt her heart rate slow as he quietened down.

"That's true too." She said, "I just think he learns better when he knows we're there for him.".

Joe lifted his son from Nimali's arms and ruffled his hair affectionately. "Then let's all go climb that tree together.". He reached out a conciliatory hand towards his wife and grinned. "Rapid Cycle Deliberate Practice is more effective anyways, right?".

"Oh God." Nimali smiled. "That's the sexiest thing you've ever said to me.".

Discussion :

In our final article for 2017, we look at a pivotal paper in simulation literature and medical education. In 2014, Rudolph et al created the analogy of 'the Safe Container for Learning' and outline strategies to create a safe learning environment for simulation participants.

The principles outlined within the article are critical learning points for all simulation educators and for many of us this has been a transformative article. Three years since publication however, has the simulation community potentially misinterpreted what psychological safety means to these authors? While Nimali's concerns for her son's supervision are valid, is there also truth to Joe's belief in the inherent dignity of risk?

To our journal clubbers, what has this article meant to you? How has it changed your practice? How does your simulation team approach psychological safety? What have been some pitfalls you've identified?

Article Summary :

"Establishing a Safe Container for Learning in Simulation" is a paper held dear to the hearts of many medical educators be they simulationists or otherwise. For many it's their first exposure to the concept of "Psychological Safety" in simulation and introduces the metaphor of 'The Safe Container'; described in the article as "*an environment where learners face professionally meaningful challenges and are held to high standards in a way that engages them but does not intimidate or humiliate them*".

Rudolph, Raemer and Simon begin the article by describing a number of threats to learner engagement in simulation, in particular:

1. Poor buy in
2. Frustration with the level of fidelity
3. Professional identity threat through exposure in simulation and debriefing
4. Difficulties discussing suboptimal performance

They then highlight the importance of "*risk taking in the service of learning*", explaining that a willingness to go to the edge of one's social and intellectual comfort zone with a positive attitude is beneficial to learning. They describe features of these traits as "learning oriented behaviours" such as reflectiveness, feedback seeking, speaking up, asking for help, testing hypotheses and reflecting on results.

After establishing these principles, the authors make a crucial point that is often overlooked :

> *"Importantly, psychological safety may not completely mitigate feelings of interpersonal risk. Rather, it tends to create a setting where learners feel safe enough to embrace being uncomfortable."*

The Safe Container, in other words, *is not there to stop us feeling uncomfortable*, it is there to allow our learners to embrace that discomfort in the pursuit of new knowledge.

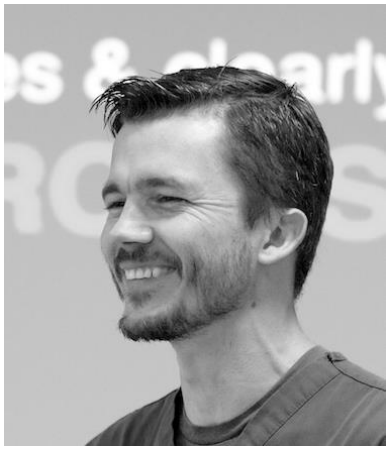
The article takes the stance that the sim prebrief is of critical importance in establishing a safe container. It's described as an opportunity to "*collaborate with learners to set goals and expectations*" that will lead to learning oriented behaviours. Through a literature review, reflecting on the experience of creating the DASH and the authors' "*collective experience in conducting more than 6000 debriefings",* the authors piece together a series of promising practices for presimulation briefing that are noted to be of benefit. Namely :

1. Clarifying objectives, environment, roles, confidentiality and expectations
2. Establishing a fiction contract
3. Attending to logistic details
4. Conveying a commitment to respecting learners and understanding their perspective

The article explores each of these principles in depth, providing examples and advice regarding how to include each principle successfully into your pre-brief.

Appendix 2 of the article is particularly noteworthy for supplying an extensive and detailed appendix providing concrete, practical examples of how to establish an engaging learning environment.

Expert Opinion: Dr Chris Nickson



Chris is an Intensivist and Emergency Physician at the Alfred ICU in Melbourne. He has a passion for helping clinicians learn and for improving the clinical performance of individuals and collectives. After finishing his medical degree at the University of Auckland, he continued post-graduate training in New Zealand as well as Australia's Northern Territory, Perth and Melbourne. He has since completed further training in clinical toxicology, clinical epidemiology and health professional education. He coordinates the Alfred ICU's education and simulation programmes and runs the unit's education website, INTENSIVE. He created the 'Critically Ill Airway' course and teaches on numerous courses around the world. He is one of the founders of the FOAM movement (Free Open-Access Medical education) and is co-creator of Lifeinthefastlane.com, the RAGE podcast and the SMACC conference. His one great achievement is being the father of two amazing children.
On Twitter, he is @precordialthump

I felt a bit "vomity" when I started writing this "expert" response. It might have been the saccharine geek-speak in the dialogue of the trigger scenario… though the helicopter parent analogy was 'sweet as', Ben!… Or, maybe it because this is THE 'Safe Container' article… After all, if you know someone who is serious about simulation-based education, chances are they were taught by one of the Yodas (whoops, authors) of this article… Privileged I am, among them to be. So yes, I now get to play the role of a Sunday Schooler critiquing the Bible's Ten Commandments. I'll apologise in advance to Robert Simon for failing to heed the advice he gave me on my first sim course: "just don't f#@k up!".

Fortunately, unlike me, Ben Symon has written a succinct summary of THE article that really cuts to the chase. His summary of the online journal club interchange is spot on too. Read them. What follows next is my take; you have been forewarned.

OK, we all know that the debrief is where the learning *really* happens (or, at least, where it really takes off). BUT, for the debrief to work – for people to talk openly and honestly about what they did and why, to be challenged and to challenge one another, and then be able reflect on it all – we have to have this magical thing called "psychological safety". It's kind of like a seatbelt you strap on to stop you breaking bones as you carom off everyone else in a demolition derby. Click clack, front and back… Hmm, if only it were that easy.

The focus of THE article is how to construct a prebrief that conjures up this psychological safety magic, how to construct the hallowed Safe Container. I, like you, live by the Rudolph-Raemer-Simon commandments. I do introductions, I demonstrate my belief in 'The Basic Assumption' ("you're all AWESOME!"), I negotiate confidentiality ("what goes on in sim, STAYS in sim…"), I'm explicit about assessment ("this is NOT a test"), and I figuratively sign everyone up to a fiction contract between facilitators and learners ("let's keep it REAL…"), before orienting everyone to the sim environment, the sim process, and finally, the case at hand... Yes, like you, I'm well trained (did I mention I had great teachers?) and I have guzzled down plenty of the 'prebrief' Kool Aid.

Let's face it, there is much that is great about this article. It is written by truly expert experts. I've seen them all in action (mostly Robert and Jenny… I watched Dan Raemer on YouTube once) and I've read many of their works over and over. They've got undeniable Street Cred. Importantly (though I'm not sure I could emulate exactly what they did from the description in the article), they've gone to lengthy lengths to dig up diverse literature from otherwise disconnected fields to build their case… and, oh, how I'd love to have read all of the listed references! Many great ideas come from a confluence of thought from disparate fields of study and the Safe Container is a case in point.

Enough of that. I want to go back to what Ben Symon and Mary Fey have each said in their own ways and make something clear: if you think psychological safety is about group hugs, singing Kumbaya, getting your feet massaged, and keeping it all cuddly-feely at all costs; you are wrong, profoundly wrong. Wrong like a Trump presidency. Wrong like Brexit. Wrong like a lot of other really wrong things. The Safe Container is not about creating a comfortable space, it is about making it OK to be uncomfortable. This is important because Ericsson tells us that expertise is forged from repetitive practice at the edge of, or beyond, our comfort zones (Ericsson, 2004). Psychological safety helps convert the Threat of socio-evaluative stress into a Challenge, so that we no longer worry about being embarrassed or having our Identities dismembered, and so that we can do things that help us learn despite the discomfort.

All this has got my 'Amy Edmondson neurons' twitching (her book 'Teaming' is a MUST read) and I find myself asking, "Is this a spanner which I see before me?". You see, in the context of teams, Edmondson has defined psychological safety as "the shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (Edmondson, 1999). Importantly, she states that this is a tacit belief borne out of a climate of interpersonal trust and mutual respect and that the essence of team psychological safety is *not* altered by making this belief explicit (Edmondson, 1999). So how does saying 'the right stuff' in a prebrief create psychological safety? Well, it doesn't… Psychological safety is not something you say, it is something that grows from what you do. Actions speak much louder than words. Indeed, Jenny Rudolph has said similar things in podcasts on Debrief2Learn and Simulcast. Like me, you may have worked with people that 'talk the talk' but if they don't also 'walk the walk', then trust and respect go up in smoke.

So, in a one-off sim session, your wider reputation as an instructor and how you behave during the prebrief is all you've got to create the Safe Container. If you do sim in the workplace (like Stephanie Barwick and Clare Thomas do), or have repeated interactions with the same group of learners, then things might be different. If you're a day-to-day d!ckhe@d in the workplace, you can't expect to wave the 'Safe Container' wand and turn from toad to prince as you step into the sim room — people will know you for who you really are. Even worse, even if you are an all round 'Good Guy', even the best Safe Container strategy will be devoured if the pervading workplace culture is toxic. This harks back to Peter Drucker's apocryphal saying: "culture eats strategy for breakfast", only so much can be achieved with even the best prebrief strategy if the wider culture is a hungry psychologically unsafe monster. Of course, the pervading culture is even more important if you're are one of those intrepid educators who unleash unannounced 'Guerilla sims' *in situ*… Who dares wins? Not always.

Now, here's a paradox for you to ponder. When I think of the most profound learning experiences in my working life, those that are seared indelibly into my cortex, a collection of colossal cock ups come to mind. These are things I felt really bad about, in some cases things that really threatened my self-identity as a competent doctor. I don't remember there being much 'positive regard' at those times. Yet I think they changed me, forced me to build new mental models, and made me strive to do better. How do experiences like this reconcile with the 'Safe Container'? Or am I just a poster boy for survivor bias spuriously validating a "what does not kill you makes you stronger" mindset?

Also, on re-reading THE article I discovered that the premise, derived from economic theory, that people are 'intendedly rational' was something that bugged me. This is because people like Daniel Kahneman and Dan Ariely argue that much of our behaviour is actually "irrational", and driven by a bundle of heuristics and cognitive biases of which we may not be aware (Ariely, 2009; Kahneman, 2012). These are typically adaptive in the right circumstance, but can be maladpative in others. This makes me wonder… Are we really privy to the mental processes that direct our behaviour? How much of what we hear in a psychologically safe debrief actually involves involuntary post-hoc rationalizations rather than insights into what was really happening in someone's mind at the time?

Another question for you, how important is the fiction contract? It centers on a belief that participants will learn more the greater their immersion in the unfolding simulation. Is this really true? Perhaps not, so long as the learning experience is 'authentic' (i.e. can be translated into the real world). For instance, low physical fidelity simulators can

teach uroscopic procedures effectively (Matsumoto, 2002) and in some circumstances observers of simulations can learn as much as participants (Stegman et al, 2012). What do you make of this?

Finally, as believers we are left with another confronting question, how do we really know if the Safe Container works? Does the Safe Container lead to better patient care or better patient outcomes, or even improve participant behaviour and performance in the real world? If the studies that answer these questions with definitive proof exist, I'm abashedly ignorant.

Having said all this, despite the caveats, I can't see myself wavering from the script anytime soon. This is an outrageously important article and a valuable guide to anyone who steps foot into the sim arena. The Safe Container rules, OK?

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Summary of this Month's Journal Club Discussion :

Blog Contributors :

- Melanie Rule, Ben Symon, Derek Louey, Steph Barwick, Clare Thomas, Rowan Duys, Cathy Grossman, Marrice King
- Mary Fey, Jane Stanford, Jenny Rudolph, Nemat Alsaba, 'NoSafeSpace', Ben Lawton

The discussion this month was extensive and wide ranging, but interestingly very little was said about the paper itself. Primarily discussants attempted to problem solve challenges in establishing psychological safety, including :

- It is difficult to establish a pre-brief at an In Situ Simulation within a clinical environment
- A psychologically safe simulation does not need to be free of stress
- Creating a safe container takes nuance and experience, and we will sometimes fail

It is difficult to establish a pre-brief at an In Situ Simulation within a clinical environment

Journal clubbers appeared in firm agreement that pre-briefing is an important component of establishing psychological safety, however given the sometimes sudden nature of In Situ Sims, a number of responders including Steph Barwick and Clare Thomas had developed interesting work arounds. Steph noted that putting the prebrief after the sim but before the debrief still appeared effective at moving her learners towards a growth minded approach, while Clare Thomas mentioned she will often call staff who will be attending an In Situ Sim prior to the day, to allow her to prepare them for it in advance. Nemat Alsaba mentioned she will sometimes send an email. These work arounds highlight an interesting point, that establishing psychological safety doesn't always have to occur at the same time as the sim.

A psychologically safe simulation does not need to be free of stress

As alluded to in the case study, experiential learning cannot happen without risk, but there was a broader spectrum of opinion regarding what psychological safety means. A number of journal clubbers described memories of high social anxiety in simulation, while others described feeling "highly scrutinised".

Derek Louey argued that "*psychological safety, if defined as the ability to speak and act without fear of negative consequence self-image, status, or career; is somewhat a fiction*", although this was countered by Mary Fey when she argued that "*simulation is just the place to allow learners to perform under duress for the purpose of developing strategies to succeed in difficult situations. A safe environment is one in which the learners trust that the facilitator is not out to get them, and has their best interests at heart. In the context of this type of trusting teacher-learner relationship, they are willing and able to tolerate stress and discomfort in the service of learning*.".

When Jane Stanford asked the team to describe their 'sweet spot' of psych safety is, Ben Symon and Jenny Rudolph discussed it as being a point where learners "can engage in "reflective" versus "deflective" routines", avoiding praise as a defensive mechanism and instead focusing on "*getting better at getting better*".

Creating a safe container takes nuance and experience, and we will sometimes fail

Different educators in the journal club appeared to have different approaches to psych safety. Mel Rule described taking a longitudinal approach by starting out gentle, making sure she maintains a consistent manner in her clinical and educational roles with her learners, and gradually with time establishing a 'circle of security' from which the team can begin to challenge itself. Ben Lawton echoed that these principles appear similar to learning principles in toddlers in developmental paediatrics. Derek Louey voiced difficulties regarding our interpretation of others stress levels, expressing concern regarding how to balance the benefits of activating our learners with pushing them beyond a break point we may not recognise. Jane Stanford suggested "*developing the broader culture of safety with words, actions, behaviours, authenticity*", but also asked "*is it enough to trust in the principle of respecting the learner?".* Rowan Duys described the benefits of long term relationships in 'hacking' psych safety to allow a pre-established peer group to take risks together more easily. Marrice described the negative impact on learning poor psych safety can cause : "The times I did not have psychological safety, and was ridiculed and made fun of for my choices; I did not hear the what I could do better the next time, just that I was so stupid.", but also highlighted that "The times I had psychological safety, I still left mentally smacking myself for making such a stupid mistake. That mental smacking I gave myself worked though because faced with that situation again I did not make that same wrong choice. I had the other better choices explored to choose from.".

Acknowledgements :

Thank you to Dr Chris Nickson for his expert commentary this month.
Thank you to all commenters this month for sharing your thoughts and allowing us to learn from you.
Simulcast would like to thank the creators of the ALiEM MEDiC series for the inspiration for the journal club's blog format and their ongoing support and contributions to the project.

References :

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