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STYLES OF GROUP SUPERVISION

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psychodynamic supervision
group analysis
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Summary

Both during the training of psychotherapists and after qualification for the profession, it is necessary to undergo supervision of one's work. Group supervision is a particular and widespread practice. The aim of this article is to show how the style of the group leader in combination with the dynamics and characteristics of the group leads to the formation of a specific type of group supervision. The article presents views on psychodynamic supervision and group functioning from an analytic perspective, by referring to the basic assumptions formulated by Wilfred Bion, group dysfunction as seen by Morris Nitsun and supervisor dysfunction as seen by Robin McGlashan. A crucial point of reference, however, is Brigid Proctor and Francesca Inskipp's analysis of supervision groups, which allowed them to distinguish and characterise three basic types of such groups: authoritative, participative and co-operative. A separate type is the leaderless group, the collegial supervision group. Awareness of the rules governing certain groups helps to ensure an effective and creative supervision process – instead of a dogmatic preference for a particular style of work.

Introduction

Recognition of the value of group work – whether psychotherapeutic or supervision – comes from the seemingly obvious idea that being part of a group is the underlying experience in a human life [1]. Wilfred Trotter and later Bion and Foulkes started from this assumption, laying the foundations of group analysis. It is in the group, through the group and towards the group that the development of the human individual takes place.

The 'supervision triangle' delineated by Newton [2] as the relationship between management, support, and teaching in supervision is at the same time the area in which the development of the psychotherapist takes place. It is perhaps worth adding what Newton means by the functions of supervision thus named. Namely, managing includes analysing the fit between therapy and the context of psychotherapy and the content of the contract, maintaining ethical principles and conducting sessions according to standards; supporting means providing an opportunity to discuss emotions, needs, problems, symptoms arising

in contact with the patient; and teaching includes developing the supervisee's existing capacities, creating their own unique way of working therapeutically [2]. With regard to the group situation, both the supervisor and the supervision group are responsible for fulfilling these tasks.

'(...) the task itself provokes emotions, fantasies, desires and defenses that are acted out in the here-and-now of the group. Working-through the reconstructions in the group develops the capacity of the group to fulfill its task' [3, p. 205]. In this case, the group's task is to co-create the conditions for the development of its members as competent psychotherapists.

A typology of supervision groups

Brigid Proctor proposes a useful classification of groups carrying out supervision tasks [4]. By identifying the specifics of the group, it is also possible to determine the style of the group, or at least to reflect on the adaptation of one's working style to the needs and capacities of the participants, as in psychotherapeutic work. It also seems inevitable to reflect on the supervisor's own limitations. In other words – to what extent is it possible to adapt the supervisor to the group given its specificities. I will address this issue later in the article.

Proctor, together with Francesca Inskipp, distinguished between three styles of conducting supervision groups and a fourth type of group, the peer group, and adapted Eric Berne's typology of psychotherapy groups for their purposes [5]:

1. authoritative group – supervision **in** a group
2. participative group – supervision **with** the group
3. co-operative group – supervision **by** the group
4. peer group supervision.

In an **authoritative group**, the supervisor is responsible for supervising each member in turn. They have their own responsibilities (e.g. preparation of the supervision material), different from those of the supervisor, and their most visible role is to observe and listen to the supervisor's work. It can be said that this is individual supervision against a group background. The supervisor's skills or approach to his or her role is no different in this situation than in individual supervision, despite a few additional tasks due to social exposure. It is essential for the supervisor to be aware of the anxiety, shame and competition that arise in a group work situation. Sensitivity to how each participant reacts to feedback, what his or her learning style is, how he or she may be encouraged to reveal troublesome, embarrassing thoughts or feelings, is a prerequisite for good supervision in both individual and group contexts. However, the group stimulates regressive states. Especially in the 'authority-pupil' format, it is easy to reproduce one's 'script', e.g. the role known from the family, the eternal novice, the top student or the outsider. In addition, this type of group guidance encourages the persistence of passivity and over-dependence. The 'authoritative supervisor' assumes that he or she has established a working alliance with the adult part of each group participant's mind, but must take into account the influence of childlike states and encourage the activation of the supervisees' 'parental' responsibility for their own work.

An authoritative group is likely to work well when:

- the objectives are clearly defined
- the division of roles and responsibilities is agreed
- scrupulous consideration is given to the expectations and context of all concerned
- the supervisor knows each supervisee's working style, learning needs and conceptual references
- he or she is well grounded in his or her own beliefs and assumptions about 'good practice'
- is capable of undertaking any managerial or administrative tasks in a given context
- has an inquiring and open mind to test both his or her own and the supervisee's assumptions about what actually happens in the therapeutic process [4].

In a **participative group**, the supervisor faces a paradigm shift in thinking – instead of thinking about the individual in the group, there should be thinking about the group as a working system. It is not the individual psychopathology or ability, but the group as a whole that is the object of the supervisor's attention; the roles its members undertake are relevant to the effectiveness of the group's work on ongoing tasks.

The supervisor in a participative group is responsible for supervising the work of its members and for guiding the group, but also for encouraging and supporting supervisees to take on the role of co-supervisors in relation to each other. It seems necessary to agree with the group on its participatory mode. The supervisor is responsible for introducing and explaining what the group members' participation in the group's work is to consist of. The emphasis here is on the fact that they are not just an assistant to the expert work of the supervisor, but a rich resource that makes the group more than the sum of individuals [4]. It is helpful to clarify when and why the supervisor takes on a more managerial role: his or her management of the structure of the work (time, how the material is prepared), interrupting the shared reflection to ask whether the feedback received is useful to the supervisee, suggesting taking on new roles, or encouraging frank, open communication – all serve to reveal the richness of the group and engage it in the task of supervising.

What is important here is the balance between the willingness of group members to participate in this way and maintaining a sense of security by leaning on authority or hiding in the group. The supervisor's tasks in this style of group management include this constant movement between carrying out the agreed work (supervising), maintaining the group (establishing and sustaining a working alliance) and being attentive to the individual development of each group member.

In a **co-operative group**, the paradigm of thinking remains the same as in a participative group. In the eyes of the supervisor, the group members – together with their individual needs, capacities and limitations – constitute a sufficiently (or not) effective matrix. Nevertheless, at first glance it may be difficult to distinguish the supervisor from the other members of such a group. Leadership is taken up alternately by the supervisees. They, on a par with the supervisor, manage the time and structure of the group. They clearly, sometimes authoritatively, set their expectations for the group's reflection on the material presented. The supervisor's input sometimes significantly influences the course of the interaction, and sometimes it is almost not visible at all. One could say that the supervisor

does not interfere with the group's work. However, he or she remains an attentive observer of the process and is responsible for taking care of it, and – despite the activity of the whole group – for the ethical and effective aspects of the therapeutic work presented. He or she is responsible for pointing out inappropriate practices if they occur. It is the supervisor who takes responsibility for the possible loss of safety in the group and for examining the group's readiness to understand its impact on the situation. If he or she cannot 'trust the process', which is when the group stops working, gets stuck in what Bion called the basic assumptions [6], then he or she must be ready to take on the leadership role. In other words, he does not prevent the group from working, but sees what is happening and helps the group to understand it.

As a fourth type of supervision group, Proctor and Inskipp distinguish the **peer supervision group**. It is difficult to talk here about the leadership style of such a group, because by its very nature it defines itself as a group without a leader. Essentially, it is a group composed of the supervisors themselves, as each member is a competent, trustworthy, creative and ethical practitioner for the others [4]. Each participant in the group is responsible for being that kind of supervisor in the peer group. In order to prevent a peer supervision group from turning into a support group, or a discussion group, the following indications must be taken into account:

- agree on a target defined by the professional area
- the shape and structure of the group can be variable, but must include space for reflection for each member
- each participant agrees to be addressed by others as a competent, trustworthy, creative and ethical practitioner
- the boundaries and specifics of responsibility should be set out in the initial agreement and be reviewed over time – as should the predefined rules for managing the supervision work
- the group may invite an external observer/consultant to help reflect on the quality of the joint work [4].

Determinants of group supervision

Although it seems reasonable that the style of running a supervision group should derive from the peculiarities of the group in question, in practice it is more a product of the specificity of the work of both the supervisor and the group. The demand that there should be some standardised, reproducible, applicable way of working in specific circumstances, when this work concerns the phenomenon of the human mind [7], does not take into account the reality of human experience. That, as mentioned, basic experience in which the human mind arises, develops and is based on a relationship with a group. It is not a meeting of static objects, but rather a living, changing wave that simultaneously arises and creates the environment that shapes it. What meets, then, is a supervisor who is shaped by his circumstances of growing as a person and embedded in his professional role – yet still emerging, changing – and a group. A group that is perhaps already shaped (and yet, changeable) by its circumstances of growth, or perhaps it is not yet a group, but

only a collection of individuals with individual group experiences. We can define a group, following Caroline Garland [8], as a collection of individuals gathered around a specific purpose or goal; for a group to be formed, it is also necessary to establish boundaries – what and who is contained within the group, and what and who remains outside; the territory of the group must also be defined – a physical space, but also a psychological one, related to the attitudes, beliefs, or culture of the group; an important factor constituting the group is its duration.

Bearing in mind how complex the context is, it is possible to try to outline the factors influencing the leadership style of the group:

— on the part of the supervisor:

Proctor draws attention to the crucial influence of the supervisor's theoretical orientation, as well as his personal experience in supervision. What matters is his experience as a supervisee, but also his colleagues, mentors and his supervisees. It is important what model of group work he knows – from theory and from practice, as well as any group experience and in the role of supervisor, and in the role of leader and group member [4]. From such, in the most general terms, a mixture, a leaven of the style of a particular supervisor is formed. We assume that, by coming into contact with the group, he or she will be able to attune himself or herself to such a degree that a working alliance is formed.

— on the part of the group:

Factors that determine what style of leading a group is looking for are: firstly, the setting conditions (how often, for how long, for what duration the group members are able to agree upon, in what numbers, what costs they are willing to bear); secondly, the requirements of the institution, certification procedures, etc. These often determine the conditions of the setting. Recognising who the 'invisible organisation'¹ is makes it much easier to think about what kind of supervision is possible. An obvious factor for many group participants and supervisors that determines the type of group is the age and seniority of the supervisees. Usually, we expect young supervisees in age and seniority to have high dependency needs, whereas such needs are sometimes underestimated in older psychotherapists.

These two fields of influence, overlapping, create the circumstances in which supervision groups of a certain type emerge.

Factors disrupting group work

Once again, it is appropriate to mention Bion's basic assumptions here. He distinguished between two levels of group functioning. One he called the basic-assumption group and

¹⁾ Agnieszka Zemło refers to the institutional context of a particular supervision group as the 'invisible organisation.' In this context, there are various dependencies, a specific work style, interpersonal relationships, rules, and guidelines, often not explicitly named. 'The invisible client as a context/organisation follows its own unconscious laws, which have an impact on the employees and then the patients' [9, p. 121].

the other the work group. In his theory of groups, he noted that although groups gather around some common interest, to perform some task, they mainly pursue the implicit goal of group survival per se. In support of this goal are the underlying assumptions, i.e. unnamed assumptions, not consciously recognised by the group as a whole, that come from the dominant emotional state within the group. These are tacit assumptions [6]. Bion identified three such assumptions: the pairing assumption, the fight-or-flight assumption and the dependency assumption [10]. Each of these operates continuously, but one or another comes to the forefront, depending on the emotional needs of the group. It is the transition from one assumption to the other that defines the group's dynamics, and moments of transition open up space for the work, that is, the performance of the task around which the group has gathered. A working group is formed in these moments of transition through collaboration, and the reward for the work is a more effective way of coping with reality. If, however, the group gets stuck in an emotional state that requires constant handling of one of the three assumptions, then an inability to learn from experience prevails (Bion even writes of a hatred of learning [6]). Since, as Rudi Vermote writes, 'health is the result of the dynamic expression and interaction of all three fields in an individual, couple, group or society' [9, p. 87], the disruptive factor of the group will be the dominance of one of them. The supervisor, on his or her part, may intensify ineffective group functioning when he or she adheres rigidly to a particular leadership style, such as when a group dominated by the desire to depend on an omnipotent object encounters an authority convinced of its infallibility.

In addition to the forces at work in the group, it is also important to look at the intrapsychic forces to which the supervisor is subject that may interfere with his or her work in the role described. The absence of one's own psychotherapy in the process of becoming a psychotherapist and then a supervisor seems an obvious obstacle, preventing one from recognising one's own limitations. This applies to both individual and group supervision. However, when faced with social exposure, i.e. working in/with and through a group, the supervisor is just as subject to the onslaught of regressive states of mind as the rest of the group. Robin McGlashan [11] metaphorically describes five typical difficulties resulting from the supervisor's impulsive, or rather unconscious, reduction of his or her own tension resulting from being overwhelmed by responsibility and anxiety. They are symbolised by mythical figures:

1. Nestor, king of Pylos – the difficulty lies in adopting a defensive stance – in fear of hostile reactions presenting a false modesty, which masks one's own hostility towards authority figures. The supervisor's verbosity and humility, rather than awareness of one's own knowledge and sharing of experience, leads the supervisee astray (or at least does not protect against it).
2. Eurystheus, king of Argos – is the symbol of an envious supervisor, full of insecurity about his own competence, as a result of which he becomes destructively critical, neglects efforts and constantly raises demands without adjusting them to the supervisees' current capabilities.
3. Procrustes, which is a symbolic representation of the supervisor, resenting individual differences and attempting to fit both himself and others into some ideal matrix. The re-

sponse to the individual characteristics of supervisees, seen not as a resource but as a failure to copy the ideal template, is rigidity and dogmatism.

4. Athena is an image of a supervisor who uses his supervisees to compensate for his own sense of inadequacy. Favouring them and advocating for them serves this purpose. Quasi-parental possessiveness and protection lead to vicarious triumphs over others.
5. The Delphic oracle – is a mixture of authoritarianism and vacuousness. The supervisor remains vague, avoids taking a clear stance, especially in an atmosphere of secrecy or elitism, which blocks supervisees from questioning his/her stance or understanding the clinical material.

Such supervisor distortions, as conceptualised by McGlashan, in juxtaposition with the basic assumptions at work in the group can block not only the work in the group, but also lay the foundations for the emergence of an anti-group [12]. A description of dysfunctional group enactments is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is at least worth mentioning, following Nitsun², not to idealise the group as such and not to overlook its destructive aspects. Being open to these dark sides, as well as being aware of one's own, offers the chance to transform them and use them in the service of development.

Summary

The tension between an authoritative style of supervision and a more cooperative, relational style is widely discussed in the available literature and applies to every type of supervision – individual and group [13]. Nowadays, with the development of psychotherapy, the increased accessibility to different sources and authorities and the awareness of the importance of intersubjectivity in interpersonal relationships, the importance of including the supervisor and his/her conditioning in the reflection is emphasised. Especially since the style of conducting supervision, as can be seen from the literature presented [4], is mainly driven by the supervisor's preferences. If he or she is able to correct his or her initial assumptions in the course of working with a particular group, then effective collaboration becomes possible. The three basic styles of group supervision described – authoritative, participative and co-operative – illustrate a shift in emphasis in supervisor work from making individual supervision against a group background, through involving all group members to work together with the supervisor for the benefit of the person presenting the clinical material, to supervising the case through the group with the supervisor in the role of monitoring the group process. It is also important to change the supervisor's perspective from focusing on the individual problem – in the authoritative approach, to understanding the group as a system that transcends in its functioning the sum of its parts of which it is composed – in the participative and co-operative approach. The choice of a particular

² 'Optimism is an essential part of the therapeutic process, but there is a risk that, in excess, it may contribute to creating an overly idealized image of reality. Optimism must also take into account the dark, destructive side of human behaviour, otherwise the process of differentiation becomes impossible, and without it, integration cannot occur' [12, p. 33]. Furthermore, writing about Foulkes' legacy: 'An optimistic and inspiring vision of the group appeared, but it completely neglected the extent to which the group triggers aggressive and potentially destructive impulses and threats, dangerous to its integrity and even its existence' [12, p. 255].

approach occurs within the capabilities of the supervisor and the specifics of the group. If both sides of this interaction can be tuned in, then it is possible to create a working group in the sense Bion gave it. This means that the group constantly fluctuates between the basic assumption of dependence and the assumption of fight-or-flight and pairing, thus creating a space for cooperation in dealing with reality. In the case of the supervision group, this reality is the development of its members into competent psychotherapists.

A separate category is the peer supervision group. In it, each participant is a supervisor for the others, leadership changes hands, and everyone is responsible for taking care to return from crises to the level of the working group. Perhaps the underlying reason for the difficulty of such groups is that, as a rule, the impact of the basic assumptions is invisible, unconscious by the group. The paradox of self-reference, as in Epimenides' famous paradox³, can be broken by referring to an external consultant. Such a side-view would allow one to see whether the group is not dominated by one of the assumptions and whether it has not, therefore, lost its effectiveness in supporting its members as competent and ethical psychotherapists. It would actually be a supervising supervision group....

It is not only the work in a peer group that can be disrupted, but in any other group it is also exposed to the influence of destructive processes, resulting, for example, from the inadequate attitude of the supervisor when he or she is pursuing the need to regain his or her own sense of security rather than assisting the psychotherapists in their work. Destructive forces coexist with constructive ones in any group. Failure to take them into account leads to an idealisation of the group as a developmental environment and, consequently, to an impasse and the emergence of the so-called anti-group. With this concept, Morris Nitsun [12] attempts to describe a set of attitudes and impulses that threaten the integrity of the group and the fulfilment of the tasks for which it was established. He points out that it is not a homogeneous or static concept and that its manifestations take specific forms in each group. Essentially, however, it is concerned with highlighting aggression directed towards the group, as opposed to aggression taking place within the group.

Although Nitsun's work applies to therapy groups, it seems worthwhile to draw on it for supervision groups as well, in order to remain attentive to the interweaving of destructive and constructive forces and their shared creative potential.

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³⁾ Epimenides of Crete says that all Cretans are liars, but since he is also a Cretan, it means that he is lying. However, if he lied by equating Cretans with liars, then he could have told the truth. If he told the truth by saying that all Cretans are liars, then, being a Cretan, he must have lied... and so one can endlessly alternate between proving Epimenides' truthfulness/lying.

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