

FEATURE

Setting the scene

Alex Duffield makes a case for creative group supervision and peer support



WORDS

Alex Duffield MBACP (Accred) is a psychodynamic counsellor in private practice, qualified group supervisor and action learning facilitator. He is interested in peer support,¹ groups, family therapy and the power of stories. He is developing a social enterprise to promote high quality and accessible group support: groupvision.org

Working in private practice can be isolating at the best of times, but during these times of self-isolation, social distancing and lockdown, being part of online groups has, more than ever, been a lifeline for me. The pandemic has thrown into sharp relief how people in leadership roles can also struggle, and the importance of us all thinking for ourselves. When work with an organisation ended just before lockdown, I had time to take up three generous offers of online support: a reflective practice group,² a 'psychosymposium',³ and a group for action learning facilitators.⁴ This was in addition to ongoing group and individual supervision, and regular 'walks and talks' with a friend who is also a therapist. Listening to how others are working through the painful choices thrown up by this crisis has helped me to think more clearly about my own next steps.

I also set up groups for friends and family. One, the 'Friday-nighters', is a group of friends involved in writing, directing, producing and performing audio plays. A regular topic for group discussion is the TV series we are

enjoying. *Staged*, written, directed and performed by Simon Evans with Michael Sheen and David Tennant, has been a favourite of ours.⁵ In it, they come together to rehearse *Six characters in search of an author*.⁶ Only later did I realise how much the series and play have to say about groups. Still later, I discovered that Foulkes, the founder of group analysis, had been profoundly influenced by the play.⁷ I wonder if this is an example of what Jung called synchronicity?⁸ Perhaps what links them is the zeitgeist then and now; as the play was written in 1921, shortly after the 1918 flu pandemic. The themes of the play, including the difficulty of how best to respond when events take over, the pain of learning from past mistakes, and how we unconsciously re-enact past trauma, are certainly very relevant today.

Reading the cases for and against supervision being mandatory in the last issue of *Private Practice*, also felt like being part of a lively group discussion. I particularly wanted to develop Jude Adcock's thought of how family dynamics can be recreated in groups, and think about the potential pitfalls she

identified.⁹ I was also drawn to respond to Jeff Weston's question of whether 'cultural and recreational activities (such as the theatre)' might combine with well-run group supervision to offer an affordable alternative to one-to-one supervision.¹⁰

Does group supervision meet BACP requirements?

For accredited members, supervision '...can be a mix of one-to-one, peer, telephone and online...', and for students or trainees it '...can be a mix of one-to-one or group. A facilitator is needed for group supervision...'¹¹ I'm not sure why facilitated group supervision is not specified for accredited members here, although it is clear it does meet the requirements as it can be a '...peer, one-to-one, group'.¹²

The pitfall of 'providing' individual supervision in a group

I wondered if some of the problems highlighted by Adcock might arise from attempting to provide individual supervision in a group. This was certainly something I found myself trying to do as a new supervisor. Through my own supervision of supervision, I began to see that this reflected how the trainees could find themselves feeling they should be 'doing' therapy 'to' their clients. This helped me feel more alongside them in this struggle, and think more about how and why this happens. If left unchecked, this

could create a destructive rivalry for the attention of a supervisor who is thought to have the answers. This would be compounded if supervision in a group is provided purely as a way of cutting costs.

The potential of supervision 'in and by' the group

In a group analytic approach, the pooled responses and reflections of the members are seen as being greater than the sum of their individual parts, and as the source or 'medium' of supervision.¹³ To harness the potential of the group requires enough understanding of, confidence in, and commitment to the group by the members. A skilled and experienced group supervisor does a lot behind the scenes to help the group build this capacity.

The three roles of a group supervisor

A group supervisor can be thought of as having three roles: supervisor, member of the group and 'dynamic administrator'.¹⁴ The role of 'dynamic administrator' is like the producer, set designer and technical support, as well as stage, house and company managers all rolled into one. This includes the equivalents of casting and contracting, making sure the finances are in place, and managing the interaction with the studio and actors' guilds, setting the stage, testing any technology, and ensuring safety.

The role of supervisor is like that of the director who brings the actors together to rehearse and invites them to share and develop their understanding of the character they are studying. It is the director's task to gauge how and when to bring the other actors in, to try to add depth and perspective, and perhaps to improvise around themes to see where they might lead. The director also thinks about how and when to change focus, to stop and think about the ways in which the parts being studied can best be brought to life, as well as how they might be influencing the team dynamics.

Framing things more broadly, the director might encourage the cast to think about how the wider organisational, cultural, social and political context might be reflected in these dynamics.¹⁵ Finally, in the group analytic approach, the supervisor is like a director who also has a part to play, who offers their

own responses to, and thoughts about, the material presented, as a fellow member of the cast.

Group supervision of one-to-one therapy

One question might be whether supervision in a group is a good fit for therapists working with individual clients. I think it can be because I see a client's internal world as being populated by different figures and scenes. As a counsellor, I draw on my position outside of the action to offer ways of reframing what the client is conveying to me, sometimes focusing in for more detail, and at other times panning out for greater context. I'm also alongside the client as someone with my own struggles and preoccupations, and draw on that perspective without necessarily talking about it directly. Then, of course, like a producer, I have to think about the business side of things, including finances, marketing and contracts, which also have an impact on the action 'on stage'.

How does supervision 'in and by a group' help?

A supervisee who is looking for a direct answer to a problem might be frustrated by hearing different perspectives.⁹ Yet this can help them to step back and think about why they want to be told what to do, where this might be coming from, and how different responses might 'play out'. This is not to say that someone taking up a new and challenging part might not need some clear direction, especially to ensure safety. It is more that the overall approach is focused on trying to help us as therapists to think for ourselves and gain the confidence to make our own decisions and to learn from the times when things do not go as planned. This helps us to develop our capacity to reflect on our own work and that of our colleagues.

Drawing on the 'parallel process' in group supervision

As in dyadic supervision, the way the dynamics in the therapy are reflected in supervision can be drawn upon to get a deeper understanding of what is happening in the therapy. This is brought to life in *Six characters in search of an author* when the director and actors assemble ready to rehearse the play *Mixing it Up*. Things soon

really do get mixed up when six 'real' characters, a fragmented family, arrive on stage, demanding their story be told. The Father says, 'We want to live... only for a moment... in you'. The actors are initially insulted by this imposition: 'One cannot let oneself be made such a fool of.'⁶

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Reading this, I thought of how the dynamics of the work being presented start to take over in supervision, and how disconcerting this can be. This might take the form of a 'parallel process', in which a dynamic between the therapist and client is echoed in the therapist-supervisor relationship.¹⁶ In group supervision, members of the supervision group might also feel a 'resonance' with different figures presented by the client, and start to 'take their part'.¹⁷ At times, the presenting therapist might recognise dynamics from the therapy being 'mirrored' back to them by the other members of the group.¹⁸ This helps them to step back and gain a fresh perspective on what is going on in the therapy. Sometimes, a wider difficulty, such as a disavowal of competitiveness, can become 'located' in a particular person or part of the system.¹⁸ This might have been what was happening in the example Adcock gives of a colleague who had felt like she was being 'attacked by crows'.⁹ When this happens, it is important to bring it to the attention of the group, so that this process can be thought about and the difficult feelings shared.

Understanding destructive group processes

It is because this work can be so challenging that at times we avoid it. Some of the ways we do this are brilliantly portrayed in *Staged*. At first, the fantasy seems to be that pairing the right two actors will allow the performance to emerge painlessly. This gives way to a 'flight or fight' response, as the director avoids a telling a forceful Samuel L Jackson that the part he turned down is no longer available. Eventually, they regress to depending on a parental Dame Judi Dench to tell them they need to get on and 'do the work'.

While all this is going on, reality in the form of the coronavirus is threatening to enter 'stage left'. This is a great depiction of how groups can use what Bion called 'basic assumption', 'pairing', 'fight and flight' and 'dependency' to avoid the reality-based 'work group' mentality that is required to create something limited but meaningful.¹⁹ An understanding of these and other 'anti-group' processes is essential in group supervision, to minimise the potential for them being enacted and understood when they are.²⁰

Learning to be a group member

As members of a group, we need to not only have a solid enough sense of who we are, but the ability to allow ourselves to be moved and sometimes changed by others. This is why it can be particularly challenging for trainees, who need support in doing this. Inevitably, we can become too fixed and defended to let clients live 'for a moment' in us. Alternatively, we can find it hard to separate from them. A well-functioning group will be able to help its members to unpick what is coming from the client and what belongs to the therapist, and to see what is happening between them in context. Support and challenge can be easier to accept when they are felt to be coming from a peer rather than someone who is seen as being in a position of authority.

Harnessing difference in groups

One potential strength of groups is the greater diversity they can embrace. The more confident group members are in their own approach, the more possible it is to be curious about different ways of working. One of the reasons that my experience of the supervision course was so enriching is that I got to learn from, and with, a wide range of therapists, including group analysts, an art therapist, a dance and movement therapist and people working in therapeutic communities. Online supervision had the added benefit of being accessible to people living abroad. The open 'medium' groups also gave us an invaluable opportunity to share different aspects of our identities and experience of conscious and unconscious prejudice. This gave me a much deeper understanding of myself, my clients and supervisees, as well as the context we are living in.

Peer support groups and networks

Although the client-focused aspects of our work is well supported, the challenges of running a business – the 'producer' role – can be sidelined. Peer support groups and networks can be helpful in bridging this gap. I have found an 'action learning' approach to be a good way of doing this. In an action learning group, or 'set' as it is known, members of the group take it in turns to talk about something they are struggling with. The other members help the 'presenter' to think it through, often with open questions, expressions of empathy

and appreciation, as well as at times offers of specific support or tips. The presenter then identifies key 'action points' for themselves to help guide them in future. This process is usually facilitated at first, but can become peer run. There is a lot of talk about being in different boats, with some being closer to the storm than others. An action learning set is like having regular radio contact with others in the fleet and helping them to navigate their way to where they want to be.

Final thoughts

I hope I have provided some food for thought about how to harness the potential of group supervision and how to navigate some of the pitfalls. My approach to setting up in private practice was to invest in supervision, as I saw it as the foundation of my work. I trusted the idea of 'build it and (they) will come' and invested in individual as well as group support, which has served me well.²¹

Becoming a group supervisor has sometimes felt like knocking some old walls down to accommodate a new structure, and learning how it all fits together. Now it is in place, I'm looking forward to the groups I might be able to invite in, so I can continue to learn and grow with them. What is emerging is the idea of a social enterprise to promote well-run, accessible and affordable group supervision and support. If you have groups or networks you would like to promote, or are interested in finding group support, I'm hoping that the website groupvision.org will provide some inspiration. ●

YOUR THOUGHTS, PLEASE

If you have a response to the issues raised in this article, please write a letter or respond with an article of your own. Email:

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