

Conducting Group Supervision Within the Context of Graduate Training Programs

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The importance of good supervision for graduate students continues to be widely documented (Enydey et al. 2003). Heads of training programs also endorse the critical role that supervision plays in enhancing the well-functioning of professional psychologists (Harvey & Struzziero, 2000). It has frequently been suggested that some examination of group process within the supervision group is desirable, especially if students are learning to conduct psychotherapy.

What should the relationship between supervision groups and theory be? What factors hinder the effectiveness of supervision groups when conducted within training programs? These are among the questions that need to be considered by supervisors running groups within the context of training programs.

The following material is intended to demonstrate the application of select theoretical models which the author has utilized in planning, running and evaluating supervision groups. These include: attachment, self-psychology, object relations, and group theory.

Models of Supervision: The Role of the Group Supervisor

Although many models of supervision exist, a key decision point for training programs is

1 This article represents a shortened version of a previously published paper (see References).

the degree to which they wish supervision to emphasize the acquisition of specific technical skills over the development of more autonomous functioning on the part of graduate students. While some programs view students as novices who learn best by modeling from an expert instructor, others view students as responsible adults capable of functioning more autonomously once equipped with metacognitive strategies and problem solving skills. In “directing” supervision, the supervisor models the intervention and students are expected to adopt the supervisor’s approach. The second type of supervision, which is referred to as “enabling”, is aimed at helping students develop methods of problem solving, critical analysis and an inner sense of competence by encouraging critical thinking (Eshel & Koriat, 2001)

Training programs which adopt an enabling approach may foster greater autonomous functioning within trainees compared to those which adopt a directing approach. In turn, the theoretical models discussed below can help guide the group supervisor’s approach to providing enabling supervision (Haboush, 2003).

Attachment Theory

Although John Bowlby’s theory of attachment originally dealt with the mother-infant dyad, secure attachments remain important throughout the life span (McWilliams, 1994; Ramos Sanchez et al. 2002; Tharinger, 1998). For infants, the development of a secure attachment depends upon the mother’s consistent attunement and responsiveness to her child’s needs. A secure attachment allows the child to return for soothing when troubled; once soothed, the child is ready to reenter the world.

Using this framework, supervision can become the secure base to which students can return. Tharinger (1998) has observed that the presence of a dependable, consistent, emotionally responsive supervisor provides supervisees with the kind of emotional attunement that is

essential for creating a secure alliance within the supervisory relationship and a greater sense of resilience when faced with challenges in their work.

According to attachment theory, anxiety triggers attachment-seeking behaviors. Children with insecure attachments which are primarily “avoidant” in nature may respond by avoiding greater contact with mother and may appear angry or unresponsive (Ramos-Sanchez et al. 2002). “Ambivalent” babies, cry frequently, are clingy, anxious, angry. When disruptions occur in the supervisory alliance, supervisees may react in ways which are consistent with their attachment style. Ramos-Sanchez et al. (2002) have hypothesized that graduate students with more secure attachment styles may handle challenges within the supervisory relationship (i.e., threats to self-esteem, fears of evaluation) better than those with insecure attachment styles.

The attachment style of the supervisor also plays a critical role in the response to attachment-seeking behavior on the part of supervisees. The “fit” between a supervisor and supervisee may be strongly influenced by their respective attachment styles:

Case Example #1: Graduate students in a supervision group were extremely frustrated in their practica. As the amount of frustration expressed by students increased, the supervisor, whose own attachment style was somewhat anxious, inadvertently began withdrawing from the group. As a result of the supervisor becoming less emotionally available, the trainees’ angry and avoidant attachment-seeking behaviors intensified. Once the supervisor understood that they were withdrawing from the group’s anger, it became possible for the supervisor to shift from a protected, but emotionally withdrawn position, to one in which they could behave in a more emotionally responsive manner. As the supervisor more directly expressed their own feelings, as well as validated students’ feelings, the angry and avoidant behaviors on the part of supervisees’ began to diminish.

The supervisor eventually spoke directly with students about this experience, thereby utilizing the group process as a learning opportunity for discussing issues involving countertransference, defenses, group theory, and self awareness.

Although supervisors may struggle with the potential for damage to their own self-esteem if their “mistakes” are exposed, this process provides important modeling for students. An enabling approach to supervision involves the supervisor modeling self-reflection and analysis rather than always presenting oneself as “the expert” (e.g., a directing approach).

Self Psychology

Heinz Kohut, in developing a theory of the self, stressed the normal developmental needs which all children have for receiving sufficient amounts of validating, confirming responses from parental figures (McWilliams, 1994). Kohut referred to these types of validating responses as “mirroring” and emphasized the importance of empathic understanding of the child’s needs. When children are deprived of sufficient approving responses, their capacity to develop internal structures for self-soothing suffers. As a result, Kohut believed that individuals periodically relate to others as self-objects rather than as separate objects. Self-objects are considered to be extensions of the self which provide important psychological functions for self-soothing, self esteem, and anxiety reduction.

In terms of (enabling) group supervision, Kohut’s work suggests that the supervisor will occasionally function as a self-object for trainees. That is, the group supervisor will periodically intervene to support students’ self esteem and reduce anxiety when students are unable to do so:

Case Example #2: In supervision, a student questioned how it was possible to feel effective as a future psychologist. This student had been working with disabled clients who were slow to respond to interventions. Conceptualized from a self psychology

framework, the supervisor understood that the student was experiencing a lack of affirming, mirroring responses regarding the effectiveness of their work. The supervisor viewed this as an opportunity to mirror the supervisee's own competencies, rather than providing a specific intervention. First, the supervisor conveyed an empathic understanding of how difficult it was for the supervisee to continue working when they were so uncertain of the outcome. The supervisor then mirrored specific competencies which the student had brought to bear on their clinical work. Finally, the inherent dilemmas of service delivery issues within organizations were acknowledged as these limit opportunities for receiving affirming feedback.

The importance of this aspect of clinical supervision can best be understood when one considers that graduate students experience tremendous threats to their self-esteem and sense of competence (Ramos-Sanchez et al. 2002).

Object Relations Theory

Although infants begin life as undifferentiated from their caretakers, they progress through stages which allow them to develop a separate sense of self as well as greater object constancy (Hamilton, 1988; McWilliams, 1994). Psychological mechanisms of defense and adaptation develop concurrent with greater separateness.

Extended to supervision, object relations theory suggests that the supervisor must be sensitive to trainees' changing needs for independence and dependence. Consistent with an enabling approach, this allows the supervisee to internalize a "good enough" supervisor who they can call to mind when functioning more independently:

Case Example #3: In supervision, the supervisor became aware that group members often vacillated in terms of the extent to which they wanted the supervisor to intervene with

practica personnel on their behalf. When the supervisor eventually reflected on their ambivalence, trainees jokingly labeled the supervisor “the universal mother.” Students went on to acknowledge the fact that they needed to function more, or less, autonomously at different times, in different situations. Supervisees indicated they felt able to let the supervisor know when they wanted more direct assistance on their behalf.

Object relations theory also emphasizes how negative affects and attributes are often projected outside of the self. When the individual first projects an undesirable quality unto an object and then attempts to control those feelings by controlling the object, this process is referred to as projective identification (Hamilton, 1988). In general, the receiving object already has certain proclivities to experiencing a particular affect:

Case Example #4: In a supervision group, supervisees were highly anxious about the prospect of being negatively evaluated and criticized. This anxiety made it difficult for supervisees to raise issues in supervision. Criticism began to be directed towards the supervisor, who was already dealing with some of their own feelings of self doubt. The supervisor was not immediately aware of the manner in which they were becoming increasingly less certain of their own interventions and more inhibited in their ability to share their thoughts in group. However, as supervisees began to discuss the “tension” they felt within the group, the supervisor was eventually better able to understand how anxious the trainees felt about speaking. The supervisor began to understand the manner in which they had become a container for the group members’ devalued feelings about themselves. This insight allowed the supervisor to begin to address the groups’ anxiety by asking how members were managing their feelings of inadequacy.

Projective identification is also involved in the experience of parallel processes occurring in groups (Hamilton, 1988).

Group Theory

Effective group supervision requires that the supervisor understands that groups undergo different developmental phases. Because groups often pass through a stage of resistance prior to beginning to work in a more in-depth fashion (Heiman & Ettin, 2001), the supervisor must anticipate the need to deal with resistance and monitor their own countertransference. Possible sources of resistance include: competitive strivings, the emergence of sibling rivalry issues, and threats to self esteem due to greater exposure (Enyedy et al.2003):

Case Example #5: A supervision group was “stuck” in that supervisees were finding it hard to ask for help. Case presentations consisted of members presenting “the facts” without acknowledging they were having difficulty. Not surprisingly, supervisees began to voice frustration that they were not benefiting from group supervision. Discussion of these feelings began to make clear the tremendous anxiety supervisees were experiencing as to how they would be evaluated by their fellow classmates. Further, some group members found it difficult to transition from having the supervisor as a course instructor to group supervisor. This intensified students’ concerns around being evaluated.

Although the supervisor acknowledged the legitimacy of students’ concerns, the supervisor also began to raise with students the inherent dilemma of all supervision: that in order to learn, professionals must risk some self exposure.

Supervisors also need to learn to recognize instances when the supervision group’s behavior represents an important reenactment of an emotional issue, conflict or dynamic (Heiman & Ettin,

2001). Reenactments within the supervision group can parallel the processes within the therapeutic groups which graduate students are running:

Case Example #6: A supervision group was meeting for the first time in the supervisor's office. Trainees had been grappling with the issue of limited resources, both within their practica as well as within the supervision group. Trainees feared monopolizing the group and depriving other students of getting their needs met. At the first meeting at the supervisor's office, one student arrived with their own chair. The member explained they brought their own chair because the supervisor had previously commented that they were uncertain whether their office held enough chairs. The supervisor acknowledged having made this comment. However, the supervisor also attended to the latent message regarding the supervisee's uncertainty that with so many group members they could all count on being reliably taken care of by the supervisor. This resulted in further discussion of supervisee's needs, and the parallels they saw within their practica regarding limited resources to meet clients needs.

A second example involves examining the process within the supervision group as it parallels the various systems in which students are functioning. The supervisee functions in at least two systems: the university setting which houses their training program as well as the organizations in which they complete their practica. The culture of a given system may also be carried over into the supervision group via the defense of projective identification (Hamilton, 1988):

Case Example #7: Supervisees had become increasingly concerned about the low level of trust among employees within their practica. Supervisees had directly observed personnel behaving in dishonest and discourteous ways with each other. As these issues were discussed, trainees suddenly began to express anxiety over the possibility that the

room in which the supervision group met might not be soundproof. Fears that the intercom had been left on and the group discussion could be overheard were expressed. Whereas students had previously been discussing the lack of safety within their practica, their projective identification was such that they were now experiencing those feelings within the supervision group.

Ethical Issues

Particular ethical challenges which confront the supervisor running groups within graduate programs involve confidentiality and dual relationships. Because supervisees may be in class together, confidentiality should be directly discussed at the outset of group.

Dual relationships may involve having the same faculty member supervise students as well as act as advisor, instructor, or committee member. The greatest complication is likely to be the degree to which students are inhibited from speaking freely in a supervision group because of concerns about future evaluations (Enydey et al. 2003). Given the power differential which exists, supervisors should directly discuss what steps can be taken to minimize these concerns (Harvey & Struzziero, 2000).

APA's 2002 Ethical Guidelines (APA, 2002) require that training programs notify students if they will be required to divulge certain types of personal information within courses (Section 7.04). Since the key issue seems to involve whether programs require such disclosure, supervisors should advise students as to whether such disclosure is mandated or optional. Additionally, the 2002 guidelines (Section 7.06) require supervisors to inform students at the outset of supervision regarding the criteria for evaluation (APA, 2002).

Conclusion

Supervision provided within graduate programs plays a critical role in graduate training. Yet, it also presents numerous relationship and ethical challenges which need to be carefully considered. Ultimately, the value which the training program places on supervision, as well as the effectiveness of the individual supervisor, may all be sensed by the supervisees. In turn, trainees may reenact this valuing, (or devaluing), within their supervision group, (and possibly in the groups they facilitate).

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