More Than One Way, or One Thing, to Learn in Supervision—A Response to Walter Stone’s “Thinking About Our Work: Supervision”

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More Than One Way, or One Thing, to Learn in Supervision—A Response to Walter Stone’s “Thinking About Our Work: Supervision”

Tzachi Slonim

In the same way that therapists need a theory of development, pathology, and mechanisms of change to guide treatment, supervisors need a theory to guide their work. For that, I am grateful for Walter Stone and GROUP’s editor Lee Kas san’s invitation to think and write about this important topic. As Stone notes, a recent issue of Psychoanalytic Inquiry was devoted to supervision, and from this issue he chose to focus on the contribution of Moga and Cabaniss (2014). These authors highlight the fact that supervision is an educational endeavor and as such should have learning objectives. So far, so good. They also note that each institution should determine its own learning objectives, which also sounds pluralistic and reasonable. The next step in their argument, however, is more problematic. They advocate for measurable learning objectives that are conveyed to students and used to evaluate their progress. They go so far as to suggest that “without this, educational endeavors float in limbo, subject to the whims of individual educators and unable to evolve in response to learners’ needs” (p. 529). And although one can presume that the preceding statement is part of a response to an authoritarian (and perhaps arrogant) psychoanalytic culture, where some senior analysts did not need to explain what they did, Moga and Cabaniss unfortunately revert to an all-or-nothing language that fails to take into account the impact of such an evaluative and paternalistic stance (i.e., “I know what you need to learn, when, and how”) on the student. It also wrongly assumes that all educational theorists share the same point of view. In this brief communication, I challenge this notion by introducing the educational frameworks of enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, progressive

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educationalist A. S. Neill, and analytic philosopher and antiwar activist Bertrand Russell. I illustrate the ways their educational philosophies can be applied to group therapy training and then move to describe my preferred approach to a supervision group, using Winnicott’s ideas on play and creativity.

If the supervisor’s goal is to “embrace, empower, and emancipate the [group] analytic potential of the supervisees with whom she has the privilege to work” (Watkins, 2012, p. 637), how can he or she achieve this? Having accepted the premise that supervision is an educational endeavor, I would like to highlight three influential points of view on this question in the philosophy of education (for a more detailed description of these theories, see Slonim, 2007). I chose these three points of view because they are located at different points in the paternalism–liberalism continuum and emphasize different aspects of the educational process.

Although known mainly for his ethical philosophy, Immanuel Kant (1803) also gave a series of lectures on pedagogy. In these lectures, he highlighted the importance of discipline, namely, that the educator knows what is best for his or her students and that he or she must see to it that they behave accordingly. He believed that, through discipline, the student learns to tame his or her unwieldy instincts and achieves self-discipline. In contrast, A. S. Neill (e.g., Neill, 1960), founder of the Summerhill residential school and a key figure in the free school movement, believed that children learn and grow if they are granted enough freedom. At Summerhill, classes (and often clothes) were optional, with the idea that by removing coercive adult influences, children can thrive and become the people they want to—and can—be. Bertrand Russell (e.g., Russell, 1935), who was an avid opponent to any form of oppression or suppression, cautioned against excess use of force in the educational process, which could lead to either resentful compliance or defiant rebellion. Instead, he emphasized critical thinking as the key educational ingredient. Anecdotally, it is rumored that, at one point, the school that Russell and his second wife, Dora, founded was audited by the British Ministry of Education. When the examiners arrived at the school, a young boy opened the door for them naked. Upon hearing the examiner shout, “Oh, my God!” the boy replied, “God? That is an unproven hypothesis.” The point is that even if we view supervision as an educational endeavor, it does not necessarily dictate a certain way of working. In fact, I believe that the exaggerated emphasis on measurable learning objectives has more to do with the corporate culture and its emphasis on accountability than with a sound educational philosophy.

Before I describe my approach to a stand-alone supervision group, I would like to imagine how the preceding educational approaches could guide training programs for group therapists. For instance, a training program based on the Kantian model would focus on content areas and skills (and be assessed via learning objectives) that need to be mastered, such as the ability to identify group themes, to utilize tactful interventions, or to formulate individual and group dynamics. A goal of such a training program would be to train group therapists who are motivated by their
sense of duty to their patients rather than by their instinctual (countertransference) needs for approval, love, and admiration.

Consider a training program designed in the spirit of A. S. Neill’s free school philosophy. A key role in such a program would be that of an advisor. He or she would assist the students in devising their own personalized curricula and encourage collaboration between students. For example, a group of students might be interested in Agazarian’s systems-centered therapy (SCT) (Agazarian, 1997; Agazarian & Gantt, 2000; Agazarian & Peters, 1981). They might create a reading group in which they discuss influential SCT papers. They might also decide to invite specific lecturers with expertise in SCT and to participate in the annual SCT conference in Philadelphia. Another group of students might decide that they are interested in the intersection of group therapy and psychoanalysis. Luckily for them, Grossmark and Wright (2014) recently edited a book on this topic. They might set up a consultation with these authors and then tailor a curriculum that includes attending psychoanalytic discussion groups on topics that intersect with group therapy. They might also identify group therapy experts who have undergone analytic training and join their therapy groups. In addition to helping each student devise a personalized curriculum, the role of the advisor in such a program would be to meet with students, likely in a group format (this is a group therapy training, after all), and continually assess their satisfaction with their progress and with the paths they have chosen. If some students decide that they are actually not that interested in SCT and would rather delve into Foulkesian group analysis (Foulkes & Anthony, 1957), the advisor would help them explore their learning process and provide guidance for their new learning path. Clearly such an approach would pay close attention to changing learning needs and desires.

A training program that emphasizes critical thinking would not treat students as “empty vessels” that need to be filled with knowledge (Freire, 1970) but as inquisitive subjects with valuable life experiences. The goal would be to help students generate their unique therapeutic points of view and to overcome their tendency to defer to external authority figures. The role of a teacher–supervisor would be to pose problems and to engage students in an investigative dialogue about these problems. For example, students might participate in a seminar where they read and discuss multiple approaches to authority in group therapy (e.g., Bion, 1961; Foulkes & Anthony, 1957). Such a dialogue would not be merely conceptual and instead would incorporate the students’ personal and professional experiences with authority. Although such an approach may seem sensible to many, in my experience, any attempt on behalf of a teacher–supervisor to relinquish—or merely reduce—his or her authoritative voice inevitably results in mounting anxiety. Samuel Beckett (an analysand of Bion’s) depicted this beautifully in Waiting for Godot, as the main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, keep waiting for Godot, who never arrives.
A PLAYFUL APPROACH TO GROUP SUPERVISION

Because most of us don’t have the opportunity to design a training program from scratch and are more likely to lead supervision groups in organizations, training programs, or private practice, I would like to offer an approach to a stand-alone supervision group that does not rely on predefined learning objectives. To do this, I will use my supervision group, which is part of the Eastern Group Psychotherapy Society’s one-year training program. In the first group session, after introducing myself and describing the frame (where we will be meeting and for how long), I invite the members to view supervision broadly and to use the group to discuss any professional dilemmas they have. I also invite members to share their felt reactions and associations to each other and to study the supervision group’s process. I then wait.

Inevitably, such an open-ended approach induces a certain amount of anxiety. Much like at the beginning of any therapy group, members are likely to want more guidance. Questions such as “What are we doing here?” and “What do you want us to talk about?” are to be expected. Supervisees have also asked, “How is this different than the process group?” and some expressed anger over the difference from what they have come to expect from supervision. I choose to begin this way for several reasons. First, I believe in experiential learning, which integrates cognition and emotion. The open-ended invitation and the utilization of the here and now set the stage for an emotionally charged group, which can be utilized for effective learning. Second, in the spirit of Neill’s and Russell’s focus on freedom and critical thinking, such an invitation makes it clear that the responsibility for choosing what to work on is on the supervisee. Moreover, the aim is to create a group atmosphere in which all of the members’ contributions, not just those of the supervisor, are welcomed and appreciated. Finally, the broadening of the supervisory scope is meant to encourage the supervisees to play—with ideas, with feelings, and with each other.

When I refer to play in the supervision group, I do not mean getting down on the floor with Star Wars action figures or stuffed animals. Instead, I am referring to a certain quality of conversation, where members are intensely concentrated, connected with each other, and spontaneous, in a way that resembles the dreamlike state that children enter when they are playing (see Tuber, 2008; Winnicott, 1971/2005). Content is of secondary importance, and a fluid back-and-forth occurs between talking about professional experiences and inner feelings using the shared language that develops in the group over time.

Unfortunately, play does not come naturally for many adults, who have been socialized to stop spontaneous or imaginative play at some point in adolescence (Cohen, 2001). And even adults who are fortunate enough to have maintained the ability to play and be creative often reserve this quality for their leisure time and not for their day jobs. Part of the reason for this has to do with the norms and

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2 As part of the training program, they also participate in an interpersonal process group.
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expectations of the workplace, which largely value the hardworking, serious, and diligent Protestant work ethic. Mental health agencies, in my experience and in the experience of my friends and colleagues, are no different. The pressure to demonstrate how effective, targeted, and efficient their psychological treatments are leads to an atmosphere that is not conducive to creativity.

Winnicott (1971/2005), on whose theorizing I am heavily relying in this section, equated creativity with healthy living and viewed compliance as “a sick basis for life” (p. 88). For him, the basic requirement for a therapist is the ability to play and be creative. He went as far as to say that therapists who cannot play may not be suitable for the work, and I would add not suitable yet. So how does one encourage and help develop the capacity for play and creativity in supervision? Here are a few ideas and guidelines.

Nice Gets Old

Young children, especially boys, tend always to want to be the all-powerful superhero or villain in the play. I cannot count the number of times I have been tied up, shot at, and even burned and frozen in play sessions. A sign of progress occurs when children can flexibly move between different roles, even in one session: when they can be the victim, the perpetrator, their mother, or even the long-lost dog. Similarly, therapists tend also to choose a limited number of “characters.” Some of the favorites are the unappreciated helper, the nice guy, and the smart-yet-distant therapist. In contrast to children, therapists don’t usually gravitate toward the mean (“I want to break my patient’s neck”) or all-powerful roles or characters (“Every intervention I gave was spot-on!”). By encouraging supervisees to try on different roles, including ones that they are not yet comfortable with, the supervisor is allowing them to “consistently work on the boundary between illusory omnipotence and helplessness” (Tuber, 2008, p. 123). And in doing so, they are becoming increasingly confident and honing their professional selves.

The Lava Rule

In his book Playful Parenting, Cohen (2001) describes a game parents play with their young child. They are all on the bed wrestling and imagine that the floor is covered with molten lava. Sometimes the family members push each other into the lava, and sometimes they rescue each other, depending on the emotional needs of the moment. By doing so, they can work through themes of loss, danger, rescue, and aggression. Similarly, the supervision group ought to tune in to members’ needs and adjust the interactions accordingly. Sometimes a supervisee may come after a destabilizing case presentation at work and need to lick his or her wounds, and sometimes the supervisee may need to practice being aggressive so that he or she can increase his or her ability to tolerate aggression in his groups. The key here is
to create an atmosphere in which members become increasingly attuned to each other. Simple interventions such as “What does the group think Katie needs from us?” or “If you were in John’s shoes, what would you need from the group?” can be useful in setting the tone for an attuned supervision group.

**Fostering Respect**

Janusz Korczak, one of my favorite pedagogues, is best known for his heroics during the Holocaust. Despite being repeatedly offered a chance to save himself, he chose to go with the Jewish children in his orphanage to the concentration camp. It is less known that his writings (e.g., Korczak, 1929/1992) about children’s right to respect were influential on the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child, which was adopted in 1989. In his writing, Korczak spoke of children’s right to be taken seriously, to make their own mistakes, to have their own possessions, and to be spoken to without condescension. For him, there was nothing worse than a child who is afraid of his or her parent or teacher. So how does this relate to the playful supervision group? It serves as a guideline, a compass, if you will, for assessing the nature of the interactions in the supervision group. Do members feel respected by their peers? Are they overly concerned about the supervisor’s evaluation? Do they value their own contributions? For example, I once had a supervisee who would start every sentence with the qualifier “This is probably irrelevant.” Play, and in turn professional development, requires a baseline of mutual respect. A well-known example of a supervision group that failed to achieve this baseline is Freud’s Wednesday Night Psychological Society. Freud’s refusal to seriously consider his supervisees’ contributions eventually led to the group’s falling apart (Frawley-O’Dea & Sarnat, 2001).

**CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

As Stone and others have noted, it can be helpful to view supervision as an educational process. I have tried to put forth an argument for the broadening of what might be considered “educational” beyond the current-day emphasis on standardization and evaluation. Children, adults, patients, and supervisees learn more, with less psychological damage, when they are treated with respect and encouraged to play and be creative.
REFERENCES


(Original work published 1929)
