Group Supervision: A reflective and creative space

Rose Falzon

Groups challenge us and reward us in ways in which individual relationships do not (Rose, C 2001: 6)

Introduction

In this article, I enquire about the perception and use of creativity and innovation in group supervision, taking into account also the setting and culture one works in.

I come from the cultural framework of a densely populated small island, embracing both the westernized realm as well as that created through the multi-layered historical and social traditions. The following are experiential narratives from supervisors and supervisees, working in diverse settings but in the same tight community. All names and some particular aspects leading to any identification were changed to protect confidentiality.

Methodology

Qualitative research is exploratory and inductive in nature highlighting the understanding of a particular phenomenon in its context. Although there is not a single unitary reality as contexts and experiences differ, I envisaged that lived experiences can render richer descriptions and illustrations. In this article as a practitioner researcher I wanted to understand and gain further meaning about the perceptions and use of creativity in group supervision. Therefore, I chose to 'write from the inside' (Ellis, 1995) and understand the meaning of lived experience through lived narratives. Though the experiences are unique to the participants, they can also be transported and representative to help other supervisors and supervisees connect and create their own meaning and understanding.

Strengths and Limitations of using narratives and case vignettes in research

Case vignettes and narratives are situated and defined by the nature of the research and the research rationale and question. There are both strengths and limitations to the choice of any particular methodology in research.

A limitation to utilizing case vignettes and narratives as a research methodology is that the data collected may not necessarily be generalized to all other situations and they do not contribute to numerical representation. Case vignettes and meaning emerging may also be subjective to the researcher and reader. There are also more

ethical considerations to take into account when undergoing this type of research, such as, confidentiality, safety, personal integrity, sensitivity of information, and possible prejudices and biases of the researcher.

However using narratives and case vignettes ground the exploration in lived reality, and thus facilitates richer descriptions and depth immersed in lived reality with emphasis on immersion in the context. Thus case representation facilitates richness of data that can help generate new understanding, insight and meaning. Case vignettes also vividly and concretely depict the processes involved in relationships. Though they cannot be generically representative, each narrative can tell us about situations further beyond the actual experiences presented. Despite their idiosyncratic nature case vignettes and narratives can be conveyed beyond the original backdrop of study as findings can resonate in other settings and contexts.

Taking all the above into consideration, inquiry through the narratives and case studies is a means by which I endeavour to portray lived experiences through rich data depicted with further understanding and meaning generated, emerging from the case studies themselves.

Etherington's statement (2000: 252) encapsulates my choice of methodology: "I am not setting out to prove or disprove hypotheses, to collect data across large numbers of people, to collect standard deviation statistics representing units of variability, or to verify the presence of cause and effect relationships between variables", but to give a voice, shed light and gain insight on the use of creativity in group supervision from the participants' perspectives who are practitioners and supervisors themselves.

Narrative 1: Two supervision groups discussed

In the narrative below, Yvonne reflects on two supervision groups that she formed part of and her experience in each.

"Certain episodes mark my experience of being in a group context. I enjoyed being and 00participating in groups from a young age especially in youth groups, voluntary working groups and also team work in the employment environment. Groups enriched me, taught me and helped me to reflect upon the multi-layered field created. I concur with Buber's words that the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts; the dynamics created through the participation of each group member is bigger than what each participant individually contributes.

Two supervision groups that I was part of left me with substantially differing feelings. Ongoing and regular supervision were both distinctive aspects of these two groups and these experiences occurred consecutively in my life. One supervision group was held in the context of an agency and supervisees had no choice in its formation. Perceiving it retrospectively, the bonding in this group was never strong as it was too large and three sub-groups within this group were formed. Some comments and observations coming from the group supervisor were too incisive and somewhat authoritarian and were not challenged within the group. However these emerging feelings and perceptions were being mentioned or acknowledged outside the group context, with the colleagues

one felt comfortable with. I entered the supervision group with quite a naïve stance, supposing that in there I will have the boundaries of trust, confidentiality and safety. So when I experienced these negative feelings, I did not immediately acknowledge them as a group experience but questioned myself and my competence in a group context. What was crucial for me was the breaking of this isolation I was feeling in the group by sharing with other group members, who themselves expressed their own negative experiences in the setting. I started realizing that the group was led in a very authoritarian style which progressively made supervisees adopt non-beneficial strategies in the group setting including; wearing masks, being passive or guarded, giving wary responses and having inhibiting silences. This was the opposite to my belief in supervision as being free flowing or encouraging spontaneous creativity conducive to experiential learning and thus providing personal and professional reflective space.

In a second subsequent group which I chose to be in, I initially adopted a guarded stance due to the previous group supervision events. However slowly, with new formed experiences within this group, I went through several changes including; feeling supported and yet safe when sessions involved challenging and immediacy, trust with others and the supervisor, and the safe space to explore leading to personal and professional growth. The group supervisor believed in a more participatory and positive relational stance where participants offered reflections, perceptions and feelings created in the group field, allowing more active participation and creativity. As a consequence, the group moved towards a more co-operative standpoint, where the supervisor was mainly a facilitator while there was more active contribution from supervisees.

In this context, I felt free and self-confident to draw on my own practitioner and personal experience and collaboratively process narratives brought by my colleagues to supervision."

Observations

Cantwell (1992:72) declares that "very little learning occurs in a negative atmosphere, and positive support and good vibes are endemic of learning." Rather than breaking down the isolation of each practitioner, the first group described above, created ambivalent isolation, masked feelings and experiences of being judged. It also led to the formation of cliques outside to counterbalance the exclusion occurring in the group. This contradicts the purpose of supervision which is mainly "to maximize the constructive and healthy nature of any counselling relationship presented for supervision in addition to attending the well-being of the counsellor" (Bond 2000: 181). The second group referred to, was creative and supportive, nurturing genuine and open communication without disconnectedness, thus being also a source that diminished the isolation of the practitioner role. This ambience enhanced a flow of collaboratively created ideas and a fulfilling experience where achievements were acknowledged and celebrated as a group, while also giving space for challenging, immediacy, empowering feedback and respectful evaluation.

Creativity may also be supported or hindered in the group supervision adopted. Proctor (2000) mentions four types of groups for supervision; authoritative, participative, co-operative and peer. Although group process may reflect a particular group typology, there can be a movement between these types of supervision groups according to the needs developing. This can occur if both the supervisor and supervisees are present to the dynamics,

situations and phenomenology of the field, thus creating a setting where beneficial interactions, awareness, processing, insight and transformative growth are possible.

Narrative 2: Supervision embedded in a particular socio-cultural context

Janet is describing a case she presented in group supervision where the clients hail from a very traditional inter-related context.

"I presented a case in supervision where the clients were a couple planning to get married in a year's time and hailed from a very traditional village. The difficulties presented concerned traditional positioning and rivalry attitudes between their families of origin. This situation was causing severe factions and arguments between the couple, who both had different beliefs to their family of origin and were moving out from the village, but still felt ambivalent and occasionally guilty due to the arguments presented in their respective families. Hailing from a different background, I needed to capture the backdrop presented and the tensions created by the modern and traditional in this couple's life circumstances.

When I presented this case, different concerns and viewpoints permeated in the group itself and this reflected a parallel process mirroring the couple's experience and the diverse cultural backgrounds. The group supervisor encouraged these reflections and standpoints which were conducive to a journey of creative learning, understanding, processing perceptions and possible interventions."

Observations

Supervision is also embedded in the culture we are working in. Fundamental differences regarding one's community also permeate the group supervision arena, sometimes unknowingly and without awareness. Clarkson (2000: 175) states that the role of culture on supervision has rarely been researched and "collusive ignorance of these issues or avoidance of these issues can be profound and habitual".

Cultural differences may not very conspicuous but tacitly present in therapy and supervision. Lago and Thompson (1997) focus on the false view that can be given of clients' difficulties if the cultural context is not taken into consideration and I believe this also concerns supervision.

 Adopting an uninvolved distant position or the polar opposite of enmeshment, will decrease the insight needed to reflect on socio-cultural factors permeating supervision. Embedding oneself in the context is a journey that creates awareness of the collective identity experiences, while still retaining the individual sense of identity.

Creativity rather than rigid positioning is required when working in a backdrop of multi-cultural backgrounds and diversity, or a context where the traditional continually intermingles with the modern. Creativity in supervision may include resources that contribute to collective memory from the interplay of the social-cultural context, the personal backgrounds of group members and also the clients presented.

Narrative 3: Creativity and Parallel Process

Brenda has been part of a supervision group made up of five therapists and the supervisor who encourages creative reflection and input. In the narrative below, Brenda describes how through group supervision, parallel processes may be identified:

"I had a client married to a foreigner, who came for counselling due to experiencing severe stress in her marriage. With the passage of time, the client started to realize that her husband might have had several ulterior motives to marry, some being to gain the resident identity card, passport and freedom to work. From two separate sources, my client heard that her husband was already married but this could not be proven since he hailed from a country where citizen information is not forwarded. Her husband, stating safety issues for his family as the reason, never gave her the addresses of his home of origin, no bank account information or any other personal information. This client had significant dependency traits and was also indecisive. During the sessions, I always felt very tired and tried hard to engage with the client. I presumed that my tiredness was mostly reflecting the fact that she used to come in my last counselling session.

I brought this case twice to group supervision as I was concerned with the tiredness and stuckness I was experiencing. The second time I spoke about this client, the supervisor encouraged us to explore what is happening in the here and now supervision field created while discussing this case. A colleague commented that she felt so sleepy and reconnected this feeling also to when I had presented this case before. Another colleague also commented on feeling helpless and lethargic, while another colleague described a picture that came to mind; drifting on a small dilapidated boat in a vast ocean without oars.

Further processing was discussed and this parallel process co-journeyed supported me to connect to the field created with my client and gave me fresh insight to what was occurring in the client's life as well as other interventions which might help me in my sessions with the client."

Observations

Creativity includes the use of all the senses and the inclusion of critical reflexivity. Those involved in group supervision need to be 'productively curious' (Amendt-Lyon 2001) by embracing the uniqueness created in the field of the moment and to be able to transform it into a creative leap supporting the practitioner with the client in the therapeutic relationship. As cited in Bohart (1999), Einstein has often been quoted as saying he was "following a feeling" in the process of developing Relativity theory. This felt-sense regarding which direction to take in his creative process led Einstein to solve the problem he was grappling with. He then proceeded with this creative stance with "mathematical symbols until he could articulate it in a fully worked out set of derivations." Bohart (1999: 297).

This process of creativity can also be applied to group supervision where the relationship between the cognitive thinking of the group combined with the intuitive tacit knowing permeates the group process of symbolizing, articulating, experimenting and forming the creation of something useful. This new perspective then needs to be checked; to be transformed in a new and healthier insight carried forward as creative adjustment within the

therapeutic work. "As in everyday life, effective therapy practice is a creative blend of old knowledge and ideas, with what are new and different about this situation and the relationship with the client." (Bohart 1999: 302) Group supervisors are required to support the strengths of supervisees and orientations that sustain their expression, be it visual, auditory or spatial modes of communication, metaphoric speech, verbal imagery and other creative ways of expression. Responding with creativity to the here and now field created in group supervision may be a catalyst for awareness, processing, insight and novel understanding.

Narrative 4: Virtues and integrity in group supervision

In the following narrative Joe reflects on the various experiences he encountered in group supervision; some very supportive, some others unconstructive and potentially harmful.

"Two supervision groups come primarily to mind; a group that has been going for the last ten years with three other practitioners and the consultative supervisor, and the one formed at work…which I had no choice about. In my external supervision group there is a mix of supervision and supervision of supervision because all of us also have supervisory roles in our work or private practice. One of the most important points is that we have been with the same supervisor and same four supervisees for this long time. I entirely trust these people's integrity and respect them personally and professionally. I feel I can go there with all my professional vulnerability and that is a very positive, restorative and enriching experience. I prefer this group to individual supervision because I get the depth of the group and the richness of the many experiences shared. I also knew these colleagues on a personal level before the group started. We continued to build that trust throughout the group's formative journey and also at times when clarification was needed; so the trust deepened. Evidently we've all grown and matured along our professional journeys and so the supervision has changed from something which was more directed by our supervisor, to an experience that is now more collaborative and consultative. In this group, there is the space for challenging, immediacy support, disagreement and we can even contradict each other. I can also trust to share about the clients and staff I work with, and I can go into detailed work and interventions. We ask and check before particular work issues are mentioned. I know I would feel free to tell one of my colleagues…'You know this person and I do not feel it is ethical to discuss certain aspects; can you go out while I talk about this?' But the level of safety is such that not only do I trust them with my own vulnerabilities and my own issues, but I trust them also with client content. I cherish each individual's integrity, values, lack of unhelpful competitiveness, trustworthiness, genuineness, generosity of self with others and congruency in this group, but I cannot say the same in the second group I form part of.

In this work based group we meet as senior practitioners who then in turn supervise the junior staff. Talk about intensified ethical dilemmas and dynamics of group supervision! The internal struggle to be in this supervision group mirrors the complex and negative dynamics I always experience in this context. The setting is very competitive and whenever I have to meet the wider group of practitioners I am instantly struck by the dynamics and negative vibes created. There is power struggle going on between the professionals; a lot of proving who is right,

a sense of being observed down to the detail, non-verbal and more verbal negative assertions, seniority issues, undercurrents and professional apprehension, baiting comments testing professional allegiances, an aura of protectiveness of one's own little space, and militancy on certain issues together with undermining observations. This is all conducted under an 'affable' charade and limits me personally and professionally. I and also some other supervisees ended up being indifferent and non-participative in the group.

I also noticed a lot of decisions taken from power positions rather than in the interest of clients. In these circumstances, I have become convinced that being professional is not only about the training, but about integrity with a capital 'I'. Group supervision without the integrity of each member is not feasible, as the power struggles and underlying agendas can be overwhelming, permeating the working, relational and supervisory field.

I realize that an unconstructive supervision setting can institutionalize the practitioner rather than make him or her aware of the setting and its implications for professional practice. I am afraid of becoming desensitized to what is unethical. I fear the setting's influences that may hinder the values I cherish most in this profession. Values as a practitioner and supervisor are more influential with clients and supervisees than any interventions we make. As a supervisor I believe I need to model aspects which our supervisees can then emulate with clients. Therefore I find it strange that there is this negative feeling between us, the consequences being that then we face clients or supervisees with a different set of principles!"

Observations

Resistance might be initially felt in a new formed group as "all movement engenders resistance" (Zinker 1998: 34) but genuine interactions will be formed and can manifest themselves in a group where openness, safety and growth continues to develop.

As mentioned in the first experience, a safe and cohesive group is amenable to a creative flow that supports what Rose (2001) calls as group sense and collective voice, that can guide and support collaborative enquiry and insight. Inner freedom to process and gain transformative meaning in supervision may only be experienced if there is safety and unity in the supervision group.

As a group supervisor, one needs to work hard to create a level of trust between the group members and watchful for the group's beneficial cohesion that may facilitate a positive level of trust which is essential. Individual issues, ways of thinking and behaviour, that emerge and affect the group negatively need to be processed, especially how these influence growth, sharing, trust and group supervision. Potential ethical dilemmas when sharing certain sensitive issues, any conflicts of interest or safety issues between group participants need also to be worked through beneficially so as to protect both each member of the group and the supervision dynamics and its creative space.

Groups whose members work within the same setting can prove to be very complex; especially where group members of today may be senior colleagues of tomorrow, and material discussed presently in the group might have adverse affects in the future. Also, practitioners and the group supervisor both need to be careful with client content, as what is discussed about clients may also influence other group members who might also be working with them or their families in another situation.

Further Reflections

Supervision groups challenge the supervisor in different ways to individual supervision. These narratives and more I encountered in various supervision groups, lead me to some further reflections that I discuss below:

The Individual and the Collective

Practitioners do not function well in isolation, thus hearing the good practices, as well as the frustrations of other practitioners, gives the supervisee a more realistic picture by which they can critique themselves and view what is well developed and less developed professionally and personally. Yalom (2005) stated that 'Universality' supports practitioners since there is the realization that one is not unique in their difficulties; sending a message of being in the same boat and less humanly alone. In group supervision the creativity of interplay between the 'I' and 'We' is crucial, so that the voice of the individual will not be lost within the collective context of the group. The supervision group itself can be a training ground for both the supervisor and supervisee, and subsequently the client to strengthen the voice of the individual.

I view supervision as a place where supervisees and the supervisor can co-create freedom to further exploration and discovery, respectful challenging and healthy relationships. This beneficial supervisory space encourages professional creativity which in turn supports an enhanced way of being with clients. Amongst the richest learning is that conceived with others, in the context of a creative collective field of unique shared experiences.

Virtue ethics of the group supervisor

As the role of integrity and the beneficial presence of the supervisor are crucial, supervision training needs to include the academic, practitioner experience and 'training of the heart' rather than merely mechanical and technical training. However, I wonder how much it is possible to cultivate 'training of the heart' in supervision courses, or whether it is an innate characteristic of the supervisor. I believe that core values, especially integrity, are essential in working through ethical dilemmas, especially those arising specifically from the relational context of group supervision.

Supervisors have a lot of knowledge available and a great deal of power is generated by the knowledge we hold especially in group supervision. A conscientious supervisor needs to be aware of this and handle information with great care using the creativity needed to respond to the here and now moment of group dynamics.

Self-awareness as group supervisors is also vital as the values one sustains will permeate the supervision group and affect its field and effectiveness.

Cultural backdrop

"Benedict (1968:138) states that it is not useful to highlight "the antagonism between culture and the individual" but to take into account "their mutual reinforcement" since "it is not possible to discuss patterns of culture without considering specifically their relation to individual psychology." Cultural backdrop sheds its spectrum of colours on issues permeating therapy as well as supervision as seen in the narratives above. Cultural aspects need to be taken into consideration not as simplistic judgments or interpretations but through the relational and diversity processing potential both in individual and collective arenas. A contextually mindful supervisor will also have insight into distinct characteristics emerging in supervision from the context in which it is embedded. Gergen (2001) states that individual identities are context-bound and that people will construct their stories within a social relational background. Thus any experience is inter-subjectively constructed within the field one is set in. Embracing the field of supervision in its entirety including the setting of work and context will thus enhance reflexivity as well as mindfulness in supervision.

Confidentiality

Clients' confidentiality when discussing in group supervision, is harder to maintain in a specialized setting, particularly with its information-sharing network and interconnectedness. This does not denote that confidentiality is not respected as a principle, but that it is much harder to guarantee. Deductive disclosures in group supervision occur when bits of information lead to inference or when information that is not really needed for the beneficence of supervision sharing, is disclosed. Checking if anyone knows the person and re-evaluating how the client is going to be discussed is a standpoint more ethically respectful than fumbling about with pretext anonymity. What can be supportive for a supervisee may be experienced as potentially destructive by another; therefore group discussion is important so as to support difference and enhance personal reflective space even when considering confidentiality parameters. Creativity enters in how to juggle this shared knowledge domain of the group supervisees and the client information that is sensitively shared in group supervision, while also checking whether any supervisee is affected adversely along the way.

If healthy boundaries are maintained and beneficial values are sustained, one can experience the beauty of group supervision leading to a free-flowing structure, spontaneous creativity and responses conducive to experiential learning and personal reflective space.

Conclusion

"Creative methods tap into the richness of our outward and inward senses…..and our mental ability to move swiftly in time and space. Talking alone will not elicit that quality of information, that ready access to the unconscious. Groups offer both wider choice and richness of the group unconscious." (Proctor 2006:23)

The purpose of supervision is mainly to maximize the constructive and healthy nature of the profession, and support the well-being of the practitioner, thus breaking down the isolation of the role especially in large or de-

manding work settings. The group collective voice needs to respect the individual voice, so that the latter is not overshadowed but enhanced and enriched by that of the collective. A positive and creative group supervision space needs to be enriched by the supervisor, as this is essential for collaborative enquiry, collective reflecting space, dynamic exploration and insight into the here-and-now experience of the group.

Bibliography

Amendt-Lyon, N. (2001a). *Art and creativity in Gestalt therapy. Gestalt Review 5(4): 225-248 Benedict,*

R. (1968). Race: Science and politics. New York, NY: Viking Press. [OriginallyPublished 1940.] Bohart,

A. C. (1999). Intuition and creativity. Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 12,287-311.

Boissevain, J. (1974). Friends of friends: Networks, manipulators and coalitions. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Bond, T. (ed.). (2000). Standards and ethics for counselling in action (2nd edn). London: Sage Publication.

Bond, T. (2006c) Ethics and psychotherapy: An issue of trust. In R. Ashcroft, A. Dawson, H. Draper and J. McMillan (eds.), Principles of Health Care Ethics. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Borders, L. D. (2008). Training programs for supervisors. In A. K. Hess (ed.), Psychotherapy supervision: Theory, research, and practice (Vol. 2). New York: Wiley.

Buber, M. (1958). I and thou. Translated by Gregor Smith R. (2nd edn). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Cantwell, P. (1992). Family Therapy Training and Supervision. VAFT Newsletter, 8: 72-78

Caroll, M., & Holloway, E. (1999). Counselling supervision in context. London: Sage Publications.

Casement, P. (1985). On learning from the patient. London: Tavistock.

Clarkson, P. (2000). Ethics: Working with ethical and moral dilemmas in psychotherapy. London and Philadelphia: Whurr Publications.

Ellis, C. (1995). *Final negotiations: A story of love, loss and chronic illness.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Etherington, K. (2000). Narrative approaches to working with adult male survivors of sexual abuse: The client's, the counsellor's and the researcher's story. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Etherington, K. (2004). Becoming a reflexive researcher: Using our selves in research. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Falzon. R. (2011). Ethical Dilemmas in Therapeutic Supervision: A Narrative Inquiry Researching the Maltese Context (Unpublished)

Feltham, C., & Dryden, W. (1994). Developing counsellor supervision. London: Sage Publications.

Gergen, K. J. (2001). Social construction in context. London: Sage Publications.

Henderson, P. (2009a). A different wisdom. Vol. 1: Reflection on supervision practice. London: Karnac.

Henderson, P. (2009b). Supervisor training. Vol.2: Issues and approaches. London: Karnac.

Hertz, R. (1997). Reflexivity and voice. London: Sage Publications.

Hess, A. K. (1986). Growth in supervision: Stages of supervisee and supervisor development. Clinical Supervisor, 4(1-2), 51-67.

Lago, C. O., & Thompson, J. (1997). The triangle with curved sides: Race and culture in counselling supervision. Shipton, G. S.(ed). In The Art of Supervision. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Philippson, P. & Harris, J. B. (1992). Gestalt: Working with Groups. Manchester Gestalt Centre.

Proctor, B. (2006). Group supervision: A guide to creative practice. London: Sage Publications.

Rose, C. (2001). Working in supervision groups Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal. June 2001.

Rose, N. (1991). Governing the soul: The shaping of the private self. London/New York: Routledge.

Rosenbaum, M. (1982). Ethical problems of group psychotherapy. In M. Rosenbaum (ed.), Ethics and values in psychotherapy: A guidebook (pp. 237-257). New York: Free Press.

Russell, B. (1965). Authority and the individual (3rd edn). London: Unwin Books.

Schon, D. A. (1983). The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action. London: Temple Smith.

Shohet, R. (2008). Passionate supervision. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Spagnuolo Lobb, M., & Amendt-Lyon, N. (2003). Creative license: The art of gestalt therapy. New York: Springer Wien.

Wosket, V. (1999). The therapeutic use of self: Counselling practice, research and supervision. London: Routledge.

Wrenn, C. G. (1985). Afterward: The culturally-encapsulated counselor revisited. In P. Pedersen (Ed.), Handbook of cross-cultural counseling and therapy (pp. 323– 329). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Yalom, I. D. (1989). Love's executioner and other tales of psychotherapy. New York: HarperCollins.

Zinker, J. (1988). Creative process in gestalt therapy. New York: Random House.