supervision in the
helping
professions
a practical approach

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Group supervision: A delicate balancing act

MARY MCMAHON AND WENDY PATTON

Supervision is frequently conceptualised as a one-on-one process. However, group supervision is also widely practised, yet it has received much less attention (Holloway & Johnston, 1985; Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). Holloway and Johnston concluded that the use of group supervision was 'widely practised but poorly understood' (p. 332), a claim that has not yet been refuted (Bernard & Goodyear). It is only comparatively recently that the first book on group supervision has been published (Proctor, 2000).

It is against the background of a literature derived predominantly from practice that this chapter is presented. However, while group supervision is essentially practice driven, there is much agreement about the conduct of supervision using group formats. It is the purpose of this chapter to describe the features of group supervision, discuss the roles of supervisors and supervisees, and present considerations for practitioners of group supervision.

What is group supervision?

Two definitions provide a useful starting point for a discussion on group supervision.

- Group supervision is the regular meeting of a group of supervisees with a designated supervisor, for the purpose of furthering their understanding of themselves as clinicians, of the clients with whom they work, and/or of service delivery in general, and who are aided in their endeavour by their interaction with each other in the context of group process (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998, p. 111).

- Group supervision is a working alliance between a supervisor and several counsellors in which each counsellor can regularly offer an account or recording of her work, reflect on it, and receive feedback and where appropriate guidance from her supervisor and her colleagues. The object of

this alliance is to enable each counsellor to gain in ethical competence, confidence and creativity so as to give her best possible service to clients (Inskipp & Proctor, 1993, p. 72).

These definitions draw attention to some of the significant features about group supervision, one of the most fundamental of which is that it has a designated supervisor. This differs from peer group supervision where there is no designated supervisor and leadership is shared among group members. It is group supervision with a designated supervisor that is the focus of this chapter. While the role of the supervisor may vary, as discussed later in this chapter, it can be reasonably assumed that the supervisor has a leadership role in the supervision process. It is clear from these definitions that group supervision, as with individual supervision, is about professional helpers presenting their cases or issues in a venue where they will not only receive support, but also feedback and challenge in order to further their professional and personal growth. This in turn may enhance their work with their clients. Another feature of these definitions is that of the involvement of a group of supervisees who each bring their own levels of experience, anxiety, contribution and commitment to the group.

There is no real evidence to indicate an optimum number of participants in group supervision (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). Feltham and Dryden (1994) question whether groups of more than five or six can function adequately and allow enough time for each member. However Schreiber and Frank (1983) suggest that groups containing fewer than seven members are more susceptible to disruption from absences or drop-outs. Recent research with Masters level students participating in group supervision, some in groups containing eight members and some in groups containing four members, revealed that the counsellors benefited equally in either group (Ray & Alterkruse, 2000). It seems that, in general, it is desirable for supervision groups to contain fewer than ten members. Indeed, Proctor (2000) suggests that groups of three, four, or five members allow for variety and intimacy. As with individual supervision, the supervisory relationship is fundamental to the success of supervision. Therefore, the role of the group supervisor becomes more complex than that of the individual supervisor as a working alliance has to be forged between a number of people.

Striking a balance between group work and supervision
Group supervision brings together two distinctly different processes; group work and supervision. Thus it offers greater complexity than individual supervision, a rich context of individual viewpoints (York, 1997), and the 'stimulation and excitement of cooperative enterprise' (Proctor, 2000, p. 24). In doing so, group supervision places greater demands on the supervisor who necessarily must be skilled in supervision and group facilitation. Essentially, group supervision provides a venue for learning and the supervisor becomes a learning facilitator who must provide balance in a number of key areas. These will now be discussed.

The role of the supervisor
Group supervisors need to reflect carefully on the role they wish to play in the supervision process. Inskipp and Proctor (1995) suggest that a supervisor's role may vary from being dominant and in control of the process through a continuum of involvement to one of peer supervision where supervisees take responsibility for the process. Inskipp and Proctor describe four models of group supervision:

1. Supervision in a group where the supervisor supervises individuals with the members as an audience.
2. Participative group supervision where the supervisor supervises, and members are taught and encouraged to participate.
3. Co-operative group supervision where the supervisor facilitates the group in learning to supervise each other.
4. Peer group supervision where peer group members supervise each other and negotiate structure, leadership, roles and responsibilities (p. 72).

Group members—spectators versus co-supervisors
Depending on the nature of the group described in the first three models, the role of the group members will vary from one of spectator to one of co-supervisor or supervisor. Inskipp and Proctor (1995) suggest that membership of participative or co-operative supervision groups where members gradually learn the skills and processes of supervision through their involvement provides adequate preparation for peer group supervision.

Structure versus no structure
As implied in Inskipp and Proctor's models, the amount of structure in a group may vary depending on the role of the supervisor. Structure in group supervision may relate to the format of the supervision session as a whole and to the supervision processes used within the session. Proctor (2000) suggests that it is useful to determine an agenda for supervision sessions because it aids in time management. Essentially the agenda addresses the stages of group development discussed later in this chapter and includes attending to the coming together of the group, building

an agenda based around group members' needs, working through an agenda of case presentations and debriefings, and reviewing the session.

Structure may also vary according to the processes of supervision being used. For example, the structured group processes suggested by Proctor (1997) and Wilbur, Roberts-Wilbur, Morris, Betz, and Hart (1991) provide a highly structured process with clearly defined roles for participants, whereas the creative therapies models suggested by Wilkins (1995) suggest process but less clear-cut guidelines on the roles of participants. Despite the structure, it is essential that the nature of the group supervision process to be used is clarified and negotiated at the beginning of the group's life, and again as needed during the course of the group.

Group facilitation versus supervision

As discussed later in this chapter, different issues prevail at various times during the life of the group. To conduct supervision without facilitating the group's development could be disadvantageous, and to emphasise group facilitation at the expense of supervision could result in group members' supervisory needs not being met. Thus a supervisor with only one set of skills, for example, group facilitation skills or supervision skills, may struggle to balance the demands of group supervision. Inskipp and Proctor (1995) suggest that group supervisors have two separate but related areas of responsibility which they must proactively manage:

- 'the supervision work which includes the guardianship of the professional development of individuals

- facilitating the building, maintaining and repairing of the relationships within the working group' (p. 78).

Challenge versus support

Blocher (1983) suggests that supervision requires a learning environment in which challenge and support are balanced. Where the balance swings too much in the direction of support, Feltham and Dryden (1994) suggest that supervisory relationships may become too 'cosy' for honest feedback to occur. On the other hand however, supervisory relationships that provide challenge and little support may also inhibit learning. Group supervision provides supervisees with challenges not present in individual supervision. For example, they are required to share their work and receive support, feedback and challenge in a public forum, and, in the case of co-operative and participative group supervision, to take shared responsibility in the development of colleagues by providing feedback (Proctor, 2000). Thus group supervisors must take care to develop a supportive learning environment where the

additional challenges of group supervision do not become intimidating or disabling and productive work can be done.

Group needs versus individual needs

Time spent in group supervision, unlike individual supervision, is not totally devoted to one person. Consequently, group supervision has often been viewed as supplementary to individual supervision rather than a viable alternative (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). However, Ray and Alterkruse (2000) suggest that group supervision is complementary to individual supervision and may be interchangeable with it. What needs to be recognised in group supervision is that individual group members have supervisory needs which may vary according to factors such as their developmental levels, work settings and case loads. In addition, the group as a whole has needs, for example needs related to factors such as the stage of development of the group or the purpose of the group. Thus the supervisor's job is one of ensuring that the needs of individual members are met as well as attending to group process and group purpose issues.

A developmental process

As previously discussed, the leader of a supervision group has to balance the roles of group facilitator and supervisor. One of the primary roles of the group facilitator is to attend to issues related to the development of the group. Possibly the most well known model of group development is that of Tuckman and Jensen (1977) who describe the stages of forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning. Acknowledgment of these stages draws attention to different needs that will exist at different times during the life cycle of the supervision group. For example, issues present in a group that is just beginning will be different from those of a well-established supervision group. It is the role of the supervisor to facilitate processes that will enable these issues to be dealt with so that the supervision group can work productively. Unresolved group issues may be disruptive to group process and may impact on the effectiveness of supervision being undertaken in the group. Consideration needs to be given to the issues operating prior to the commencement of the group, at the commencement of the group, during the course of the group, and at the conclusion of the group. These will now be discussed.

Prior to the commencement of the group

Questions to be considered at this time include questions related to the purpose of the group, group membership, practicalities such as time, ground rules such as confidentiality, location of meetings and frequency of meetings.

Initial questions

- *What is the purpose of this group?*
- *How many members will it contain?*
- *Who will be the members?*
- *Is membership of the supervision group voluntary or compulsory?*
- *Will it be a heterogeneous group or a homogeneous group, i.e. will all the members be from the same or different professions, or the same or different organisations, or will they all have the same or different amounts of experience?*
- *Who will be the supervisor?*
- *What will the role of the supervisor be?*

The commencement of the group

Members typically come into new groups with issues surrounding inclusion and their involvement in the group. It is vitally important that time is devoted to addressing the presenting needs of group participants because clarification and resolution of these needs will promote a healthy working environment in the group. Questions to be attended to include those related to the members themselves, their membership of the group, the group supervisor, and the group process itself. Examples of such questions are now presented.
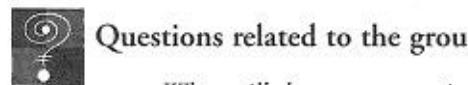
Questions related to me as a member of the group

- *How should I present myself?*
- *Do I really belong in this group?*
- *What do I want from this group?*
- *What do I understand group supervision is about?*
- *What do I need to know about group supervision?*
- *What are my supervision needs?*
- *What will I have to do to have my supervision needs met?*

Questions related to my membership of this supervision group

- *Who else will be in the group?*

- *What is the background of others in the supervision group?*
- *Will I be accepted in this supervision group?*
- *Are the other group members more or less experienced than me?*
- *What is the theoretical orientation of other members of the group?*
- *Are the other members experienced in group supervision?*

Questions related to the group supervisor

- *What will the group supervisor expect of group members?*
- *How will the group supervisor conduct him/herself?*
- *What is the role of the group supervisor?*
- *What is the theoretical orientation of the group supervisor?*

Questions related to the group supervision process

- *How will this supervision group operate?*
- *What will I be expected to contribute?*
- *How are supervision issues or cases to be presented?*
- *Will supervision of group members be conducted in turn, will it occur on a needs basis, or will a combination occur?*
- *How safe will I be in this group?*
- *Will what I say be treated confidentially?*
- *How much structure will there be in this supervision group?*

In addition to providing opportunity for these questions to be dealt with, many of the practicalities of working together in a group over an extended period of time need to be negotiated at the commencement of the group. In essence, it is important to attend to processes which enable group members to get to know each other, share hopes and expectations of their group supervision experience, contribute to and understand the way in which the group will operate, set supervision goals, and get to know the supervisor including his/her role and expectations. The practicalities are listed as a checklist in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1	Practicalities of setting up supervision groups

- ☐ time of meetings
- ☐ how supervision material will be presented, e.g. case notes, audio/video recording, genograms
- ☐ duration of meetings
- ☐ how supervision material will be processed, e.g. structured group processes,
- ☐ lifespan/duration of the group
- ☐ inclusion of new group members midway through the life of the group
- ☐ frequency of meetings
- ☐ record keeping
- ☐ location of meetings, e.g. regular or rotated setting
- ☐ processes of review, monitoring, evaluation
- ☐ structure of meetings, e.g. time allocated per person per meeting, time allocated for supervision and group processing
- ☐ dealing with absences from the group
- ☐ group leadership, e.g. always the supervisor, turn taking by members
- ☐ ethical issues, e.g. processes and responsibility for dealing with unprofessional conduct
- ☐ ground rules, e.g. confidentiality, attendance, participation
- ☐ contingency plans, e.g. are group members able to contact supervisor between supervision sessions if they need to? If not, who will they contact?

The course of the group

Once the group begins to operate, opportunity has to be provided for supervision and group facilitation. For example, attending only to supervision may result in group members' needs not being heard and attended to and issues not being dealt with. In addition, adequate processing enables learning to occur. Group supervision can be viewed as an experiential learning process and attention to the elements of the experiential learning cycle will maximise learning for participants. The experiential learning cycle may apply twice—the supervision process itself should

follow the cycle, as should the debriefing that follows. Specifically, the elements of experiencing, publishing, processing, generalising and applying need to be addressed (Kolb, 1984). Each of these will now be discussed.

Experiencing: A group member presents a case or supervision issue which is then processed.

Publishing: After the supervision issue or case has been processed, debriefing occurs where group members share their reactions and observations.

Processing: Discussion about the commonalities, patterns and themes of the debriefing session occurs.

Generalising: Group members then relate their learning to their own life and work.

Applying: Group members plan how they will incorporate their learning into their own work. This could involve role play, goal setting or coaching.

In addition to following an experiential learning process, group supervision leaders could reflect on the following questions during the course of the group.

- *Are group needs and individual needs being attended to?*
- *Is enough time being devoted to processing learning?*
- *Are the group goals still the same or have they changed? If so, in what way and what changes need to occur in the conduct of the group?*
- *Has time for review and monitoring of the group process been built in?*
- *Are there any issues that need attending to, for example, attendance, dominance by a member, breaches of confidentiality?*

The conclusion of the group

Just as relationships run courses, so too do groups. Endings which are not attended to may result in unfinished business and disillusionment on the part of the members and leader. Therefore it is important to process the conclusion of the group. In particular, consideration needs to be given to what members have gained from the group and to their participation in supervision beyond the life of the group. Members need an opportunity to re-establish their identity as an individual separate from the group. This could result in group members beginning to disengage during the latter stages of group supervision. Consideration could also

be given to whether the group continues and in what format. If the group is to continue, its structure and membership will need to be renegotiated. Questions that could guide considerations for the group supervisor and group members are now presented.

- *What have I learned?*

- *What differences do I notice about myself as a practitioner now compared with when I started in this group?*

- *How has the group supervision contributed to these changes?*

- *Which of my original supervision goals have I achieved?*

- *Which of my original supervision goals have I yet to achieve?*

- *What have I appreciated about the group?*

- *What supervision options do I have from now on?*

- *Will this group be re-established? If so, in what format? Do I want to remain in this group?*

Conclusion

Group supervision has much to offer helping professionals through the richness generated by the different viewpoints of the group members. Indeed, its widespread use as an approach to supervision attests to its value and applicability. Further, group supervision provides a mechanism for developing the supervision skills of participants. However, group supervision is not something to be undertaken lightly. It requires attention to its component parts of group process and group development, and supervision. A sensitive balance of the tasks related to these will ensure that group supervision is a positive learning environment for group supervision participants.

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