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Long Term Systemic Therapy

Individuals, Couples and Families

Edited by
Arlene Vetere · Jim Sheehan

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Family Therapy and Systemic Practice
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Foreword

When I was asked to write this Foreword my immediate reaction was to feel unsure about whether or not I knew enough about long term therapy to be able to comment. I then asked what exactly is long term therapy? Is it anything longer than the CBT fixed session protocols or the usual 6 approved insurance sessions? Working in the field of eating disorders this does not even touch the sides.

It seems to me that there are different types of long term therapy: firstly there is the situation where a therapist sees a client for ongoing sessions for a significant length of time; secondly there is the situation where a therapist sees a client at differing points in their lives and thirdly there is the situation where the therapist offers a client an ongoing support over a number of years for a specific reason without necessarily offering sessions. In the field of family therapy I believe these also apply but would include the whole or parts of the family.

I would like to describe 3 such examples of my therapeutic work to demonstrate these ideas.

I have one male client who I first saw 9 years ago for a set 6 sessions in relation to marital difficulties that he and his wife were having. He had a

military history and had spent the early part of his adult life conforming to others' expectations of him. He was lacking in insight and ability to take responsibility for his own behaviour and emotions. 9 years down the line he is a sensitive emotionally aware man who has great insight and ability for self-reflection. He attends currently every 4–6 weeks. When I first met him I would never have imagined that I would still be seeing him at all let alone so regularly. I believe that it is the longevity of our relationship together that has allowed him to be able to do the work that he has done that has involved his early relationships with his parents and wider family, the role the military played in shaping his emotional expression, and his sexuality.

I have had a number of clients that I saw as teenagers that made contact as adults for varying reasons, for example, one client who I saw when she was aged 15 years and had a psychiatric diagnosis of anorexia nervosa. She sent me the occasional email over the years letting me know what she was doing. Then following the birth of her first daughter, when she was in her early thirties, some of her childhood issues resurfaced in her parenting of her daughter. She was able to work through relational difficulties she had with her own mother through thinking about herself as a mother.

In another example, I shall describe a client who I saw when she was aged 15 years, who had a psychiatric diagnosis of bulimia and depression. She was struggling with her dream for herself not being what her parents wanted for her, and again, over the years I got the occasional email telling me about how she was achieving her dream despite her family's opposition. Again in her early thirties she had a crisis when her depression overcame her. She took herself into the jungle, consumed surgical alcohol and cut her own throat. It was a miracle she was found. When she came home she made contact and began to rebuild her life, which ultimately resulted in her developing a new found spirituality and new career path. In addition to this she dealt with the death of her much beloved grandmother, who had been her main source of support within the family, and ran the London Marathon.

The last client I would like to tell you about is a family I first saw 8 years ago when the parents first divorced. There were 2 children, a boy of 8 years and a daughter of 11 years. The boy still wanted to see his Dad

but the daughter had found a sexually explicit message from his girlfriend on his phone and withdrawn completely from him, with the support of the mother. My task had been to try to re-engage the father and daughter. The mother eventually moved forward emotionally and actively worked on supporting her daughter re-engaging with her ex-husband although at this point the daughter was adamantly refusing all contact. Despite all our efforts nothing changed. My final intervention was to encourage the father to maintain a level of communication with the daughter that he could sustain without getting anything back. With the mother's support he began telephoning once a week to talk to her, initially this was on the house phone and eventually it was on the brothers' phone. Over the years he called from time to time to talk and up date me on the no change; these conversations, for me, were soul destroying as I felt I had let him down. For 7 years he maintained this until the daughter went to university at which point he said to his daughter if she wanted him to continue talking to her she would need to give him her number. She gave him her number and suggested they text: this was the first time he had got anything back from her. For the last year they have been engaging in text conversations. 2 weeks ago the brother was having a pre prom gathering at home and wanted his Dad there. The father accepted but cautioned that he did not want to make his daughter feel she could not be there, so he would stay away. Via the mother the father was told that the daughter was ok for him to attend. This was the first time he had seen his daughter in 8 years. She spoke to him and they hugged. When I received his email update I cried.

These examples may not be conventional therapy examples; however the common theme is the strong trusting relationship that was developed between the therapist and client. In the current climate too much emphasis, I believe is placed on protocols and replicating treatment plans that can be rolled out to all regardless of whether or not they are a good fit. The personal and individualised approach that these examples show are not possible now for most clients in public sector services.

I value a book that acknowledges long term therapy and the relationships formed between client and therapist that are crucial to that therapy being successful for those involved. This is particularly important in the field of family therapy where several members of the same family can

be seen by the same therapist. On more than one occasion I have been referred to as 'our family's' therapist. This, for me, is the way forward for families in the same way a family might have a family GP or family lawyer, they can also have a family therapist.

Maidenhead, UK
August 2019

Shelagh Wright
Systemic Psychotherapist and
Accredited Family Mediator

Editors' Introduction

Systemic psychotherapy has long been conceptualised and practiced as brief psychotherapy, in both the public sector and in independent practice. There are many schools of practice within the field of systemic psychotherapy, such as, solution focused, Milan systemic, open dialogue approaches, narrative approaches, strategic and structural approaches, narrative attachment, and so on, and all come under the umbrella of brief therapy. Indeed, the brevity of these approaches formed one central plank through which systemic psychotherapy found its own unique identity against the background of more established psychoanalytic approaches to psychotherapy. Systemic psychotherapy, broadly, has developed a robust and ecologically valid evidence base and is recommended within NICE Guidance, UK, for a range of psychiatric disorders (Carr 2014a, b). It sits alongside the other major models of brief psychotherapy, such as, CBT, CAT, behaviour therapy, EMDR, brief focal psychodynamic psychotherapy, and so on. Typically, the brief therapies take place within an average of 5–20 meetings, unless the work is complicated by trauma processes. However, despite being seen as a brief therapy, in our practice and in our

supervision work, we notice that many colleagues offer systemic therapy over the longer term.

Both Jim Sheehan and Arlene Vetere are systemic supervisors. We both supervise experienced systemic psychotherapists and systemic practitioners. Increasingly we notice that our supervisees bring to the supervision their longer term practice. This can take many forms, for example, long term systemic psychotherapy over 3–5 years, and more, perhaps with some managed breaks in the process; working with different generations in a family system over the course of a life cycle, perhaps working with the children, and then with the children as adults, or with their children; or working with different parts of an extended family system at different times; and offering an on-demand service to individuals, couples and families over an extended period of time, including bi-annual 'top up' meetings. Our supervisees bring their dilemmas, their ethical concerns and questions around long term relationships with individuals, family systems, professional teams, supervision groups, and professional-family systems. At the heart of many of their questions is a focus on the extent to which systemic theory can accommodate and formulate long term practice, and where might be the boundaries of the systemic theories that both help to explain and give direction to the work. At what point might a supervisee need to incorporate and integrate other explanatory models into their systemic thinking, and what might this mean for systemic practice? How does the relative longevity of the work impact the way practitioners build and maintain therapeutic relationships with the relational systems they assist? And what implications does such longevity have on, and for, the supervisory needs of systemic psychotherapists at the heart of the work? Given the absence of a rigorous evidence base for long term systemic therapy and practice, how can we and our supervisees hold ourselves ethically accountable for what we do and what we think?

Both of us also work systemically over the longer term, with individual clients, couples and families, and we also offer long term consultation with teams, agencies and organisations. So we too are exercised by the above questions and dilemmas. In editing this book, we have invited experienced systemic psychotherapists who are also experienced supervisors to write about and reflect on their experiences of longer term systemic work, and the implications for systemic theory in their area of practice.

All the contributors are well known in their field and have extensive experience of writing for publication: Ros Draper; Chip Chimera; Ana Aguirregabiria; Helga Hanks; Sarah Houston; T. K. Lang; Paddy Sweeney and Martin Daly. We too both contribute a chapter each.

The book is divided into four parts of working therapeutically with (a) couples and families, (b) with individuals, (c) with professional practitioner groups and (d) with family businesses. In preparing our chapters, some authors have invited their clients, with whom they have worked together over the longer term to contribute some thoughts about their experiences of being in such a long lived relationship, for example, the chapters by Chip Chimera, Ros Draper and Arlene Vetere.

We shall briefly introduce each chapter in relation to how systemic theory is used to understand the relational processes involved in longer term systemic psychotherapy. Jim Sheehan writes about his work with couples where one of them is challenged by a lengthy chronic illness. Systemic theory illuminates the impact of the illness on the person, their partner, their relationship and their family/social support systems and how their circumstances and wider relational contexts influence the progression of the illness. In working with couples over the longer term, Jim explores how expected and unexpected life events, and the life cycle changes for the couple and their relationship all benefit from an ongoing therapeutic relationship where trust and commitment enable either frequent or infrequent consultation and therapy as needed. In her chapter on working with couples and families, Arlene explores how some people simply need longer to process and resolve unresolved hurts and losses in their relationships. A typical couple therapy might consist of 10–20 meetings, but for some, as Arlene shows, more time is needed to consolidate and make coherent the systemic experiences of healing, forgiveness and repair. The development of a shared narrative as to how and why the therapy was helpful often depends on the integration of, and reflection on, all aspects of intimate experiences and this where the passage of time affords the opportunity.

There are 3 chapters on working systemically with individuals. Both Ros and Chip draw on their clients' reflections—in Ros' chapter to construct the account, and in Chip's to weave together her reflections with that of her client's. Chip writes of her therapeutic relationship with her

client and their joint challenge to identify and resolve early adaptive self-protective processes of dissociation, and other unresolved trauma responses to relational danger, that in adulthood get in the way of developing trusting and intimate relationships. Ros, in her chapter, uses a relationally discursive approach to co-construct accounts of the development and progression of the therapeutic relationship and therapeutic changes over time. Neither Ros nor Chip shy away from addressing the challenges of longer term systemic work with individuals and focus on processes of healing and repair in the therapeutic alliance. Sarah works systemically with young people, and although the length of time spent in the work might be relatively shorter than, say with the adult-focused work discussed by Chip and Ros in their chapters, nevertheless, Sarah uses systemic theory to show how subjective time and distressing experience can seem extended during adolescence, and thus how to assist young people in navigating bumps in the road of their emotional and relational development.

There are three chapters on extended group supervision with professional practitioners. This partly addresses a clear gap in the systemic literature (Henning 2016) and also offers an opportunity for all four authors to explore what is enabled by the length of time afforded the group members. Helga writes of how a committed supervision relationship with peers and supervisors in a group setting enables the development of interpersonal trust such that deeper recesses of experience can be accessed and processed in the group with the group members. Her emphasis on self care and care of others in extremely challenging working contexts shows us all how persistence and emphasis on small acts of care and kindness can systemically reverberate throughout the wider working system. Similarly TK and Paddy and Martin in their systemic group work with pastoral care teams and health care providers explore and illuminate the development of processes of trust and trusting behaviour that enables and sustains professional receptivity and complex emotional risk-taking in their day-to-day work. All three chapters explore the parallel processes and emotional dynamics in group work that can mirror similar processes in the workplace and in other walks of life.

Finally, Ana in her chapter on working systemically with family businesses illustrates the complex interplay and weave of family life and family relationships with business roles, business hierarchies and working relationships. Such interplay can lead to emotional dilemmas and discrepancies that are harder to resolve, such as the reversal of hierarchies, power and influence across the two domains of work and family, conflicts of loyalty between family and business roles, and the attachment dilemmas at the heart of such complexity.

We hope this book will begin a process of addressing this huge gap in the systemic literature between long term systemic practice on the ground and a lack of theorising and research around longer term systemic work. We want this book to both be a resource for practitioners and supervisors, and to celebrate a growing interest in theory-practice linking in long term systemic psychotherapy.

August 2019

Arlene Vetere
Jim Sheehan

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7

Long-Term Supervision in Groups: Opportunities and Challenges of a Language-Systemic Approach

T. K. Lang

Introduction

"It is fun to watch professionals work. They have so many interesting tools. You can learn a lot." A friend said this as we watched utility company workers trimming tree branches entangled with power lines. The experience reminded me of working with professionals in long-term supervision groups. Specialists in any profession develop unique ways of doing their work through years of practice. There is a lot to be learned through sharing and reflecting on this experience. In this chapter, I show how long-term supervision groups offer professionals a particularly well-suited context for reflecting dialogically on their practice, learning from it together with other professionals, and through this being confirmed as belonging to their profession.

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A Non-expert Approach to Supervision: A Dialogic Paradigm

As professionals, we are connected to other persons, to our professional field, and our professional past through continuously ongoing dialogue, in particular, a dialogue in the form of questions and answers. Therefore, an approach to supervision based on "a *philosophy of language*" (Wittgenstein 1953; Gadamer 1975; Ricoeur 1984, 1992) and "*dialogism*" (Buber 1970, 2002; Holquist 2002; Bakhtin 1984) has shown itself to be particularly useful. Such an approach is also founded on the firm conviction that "*the other is a stranger*," not reducible to a category (Levinas 1991), and that *truth* presupposes an agreement between at least two people, i.e., a "We" (Jaspers 1953; Gergen 1994). This awareness of the "otherness" of the other (Friedman 1976) together with a critical stance reflected in "an awareness of the power relations hidden within the assumptions of any social discourse" (Hoffman 1992, p. 22), is what prevents the dialogic supervisor from becoming monologic. It also precludes that the supervisor—disguised as an expert—directs and makes choices for the one seeking supervision.

Since the mid-1980s, I have worked with a group of supervisors developing a language-systemic mode of supervision (Anderson and Goolishian 1988; Anderson 1997) offering professionals long-term supervision in groups. While some changes have occurred over the years on account of members moving in or out of the local or professional community, several members of these groups have followed each other closely through the years, some nearly throughout their entire professional career. Notably, the latter has been the case with physicians in private practice and ministers working in a specific geographical area for most of their professional life. Others participate for as long as they occupy the professional position that makes participation relevant.

Regardless of which professional group members belong to, they express how the group has been of decisive importance to them—for some even a precondition—in accepting a particular job or being able to stay in it, particularly while working through critical periods or demands.

Much Like Peer Reviews

The supervision groups concern the members´ work situation and function much like peer reviews function when one is writing articles for professional journals. By narrating one's daily work and reflecting upon this narrative together with the group, one seeks to become the best version of oneself as a professional.

The group works through listening; recounting the story told, and then reflecting on it. Reflection takes the form of asking critical-analytical questions from a not-knowing position, sharing one's own relevant experiences, giving constructive feedback, and engaging in dialogues searching for the most professional way of doing what the narrator needs to do, or retrospectively, obviously should have done. All this time, the emphasis is on staying within the shared narrative, focusing specifically on the presentation of the story, particular words, and phrases used. To listen and remember what has been said is discovered to be a real challenge for many. Consequently, they make notes as the story unfolds, preventing them from forgetting or being seduced by their interpretations of what they have heard, thus enabling them to recount verbatim the story told. At times, groups may look much like a press conference. When this occurs, it is vital that the supervisor is an attentive listener, providing the narrator with eyes to look into as he or she talks. In general, one ignores language in favor of the issue at hand. Not so here.

The group's intention, in all this, is to clarify the narrator's professional understanding and perspective on matters in his or her professional practice. Here the group works following Heidegger's (1971) assertion that we do not know what we mean before we hear ourselves say it. In reality, he claims, we "see" with our ears because it is the language which brings everything to our awareness. Consequently, according to Heidegger, to think is to listen. Long-term supervision groups function, one may say, much like fitness centers where one instead of exercising the body is training to listen and be in that which has been said, in such a manner that the narrator can see and understand what the narrative tells. The group is interested in the narrator's comportment and attitude toward the intentional content that is being conveyed, in the philosophical and

ethical stands and demands that are becoming visible through the story told, and in the manner of expression.

Both intellectually and personally this is a demanding exercise, utterly dependent on group members trusting each other. Members need to know that what is said or done in the group, stays in the group, that whatever response is given or received is offered with the other's best in mind. By trusting this, group cohesion develops fast, and the group members can concentrate their full energy on being resources for each other.

In this form of long-term supervision, we tap into the individual's life-long personal learning process and integrate this abundant resource of knowledge and skills into an interpersonal learning network of professionals. A *social internet* among professionals, one might say—alternatively, an ecology of ideas or "minds," to use Gregory Bateson's language (1972, p. 339).

An Example

Erik is a child protection entrepreneur. He and his closest staff and team leaders constitute a supervision group that meets every 4th week for two hours. Coming to one of the sessions, Erik asks if he may take up some time on this particular day. He says he wants to reflect on: "What kind of leader am I?" "What kind of leader do I want to be?" "And maybe the answers to those two questions do not coincide?" The group gives him the floor.

He shares a story about how he and one of the team leaders had been in a conversation where it became relevant that the team leader responded thus: "Well, Erik, you're not one particularly caring leader. However, you are available. Lisa is a very caring leader. She, for example, knows the names of all her employees' children. Yes, even their pets' names she remembers."

Erik wanted to reflect together with the group on, as he phrased it: "Have I become a less supportive leader? One who wants structure and professionalism, and only comments when something ain't good

enough?" He then told the group that he was a member of a choir. On one occasion he had been elected to be the soloist at a concert. During their many practices preparing for the concert, the choir director not once commented on his singing. Erik had felt so bad about it, feeling he lost quite a bit of his self-confidence as a result of not knowing if what he did was right or not, in the conductor's eyes. He used this as an example of what kind of leader he did not want to be but was worried about having become, after having gotten the team leader's response. Such was the narrative he presented to the group and wanted reflections on. How reflections are done, will be addressed later.

The Groups

The oldest one of my groups, a group of physicians in private practice, has been running for 33 years, meeting 90 minutes every second or third week except for two months in the summertime and one month around Christmas. Through the last three decades I have been running, on average, some thirty groups like this each year. The timeframes for their meetings vary, depending on the frequency with which they meet, which again depends on the geographical distances they have to travel to attend.

These groups are "open groups," (Yalom 1975) admitting new members as old members either retire, move from the area, or for other reasons end their participation. They are also "work groups" (Bion 1974), groups that are meeting for a specific task, in this case, for supervision. Their organization and structure give stability and permanence to the group.

Some groups are "*mono-professional groups*," e.g., groups of physicians in private practice, principals in local schools, ministers, family therapists, supervisors, and different health- and social care professionals. While others are "*multi-professional groups*." Others again are "*trans-professional groups*" where whole staffs of institutions participate; or a department staff; a church staff; or psychologists, psychiatric nurses, social workers, family therapists, and milieu therapists working as a team

in different community-based "low-threshold programs" helping families, battered or sexually abused women and men, mentally ill people and drug addicts.

If the group members have to travel far to meet, they may attend entire days like once in February, once in April and once in June, and likewise two or three times in the fall. Others may choose to meet three hours once a month, and so forth according to what fits the participants best.

A Contract Defines the Context

All these different groups have as foundations the same "*moral contract*" between the group members and the supervisor, and between the group members themselves. It defines the context— the group's organization and structure—within which the supervision takes place. It describes in detail how each group session will proceed; the philosophy behind this way of working; and the obligations of the participants over against each other and toward themselves.

Establishing the rules of procedure and presenting the philosophical stance characterizing this form of supervision as a dialogical and collaborative process, is a precondition for the work. The groups are highly organized and the meetings efficient.

Though, the supervisor's responsibility in constituting the group and the supervisory process emphasizes, the group organization and structure need to be understood as "the product of co-operation between members of the group, and their effect once established in the group is to demand still further co-operation from the individuals in the group" (Bion 1974, p. 122).

"How?" "Why?" and "Who?"—The Necessity of a Deep, Reciprocal, Shared Understanding

It is a truism in this way of thinking that real communication between participants in a conversation will only take place where there is a deep, reciprocal, and shared understanding of who the participants are:

Who are you? Who am I? What are we doing together? Why are we doing this (Gadamer 1975)? Therefore, the first session always starts with an introduction of the participants. How the group will work, and why. Making sure that the supervisor's assumptions about his or her role coincide with those held by the participants in the group, and vice versa: that the expectations about what it means to be a member of the group coincide with the expectations of the other members of the group, including the supervisor (Berger 1963).

In the introductory phase of a group I often include telling about the three most determining elements when realtors price a property: "*Location. Location. Location.*" Then I add: "When you work professionally with people, there are three equally crucial elements: *Context-defining. Context-defining. Context-defining.*"

When the context is understood and mutually agreed upon, each member of the group knows the "*rules*" that will apply in the group setting. So, the "*play*" may begin.

The Group as a Language Game

Wittgenstein (1953) introduces the analogy between game and language to underline that language includes activity, action. A language game is a section of the language and the activities into which it is interwoven. To understand a concept, Wittgenstein maintains, is to participate in a life form. Learning to master a broader human reality. If one wants to play, one needs to enter the game and participate in it. In this sense, a supervisory session is like a language game. One needs to master it to understand it. To understand the concept: "a language-systemic approach to supervision" one needs to participate in it.

"You should try it!" is a commonly expressed response the first time a group member comes back in after having been placed outside the circle with his or her back to the group. Sitting there, he or she first had to listen to the group members' verbatim recital of the story he or she just told, while sitting in the ring, facing the group. After the supervisor has asked if the story has been correctly recited, the narrator may confirm this, correct it, or add something important that has been left out.

The group members are then asked by the supervisor to reflect on the story, while the narrator still sits outside the circle with his or her back to the group making notes of thoughts that may occur while listening to the group's recitation and reflections. Thoughts that are shared and developed further, when he or she enters the circle again: "What I discovered sitting listening to my own story recited, was that …." Alternatively: "When you were reflecting on my story, I understood that…." If an entirely new story about the "real issue" occurs, the supervisor places the narrator, after having told the new story, outside the circle again with his or her back toward the group. The same procedure is then followed, as after the first story. One of the most powerful effects of this mode of supervision, is often said by the participants to be "sitting with my back towards the group and experiencing that I really have been listened to and been heard!"

The metaphor of the game is also used by Gadamer when describing how language pulls the reader of text into a meaning-universe. To the degree the reader understands what he or she reads, the reader will be drawn away by the account. The same is the case regarding the story heard told in supervisory groups, both when the group members listen to the narrated story, as well as when the narrator listens to the story recited verbatim. "In understanding, we are drawn into an event of truth and arrive, as it were, too late, if we want to know what we are supposed to believe" (Gadamer 1975, p. 484).

Entering the game's world is letting oneself be sucked into it, which changes one's position. At a certain point, the game takes over, as if one becomes part of the game itself, and ruled by it. The players follow where the game takes them.

What makes working as a supervisor so exciting is precisely this: that one never knows *what* is going to happen, or *where* it is going to lead. One only knows for sure that something *will* happen, in every session, if we "play" according to the rules. We know that no one in the group could have foreseen, planned, or manipulated this to happen. Nor would it have been possible to make it happen without the participation of these particular people in the group. The supervision group becomes a professional creative room where new insights and understanding can occur by coincidence. We experience what Bakhtin (1984), like Buber

(1970), formulated as a theory of the inter-subjective formation of the self: in revealing oneself to another, one becomes aware of oneself.

Bakhtin maintains that "Human thought becomes genuine thought, that is, an idea, only under conditions of living contact with another and alien thought, a thought embodied in someone else's voice, that is, in someone else's consciousness expressed in discourse. At that point of contact between voice-consciousnesses, the idea is born and lives" (Bakhtin 1984, p. 88). If an idea remains in one person's isolated individual consciousness only, it degenerates and dies (Jaspers 1953).

Development Within a Professional Context

The context exists first. We are born into a culture (family, local, and national), where we learn to speak, think and act, so that we become part of that culture.

In the same manner, we have studied, learned the language, and worked our way through practice, into mastering the way to do things as they are seen to be scientifically or professionally correct to do, within the science or profession to which we belong.

After entering a profession through its initiating processes, it is a condition for maintaining one's professionalism that one participates in close communication with other professionals. Supervision groups offer the possibility of doing this. Since understanding is never-ending and professional knowledge is fresh produce these groups provide a dynamic and viable knowledge arena throughout the members' entire professional lifecycle.

As a place for sharing, truthfully, stories about how one works, these groups function as a tool for securing the quality of one's daily practice through letting others "peek over one's shoulder" to see how one works; asking questions about what they "see;" giving support, corrective, or applause when appropriate. Following Bakhtin (1984, p. 287), we can never really see ourselves, and can only get an authentic image of ourselves reflected in the other's eyes. He considers the other's gaze as a precondition for the person having a sense of self at all. Subscribing

to this view, we consider having other professionals' gaze on oneself as necessary for any professional to have a professional self.

One's "professional I" requires a "professional You": someone who can see me and acknowledge me and meet me openly and honestly in a manner that makes me able to hold on to myself and my stories as well as endure being challenged, so that I might discover new understandings or ways of performing my professional practice. Supervisory groups invite this process to take place through group members' narrating, listening, and engaging in exchanges with other professionals.

"The idea is a *live event*, played out at the point of dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses," states Bakhtin (1984, p. 88). Likewise, Gadamer (1986/1993, p. 108) emphasizes understanding as an event—as something happening to us, not something we do or achieve alone.

The group conversations lead the participants to places they never knew existed. Spontaneously an idea takes shape, is born and begins to live, becomes a live event in which the group members participate and understanding happens.

What one is witnessing then is what Hannah Arendt (1958) described as the creation of "a residue" or "a surplus." That which remains after the group session. The real product of the meetings is not what has been said or done in that encounter, but the narrative, the story that will be told afterward about what happened. That is the real product. "Oh, now I understand, and I know what I want to do!"

Alternatively, expressed in typical feedbacks like: "I was just about to say this to my client, but then I could hear your voice, TK, as if you were sitting on my shoulder talking to me, asking about my intentions in saying that which I was about to say."

The most substantial impact of language-systemic supervision comes precisely from this: the group members' voices become part of the individual member's self-reflection. Like Bakhtin said, "We are the voices that inhabit us" (Bakhtin 1981). As he argued, "it is precisely the individual utterance that should be made the central object of enquiry because it is there that the voices of self and other engage in an ongoing power struggle over meaning" (Chapman and Routledge 2005, p. 25; Bakhtin 1986, p. 89).

The Core of Supervision: Becoming a Reflective Subject in One's Professional Practice

This self-reflective inner dialogue—before, during, or after our professional encounter with our clients—is the core of supervision. It is related to what is called conscience (Latin: con-scientia, to know together with). One knows together with one's self. However, also together with others, whose voices may participate in one's inner polyphonic conversation with one's self.

Conscience shows itself as an afterthought, a reflection on thoughts and on what has been said and done. It functions as a corrective to one's future actions. Supervision functions likewise, nurturing inner conversations as afterthoughts: being about to act, one may hear voices from a supervisory session which guide one directly, so one knows what to do, or indirectly by making one anticipate reflections in a future session.

Zygmunt Bauman elegantly formulates this anticipation:

> Lives lived and lives told are for that reason closely interconnected and interdependent. One can say, paradoxically, that the stories told of lives interfere with the lives lived before the lives lived have been lived to be told. (Bauman 2001, p. 16)

This interaction between lives and stories seems to be intrinsic to our human nature. In a broader context, it also means that a human being is fundamentally social and socially interdependent. Stories and lives complexly interact with each other forming a social setting (Lang and Tysk 2017; Bateson 1972).

Critical Analysis of Professional Issues: The Group as a Language System

Such a social context is what supervision groups constitute. For as long as group members bring up themes, concerns, problems, situations, or questions from their professional work that the group finds interesting

and meaningful to talk about and reflect on, the group continues to exist. In the language of Goolishian and Anderson (1987, 1988), this is what makes the supervision groups into "language systems." If they do not have issues to reflect on, the language system—created by the conversation around an "issue"—dissolves.

It is, usually, more beneficial to have multi-professional groups. By bringing forth a greater multitude of perspectives on an "issue," it more easily dissolves as a "problem." Viewed from different perspectives, an "issue" may seem irrelevant, or ways to deal with it may occur as obvious, quite different from how it does in a group of exclusively highly specialized professionals within the same field. In mono-professional groups, one experiences more often than in multi-professional groups that members think they understand too quickly. Then they easily end up talking about issues in a manner Wittgenstein describes thus:

> "The general form of propositions is: This is how things are."—That is the kind of proposition that one repeats to oneself countless times.
>
> … A picture held us captive. So we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably. (1953, §§ 114–115)

Of course, this is always a danger in conversations. As Harlene Anderson cautions, "Be tentative with what you think you might know. Knowing interferes with dialogue: it can preclude learning about the other, being inspired by them, and the spontaneity intrinsic to genuine dialogue" (2007, p. 40).

Supervision as a Reflection on Practice

I define *supervision* as "*reflection on practice*." *Practice*, in its turn, I understand with Wittgenstein (1953, §§ 202) as "*a rule plus the applying of the rule*." Which in everyday professional language would be approximate: "My *professional practice* is what I do in every instance of my professional work, as a consequence of my training, doing what is the right thing to do, within that particular context."

One cannot follow a rule "privately." One needs to be trained to follow it, as one analogically is trained to follow an order. To *believe* that one is following the rule is not to follow the rule but to act on an interpretation. Consequently, any professional will have to belong to a professional community that verifies that their practice is following "the rule," what is right to do, within that professional field of knowledge.

So what is brought to supervision is a narrative of what happened in a particular situation during a professional's everyday work—something that did not make sense, or something so challenging that the professional's self-confidence is at stake, experiencing shaking of one's professional foundations as they are threatening to lose their meaning.

The supervision functions, then, as an inquiry into the professionals' understanding ("the rule") of what they are doing or intend to be doing when they do what they do in their practice and reveal in their telling about it. Moreover, the group looks at the way things have been done or said ("the application of the rule"), to see if this meets the standards of the profession, as an adequate response to whatever the situation demanded.

Long-term supervision in groups brings, unavoidably, into discussion the concepts and understandings of the particular field of knowledge within which the professional has his or her training. Are these concepts and beliefs adequate and helpful in the actual situation about which the narrator is concerned? Scrutinizing experiences from practice that turn out *not* to be satisfying, even though one has done what one usually does in "such situations," may reveal information that will make a difference to the narrator's future practice. In this sense, our groups offer a "*tool*" or a "*room*" for an active investigation through critical analysis of the validity of one's own profession's self-evident, or axiomatic understandings. Accordingly, one's supervisory group becomes an active participant in developing the professional field to which one belongs.

Outside the Hamster Wheel

Long-term supervisory groups offer professionals a place outside their daily "hamster wheel" of running their everyday practice, continually trying to keep up with an often overwhelming amount of work and

demands. The groups provide a viewpoint allowing a necessary, transcendent perspective on everyday practice, making possible the exploration of one's practice in depth in order to provide new insights. Thus, these groups become a field of knowledge creation as well as a continuous evaluation process providing quality assurance—an ongoing integrative process that may widen the group members' horizon, however, only by overturning an existing perspective as erroneous or too narrow.

Given the hermeneutic challenges in any human dialogue, it is demanding to be a supervisor with this philosophical approach. One needs to be highly aware that speech always contains more than can be immediately perceived even though the narrator both leaves a picture of him- or herself, as well as is personally present in his or her speech (Lévinas 1991). "People are what they say, but not what they say that they are." (Skjervheim 2002, p. 230). They are also their image, i.e., what they who meet them, say they are. When reflecting what has been heard and seen it is important to remember that the supervisor is not there as a specialist to criticize or correct the ones asking for supervision. Also, it is important to remember that their narrative—though revealing themselves—is about a situation where they did as best as they could at that moment. Finally, essential to have in mind is how telling about something that one is not satisfied with having done, is a daring and often scary thing to do. The supervisor has to watch out—"not so much that what you're saying is true, but that the person you're talking to can stand the truth" (Seneca, 4 BC-65, 3.36.4). Because of this one has to be very particular about how one starts the groups.

Laying Down the Foundations: The First Meeting in Detail

At the opening of the first session, each participant is asked to introduce him- or herself by name and in his or her professional capacity. Do they have any specialized education? If so, from where; and when; and what kind of specialist competence did they acquire by that? What kind of professional work experiences do they have? Where? For how long?

They are also asked to say something about their experiences with supervision and with participating in "a group like this one." If they have experience, was it good or bad? If good, what made it so? If not good, what made it so?

Finally, they are asked to say something about their expectations, here and now, at the start of their participation in this particular group.

If it is the upstart of an entirely new group, the supervisor usually starts the "introduction round" by introducing him- or herself, thus setting the standard. If it is an ongoing group, including new members, same procedure is followed plus the old members share, how long they have been in it; how they use it; and their experience of the group's value in their professional life.

The groups always sit in a circle. No table. There may be coffee, tea, and water together with cups and glasses standing on the floor in the middle of the circle.

The way the group will be working; the philosophy this work is based on; and a minute presentation of the contract that defines the group members' way of relating to each other, comes next. Often, during this presentation, old members express how they suddenly understand the importance of why we do things the way we do. Saying this, they sustain and develop the cohesiveness of the group and the group culture per se. Establishing the ground rules for the group's work together gives the supervisor as well as participants the freedom to act in whatever situation that might occur during a group session.

Fundamental to making supervision a secure "room" is the group members pledging confidentiality concerning what others are sharing in the group. What one finds out about oneself and how this affects one's further life as a professional, one may share with whoever. However, who said what in the group that made one see things differently, stays in the group. "Yours is yours. Do whatever with it. What belongs to others' stays in the group." If it is a group of co-workers making up the supervisory group, it is important to make rules, particularly about how the participating manager will not call anyone in "on the carpet" for something shared in the group. Also important to emphasize is that nothing brought into supervision becomes the leader's responsibility to handle

before the one bringing it forth in the group brings it to the leader outside the group. Sounds maybe complicated, but in practice, it turns out to be no problem.

The contract also contains an agreement on time-frame, frequency, meeting place, dates, what kind of issues are relevant to bring forth, how one ends participation, how one includes new members, and how once a year a session is set aside for evaluation. At the annual evaluation, each member evaluates his or her use of the group, how the group has been essential and shares thoughts on how each member, mentioned by name, has contributed positively in that member's perspective during the past year. Attending the group is also agreed to be a top priority commitment, in the sense that only sick-leave, vacation, and emergencies may justify absence.

If it is a 90-minutes group, I always make sure that I have at least 40 minutes at the end of the first session, asking one of the members to "jump into it" so that the group may experience a real supervisory session, learning by doing in the Wittgensteinian tradition of "meaning equals use."

The first meeting always has the same structure. Being pragmatic and not wishing to spend too much time introducing new members, we usually include them in the upstart meeting after summer- or Christmas breaks.

Long-term supervision groups provide a unique context, making conversations in that space very different from those in staff meetings, at nursing stations, or among colleagues, friends, and people in general. The difference lies in the quite particular and clearly defined frame, referred to as *the contract*: the mutual commitment to the collaborative work this form of supervision demands.

Trusting the Structure and the Process: The Format of Each Session

Each session starts with feedback from the previous session, either concerning the issues dealt with, what it might have led to, or how it was to attend. Then each member of the group addresses the supervisor's

question: "What are you concerned about today?" While answering this question briefly, the group agrees on who is "to get time today." Groups differ in whether they decide this ahead of or at the beginning of each session.

The one who "gets the time" then tells his or her narrative concerning a job- or professional field-related theme. After that, the narrator turns his or her chair, placing him- or herself outside the group-circle with his or her back toward the group. The story told is then recited verbatim by the group members, starting with someone reciting the first part of the story, followed by the person sitting next to him or her taking up the story from where the former group member left off, and so forth until the whole story has been retold. The supervisor then asks the narrator whether the group has correctly reiterated the narrative. If things need to be corrected or added, one does so. The group then shares, in the same manner, going around the circle, what thoughts the narrative has evoked, own experiences, or relevant material from the professional field, possibly, also adding short reflections on other group members' reflections.

The narrator is then invited back into the circle to share thoughts, understandings, or insights evolving or gained while listening to the recitation and reflections. If interesting new perspectives emerge, or a story about "what the real issue is," the same procedure is followed, placing the narrator outside the circle again while the group recites and reflects on the new material presented. How many times the narrator is placed outside the group depends on what new statements may occur worth reflecting on in that way.

Back in the circle again, the narrator reports to the group, initiating dialogues within the group that may bring forth new understandings and suggestions relevant to new practices. In this last phase of the session, experience has shown how group members easily fall back into monologues and argumentative modes of communicating, losing focus on the narrator's story and issue. Consequently, it is vital that the supervisor actively upholds the dialogical and reflecting conversation with a focus on what may be useful to the one "having the time." The narrator always gets the last word before the designated time is up, or the session ends.

What Has Experience Taught Us?

First and foremost: it works.

This kind of supervision in long-term groups gives professionals working alone the experience of belonging to a professional fellowship; it also ensures the quality of their professional work, keeps them up to date within their professional field, and functions as a unique safety net when times get rough. "I wouldn't have stayed in this job of mine if it hadn't been for this group," is a commonly expressed sentiment.

In addition to the group being essential in any individual professional's life, experience with this form of supervision also reveals how whole teams or staffs at institutions often benefit from it. The teams' professional awareness is typically strengthened. The same goes for their willingness to accept both individual and collective responsibility toward clients, colleagues, and others with whom they cooperate, as well as their willingness to accept the limits and possibilities of their resources.

The culture of the long-term supervision groups, as presented in this chapter, tends to influence the culture of the whole department or institution. After a while, the culture of the group seems to set the standard also for how people communicate respectfully with each other in other encounters as well. Colleagues are paying attention to each other in quite a different way and are collaborating more efficiently because they understand and trust each other more after having shared openly with each other in the supervision group. The culture of dialogue—the training in listening and in being-in-what-is-said—that the supervisory groups develop affects how the professionals engage with other agencies and particularly how they interact with clients, patients, and significant others. As expressed by the leader of four homes for traumatized single teenage refugees at the annual evaluation after ten years of gathering for 90 minutes every two weeks (except for summers and Christmas holidays): "These supervision groups are the glue in our organization."

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have emphasized the decisiveness of the contract on which this form of supervisory work depends. The moral commitment the contract implies enforces strong group cohesiveness, making it possible for the members to focus their full energy on being resources for each other and talking freely and sharing truthfully in a dialogical manner in the groups. Through this sharing of professional reflections, new understandings may emerge unexpectedly, not as something provided by a supervisor acting as an expert, nor as the result of a specific task performed by the individual, but as *an event* in which the group members are themselves, active participants.

Many people's tendencies to be self-centered, defensive, and afraid of living transparently and revealing themselves to others, are counteracted by the form of long-term supervision groups described here. The monologue of self-centeredness is transformed (or at least challenged) by the dialogical structure of the group. In the best of cases, individuals are freed from the confines of their single-minded habitual self-understandings as professionals and empowered to regard themselves anew through a plurality of available perspectives.

The concept "groupthink" from the group dynamics tradition comes to mind at this point as a challenge or warning. Irving Janis's studies of "the poor decision-making strategies used by groups responsible for such fiascoes as the Bay of Pigs invasion, the defense of Pearl Harbor before its attack in World War II, and the escalation of the Vietnam War," concludes that "in-group pressures" made these groups "the victims of *groupthink,*" resulting in "a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment" (1972, p. 9). This is why the supervisor in long-term supervision groups emphasizes, again and again, that: "Yes, this is one way to look at it. How may it look from other perspectives?"

I hear myself time and again assert that: "We don't get our life in order before it is placed in a narrative. The hope lies in that it is a good story!" Moreover, as this chapter has shown, I agree with Jaspers, who maintained that "the truth begins first where two are together" (1972, p. 93), and with Ricoeur underscoring how "we tell stories because in the last

analysis human lives need and merit being narrated" (1984, p. 75). Or as the American essayist, Joan Didion writes: "We tell ourselves stories in order to live" (1979, p. 11). These stories, of course, can be both liberating and destructive forces in people's lives. The author Maggie Nelson writes that:

> I became a poet in part because I didn't want to tell stories. As far as I could tell, stories may enable us to live, but they also trap us, bring us spectacular pain. In their scramble to make sense of nonsensical things, they distort, codify, blame, aggrandize, restrict, omit, betray, mythologize, you name it. This has always struck me as cause for lament, not celebration. (2017, p. 155)

Wittgenstein and Heidegger had the same insight as the one Nelson expresses here; their philosophies demonstrated how language bewitches us, creating a picture that holds us captive. However, these two philosophers also saw language as an instrument of freedom, containing the power the Greeks called *poiesis*, and we call poetry. The supervisor must be sensitive to this dual potential in language; he or she must understand just how powerful stories can be, as both creative and destructive forces in a person's life. One of the aims of the supervision is to challenge destructive narratives while harnessing the creative and liberating potential in fresh perspectives.

Ultimately, the approach to supervision I have presented in this chapter rests on the firm conviction that it is only when professionals reflect collectively on their practice that they become truly professional. It is only through the gaze of other professionals that they come to understand who they are or should be as professionals. However, the responsibility for the person I show myself to be, in what I say or do, is never the group's responsibility. The responsibility for my responses to others, and for my answers to whatever the actual situation calls for, is mine alone.

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