



Julija Pelc

CASE OF SUPERVISION-OF-SUPERVISION EXPERIENCE IN THE SUPER PSIHOLOG PROJECT: JOURNEY OF ONE OF THE SUPERVISORY GROUPS

On the Way to a Kindergarten

The supervisory group in the SUPER PSIHOLOG project started its journey in the pleasant room of a counselling worker in the kindergarten attic of a villa in Ljubljana. To reach the room, the members of the group climbed the wooden stairs, whispering, on our toes; here and there a creaky sound could be heard, but the children's snoring was louder. The image of the naughty Pippy Longstocking, who resided in the Villa Villekulla, stole upon me. This was not surprising, as I was feeling as I always do when entering a new supervisory relationship, a joyous excitement before a new journey whose path is still unknown, because we are going to create it together with the participants of the supervisory group.

The villa is located on a green plot, among the city giants. The path leading to it is somehow hidden between the blocks of flats, turning here and there, and when the destination is almost reached a new circle of searching begins. However, persistence bears fruit, for some earlier, for others later, but the labyrinth of the unknown path was eventually solved by us all. It was good to have known each other before (the group had already collaborated in a workshop within SUPER PSIHOLOG), helped each other, directed each other, illuminated the path to the destination, and kindly accepted each other. The feeling of one's own accountability cannot be avoided in this context, neither can the emerging emotions.

Describing this reminds me of the work process in supervision – expectations, goals, research, temporary loss of focus, recognition, naming, reflective practice, making sense, experimenting, and persisting until reaching the goal. Besides this path to the kindergarten and search for routes in the supervision process, I see a parallelism in the fact that for the first meeting we had chosen a kindergarten, a place of entrance into the area of educating and raising a child. Months after this, on their new professional paths, the supervisors helped the novice psychologists and psychology students in the traineeship so they could learn a diverse and broad range of psychologist work, and develop the required competences, professionalism and autonomy for independent performance. The supervisors and supervisors of supervisors collaborated in the process of acquiring the competences of supervision and of successful implementation of the supervised practice, respectively.

The supervisory group was homogenous with regard to gender and area of work, and all of the psychologists were employed in the area of education and care. Two were employed in a primary school, two in a grammar school, and one was employed in a kindergarten. The group members had a great deal of work experience, including in their professional fields where they worked during the project implementation. They were employed as counselling workers, and in the secondary school were doing a combination of counselling work and/or teaching psychology. Despite its homogeneity in some respects, the group was heterogeneous regarding the ages of the children and teenagers in the related institutions.

Lifting Anchor

The supervisory group met seven times. In the first and second meetings we devoted some time to building rapport in concluding the supervision agreement in compliance with the recommended guidelines (agreement on time and location of sessions, intervals, the length of sessions, manner of defining dates, the importance of regular attendance, recording, responsibilities of supervisors and supervisees, benevolence, sincerity, communication style, the importance of telling each other less pleasant things, safety, trust and confidentiality, the type of materials we can use, what the supervisor's learning is supported by and what it is hindered by, etc.). We examined our previous experiences of supervision and familiarized ourselves with the method of work, course of supervision, and predicted structure of a session, the importance of material preparation, active and timely attendance, and evaluation, both after each session and upon conclusion of the seven meetings. We discussed our expectations and considered the goals – both personal and group ones.

In the second session we did what other groups had done in their first, namely we performed the recommended personal introductions (as described in the chapter *Development of the Supervision of Supervisors*). My initial opinion was that this guideline by our Norwegian colleagues was too directive and could lead to discomfort, as

Slovenians tend to be shy and reserved. Moreover, many people associated such personal questions with therapeutic work, and supervision is not therapy. However, the opposite happened, and I had a feeling that we were able to move closer together with deep level of connectivity, and our feelings of belonging, safety, and closeness were increased. Such a narrative approach contributed to our entering the relationship in an open, direct dialogue, with feelings of vulnerability, decisiveness and softness arising simultaneously, as expressed by us feeling greater power as individuals. While listening to their stories I felt respect and gentleness, and as a group we were sorry that one psychologist withdrew from the project. However, I think that a positive aspect of this project was that our experienced colleagues joined it on a voluntary basis, and that the resulting supervision presented a privileged space for exploration and discussion of various issues, which in the supervision process emerge on an individual level – both professional and personal – and at the system level. This caused a sense of being part of a larger group of like-minded people who were creating something new in the Slovenian space, giving rise to feelings of creativity and enthusiasm, as reflected within the supervisory group. Because of this the group felt able to unfurl its sails and head off into the unknown.

Setting Sail

During the sessions the psychologists exchanged valuable experiences and planned the beginning of the supervised practice with a supervisee, the procedure of directing the discussion and the establishment of an agreement. They exchanged information on the materials they had used, definitions of expectations, conclusion of the supervision agreement, timeframe, and the location of discussion. In this way, they got oriented with the materials delivered within the project. They were supportive of one of the participants who, due to geographic distance, experienced difficulties in securing a supervisee. All of them received support in supervision with regard to supervisory questions relating to the relationships with supervisees, their position and operation in the system. As they described it, for some of them the participation in supervision was very beneficial, because it enabled them to learn in a natural way by collaborating with other participants. They elaborated on the skills, methods and techniques which they had acquired during the process of training. Learning was enriched by providing separate feedback, which was very often presented and always welcomed. As awareness of the supervision process increased, it was realized how important the implementation of all its phases was, and that skipping or avoiding a certain phase would reduce the quality of the process.

A supervisory space is an environment where the group pays attention to details. The result is broader than the development of the competences needed to implement the supervision process. Collaboration in the supervisory group and in the project, according to the final evaluation by participants, supported their regular duties in

the workplace and encouraged further professional development. Moreover, it also strengthened the participants' awareness of the importance of the supervisor's role in the relationship with the supervisee. This not only includes competences with regard to communication, but is about the whole attitude of an individual towards another person, the co-creation of the work relationship, and taking responsibility for one's own contributions. Participation in this group thus had an indelible impression on the implementation of the supervision process.

The Group as a Mirror

Sometimes looking into one's own mirror can be difficult, because it is still foggy and gives a distorted picture. Subjective experience can fundamentally deviate from the reality that remains hidden from the person involved, and the resulting blind spots are also part of the story of those who can otherwise see clearly.

"I can hear, I know, I was talking too much," the supervisor-in-training, a member of the supervisory group, felt embarrassed before she presented an audio recording of a discussion with her supervisee. She told us that she had listened to the recording at home, and how bad she felt to have taken so much space for herself, to have been giving too much advice, not to have gone into more depth and asked additional more personal research questions. She was worried about triggering something in the supervisee, and the session not functioning appropriately. However, she gained courage and shared her experience with the group despite this discomfort and embarrassment. She realized that listening to the recording in the group brought her a different understanding of the situation. We thus waited intently for the moment on the recording where she would talk too much, but it never arrived. While it was true that another person in the group might have asked more research questions, the woman was teaching and counselling her supervisee, fulfilling the expected roles of a supervisor.

During the discussion in the supervised group, the psychologist realized that her own need to care for others was taking over, to do whatever she could so that others would feel good. She said that this was a familiar story, one that she had suppressed but which still occasionally impacts her professional relationships. She thus gained a greater understanding of herself and awareness that the supervisor acts as a teacher, therapist, and counsellor. Moreover, with more realistic insights into what she was sharing during the conversation with the supervisee, she was then able to effectively transfer this new understanding into further conversations, and increased her own power to choose how to move from one role to another, taking into consideration the supervisee's needs.

Duckert and Kyte (personal communication) recommend analysing audio and video recordings in the presence of other professionals, "critical friends," at least in the

initial phase of the development of the supervisor's role. Professionals themselves can be too self-critical, and thus self-assessment (which is very important) can differ significantly from reality, and may not be supportive of the professional and their work. As such, other professionals can be our mirror and a reflection of reality, and the process of analysis can be a means of empowerment.

It seems that it is easier and more comfortable for the supervisee to describe a specific case, and to talk about a particular topic, as it allows us to keep a safe distance. However, listening to a recording of such conversations brings another level: the perception of one's own voice differs from our inner perception, we can hear how we structure a statement, our own thoughts, how we respond to the words of others, what we react to, and what we omit; what our tone is like, how we articulate our ideas, and the rhythm of conversation; whether or not a word is given its own space for expression, and whether or not silence has a space for expression in the quietness; what we accomplish with silence, whether or not we allow it, how we feel in silence, whether we are the ones who terminate it, and if so, when and why; what our emotional response is like, what feelings we experience during the conversation; and what is happening in the particular moment when we are listening to and observing our own work in the presence of the group members. These are a few of the questions that can be used to strengthen our self-awareness and self-knowledge, as well as the awareness and knowledge of others, which can increase mindful attention, the ability to manage one's own responses and ask relevant questions about what we need from our work. This process is intensified when we include audio and video recordings in the supervision process, where every millimetre of non-verbal expression can be observed, and every millilitre of emotional experience is recognized.

It is important for the efficiency and quality of supervision that those who are to receive it look through any video recordings beforehand, have one or more possible problems ready and find video clips that are related to these. Moreover, less learning is achieved when supervisors and supervisors of supervisors do not spend time preparing for video-based supervision sessions (Kyte & Duckert, personal communication).

Individuals obtain more direct information regarding themselves when they actively participate in the process of case analysis, and when they independently lead a case analysis in front of the group. Different leading styles are thus clearly expressed. Researching the creative space of a supervisor (paraphrasing Cajvert, 2001) is important for recognizing one's own boundaries and identity in a particular role, as none of the suggested techniques works in isolation, and they have to be harmonized and integrated with our personalities. In our supervisory group, the supervision process contributed to a greater awareness and understanding of competences, both primary and enabling ones. Additionally, the supervisors-in-training developed the competences of providing effective communication, intervention, and evaluation. In their opinion, supervision enhanced continuing professional development and

brought to light the details of professional work. Overall, supervision played a significant role in the group members' emotional relief, and enhanced their self-care.

Cliffs

There are both visible and invisible cliffs that need to be negotiated, becoming visible when we hit them. Parallel processes are invisible until they are unconscious, only when they are "at work" can we notice them, perceive and gradually apprehend them, and thus eventually change them. Despite a spirit of openness and willingness, individuals can experience hindering factors that cause them to suppress certain responses. These are then expressed in an uncontrollable way, and thus the supervisor or supervisor of supervisors co-creates new obstacles. During other times unexpected situations occur which require an appropriate response.

Leaving of a group member. When to terminate a collaboration, how much time to give the person to decide by him-/herself whether to leave, what is the supervisor's role in this context, what is that of the leader of the training programme, and what is the role of a coordinator? Which information regarding the supervisee is confidential, which can be shared in the project? Due to objective reasons one of the supervisees was only present in the first session, and she officially ended the collaboration a few months later. During the time of her absence she was still regarded as a member of the group, we expected her arrival, but her seat remained empty. The participants thought of her in different ways, aloud or silently. All the members accepted her leaving as the most reasonable course of action at the moment she announced, and had farewell conversations with her. Nevertheless, the absent participant still was present in a way – as a person who had left. One of the participants experienced her leaving as a challenge. She had a bad feeling, and was worried that she herself had contributed to this, that she had not been understanding enough when expressing her desire for the other participants to come on time so that the sessions could start as agreed. On the cognitive level, she knew what was reasonable, real, and optimal, but her emotions took their own path. Despite the good general mood in the group, the building of deep trust and safety was a process which needed some time to occur.

Acting different roles. A specific skill that needs to be developed by the supervisor is the natural movement among the roles of teacher, counsellor, and supervisor. This affects who and how leads the process, the supervisor or supervisee. Initially, this challenge presented a field of exploration and self-questioning for some supervisors. However, when we could express our thoughts and discuss them in the group, we could then relativize and normalize our feelings and emotions.

Understanding a supervisee and self-disclosure. A group member stated in the final evaluation: "At the beginning of supervision, when the group has formed, it was difficult for me to share myself, my thoughts, with strangers. Similarly, working with the

supervisor was challenging, because we differ in our methods of work.” It is good that I, as a supervisor, had a real interest in finding out how I could contribute to a better climate and interpersonal understanding. For this reason, certain issues were soon dealt with by means of feedback, reflection, examination and “translation” of ourselves. Developing quality connections and relationships was very important for me. We operate from different approaches and experiences, which could mean a specific use of language or terminology which is familiar to some, but unfamiliar to others. Meeting and understanding one another on the border of diversity is a quality which needs to be built up in order to develop stronger and more trusting connections.

Agreeing on the time-schedule. We adapted to each other in terms of our desire that as many of us as possible could be present in the sessions. Slowly a feeling emerged that there was no continuity, and that fewer sessions could be arranged than was wanted. This was not true, however, and problems only arose due to issues related to coordinating the time-schedule of the sessions, with a longer than usual break occurring between the last two sessions. Upon conclusion of the process, a few of the participants felt a strong sense of belonging to the group and in the final evaluation they used the expression “We were ...,” while one participant was not so connected to the group, and said that she experienced more intense unpleasant emotions when working with it. There were factors of an objective nature which hindered regular attendance, such as health or other issues which meant that going to a scheduled session was not possible. Such situations thus became part of the group’s reality. By means of conversations and compassionate understanding we could skilfully avoid some problems here. For example, the rigid preservation of scheduled dates could cause the more frequent absence of individual members, which was not desired because it would cause obstacles to the overall aims of the process, influencing the relationships and feeling of belonging among group members, as well as the outcomes. Sailing around the obstacles in the supervision process requires the active participation of all the participants. The use of a permanent location and long-term schedule planning proved to be a good option in this case, despite the problems with absences that sometimes occurred. In short, when planning a project like this it is good to know how to deal with any attendance issues, as they are almost certain to happen.

Preparation of cases, materials. Occasionally, the participants did not have actual cases prepared regarding the implementation of the supervision processes, because they did not have supervisees or concrete questions. However, using an approach that allows for different topics and questions to be examined, there was no fear that we would not have enough work materials. Here, the “materials” can be the participants themselves, as they enter into supervision and supervisory relationships, and reflecting on this process can provide a new information that opens up new considerations. In our group we could focus on the process analysis, group dynamics, topics we dealt with, and what happened later with a case, we can encourage

more thinking about interpersonal communication, the emotions we experienced, group structure, its climate, self-reflection, reflection on others and the supervisor. In the group we managed to maintain a supervisory method of work, and so dealt with the cases through the analysis and exchange of experiences, thus increasing the well-being of all the participants – the supervisors-in-training, their supervisees, and the supervisor of supervisors.

Between the supervisory relationship and friendship. The supervisory relationships presented specific challenges, joys, and reflections to the supervisees and supervisors. Some of them grew into friendships, and in some cases the supervision continued outside the workplace. The supervisors thus devoted more of their time and moved some their boundaries, re-shaping of their roles. It is important to remember that both the supervisor and supervisor of supervisors are models, and as part of this are modelling how to set boundaries, which need to be skilfully arranged by the supervisee in his/her relationship towards the people he/she works with. In this regard, there were no significant deviations in the group which would require thoughtful consideration of the ethical aspects of this process, although the potential for ethical dilemma to arise in this context should not be forgotten.

Ethical questions. In the group we engaged in regular reflection on the following ethical questions:

1. How to set boundaries? In the events described earlier in this chapter there were no ethical dilemmas, however, they could have occurred if the boundaries had been crossed, depending on the context and the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee. The supervisors in the group were highly professionally qualified and knew how to manage the situations that occurred. Nevertheless, the formal framework of collaboration between the supervisor and supervisee can loosen, and in certain cases this can become counter-productive for individuals who experience difficulties in setting borders and taking responsibility for their actions.
2. How long to persist if the supervisee is very unskilful with regard to particular competences and the progress is not adequate, or he/she lacks the courage to try, or is a passive observer with insufficient initiative? There are great differences among novices in terms of autonomy, knowledge, experience, self-confidence, and personal traits. Some of them are rather independent at the beginning, and can integrate guidelines into practice; others are slower, long-term observers, before they gather the courage for increased professional independence.
3. How to realistically and encouragingly inform an individual who is over-confident and in his/her opinion very successfully performs his/her work to drop their defences and see the reality from other perspectives? We are aware that a novice has a need to present him-/herself in good light in the processes of mentoring and supervision, and consequently more often presents cases which had been effectively solved, or describes an idealized image of a work situation.

4. How much directedness should be afforded to a supervisee who avoids allowing the supervisor to visit him/her in the workplace, and should the supervisor visit him/her anyway? What if we are entering an environment which is not supportive of the supervised practice? What impact does our entrance have on the supervisee in his/her environment and in the reciprocal relationship? It is important that both the supervisor and supervisor of supervisors take both individual specifics and the broader context into consideration.
5. How to operate when the supervisor faces an important difference between his/her value system and that of the supervisee? We discussed this issue in our group, and found a solution which was implemented on the project level. It is important that the supervisor is in contact with himself/herself, and recognizes how disharmony influences him/her and the relationship with the supervisee. It is thus needed to examine how to manage the situation while maintaining professional boundaries and preventing a mixing of roles.

In general, and in particular regarding cases of ethical dilemmas, it is responsible and important for the supervisor to participate in meta-supervision or intervention, where the questions and issues that arise are handled with the help of the group, the supervisor, and with the required critical distance.

Distinction between the supervisor's and the supervisee's field of practice. "Can I be a supervisor, will I know how and be able to satisfy the supervisee's expectations?" The supervisor discovered while having a thorough conversation with a supervisee about her expectations, goals, and needs that it was not about learning specific therapeutic approaches. Questions regarding borders and other competences in psychologist's work relate to both the supervisor and supervisee. In this way she maintained awareness of the supervisee's efforts and of how to lead the process of exploration. Due to distinct fields of practice and different workplaces, the risk of including her own projections into the supervisory relationship was reduced. With an attitude of careful awareness she followed her own process and regulated the current goals important to the supervisee, adapted them by working together with the supervisee in order to better suit the supervisee's altered life circumstances and long-term goals. The skill of setting boundaries is mutual one, regardless of the professional domain. It begins with recognizing one's own needs, self-care, self-confidence, positive self-esteem, negotiating skills, ability to manage possible conflicting situations, and reducing the need to please others.

Storms

Is it wrong if no storm occurred? There were a few clouds, a bit of wind, but no storm. There were, however, some inner gales, counter-transference responses, and an inner dialogue: "All of them are so experienced," I thought. "The descriptions of their work express knowledge, enthusiasm, responsibility, an individual approach, accuracy. They

are innovative, devoted, creative, resourceful, skilful, autonomous, critical supervisors ...” It was as if I had forgotten that I had been responsible for the process, helping the group sail to the destination, and that at the same time each of the participants had to take their own and shared sails, put in some effort, harmonize the work, tune in, in order to safely arrive at the destination. They added originality to the supervision process, upgraded their approaches by writing down reflections, carefully deliberated on how to encourage the supervisee so that an optimal experience of the supervised practice was gained. They were thinking about themselves, how they operate, what the result is, what could be changed and improved. They were able to dive into themselves, feel the essence and understand how old patterns influenced their current professional relationships. Self-reflection and reflection in general are key competences of supervision. As one of the participants noted, the supervision journey enriched them with new knowledge, experiences, and methods of work, which is now more thorough, structured, systematic, and systemic.

Arrival

When after a longer period of time you step from a boat onto the ground your legs can feel unsteady, and the body is like a wave. It is good to maintain this feeling of movement when no longer in the project or the supervisory group. The development of competences and mindful presence towards oneself and the others surely contribute to the quality of the work that is done. Asking proper questions gives rise to different perspectives, opens possibilities of choice, and different understanding of the situation. What do we take with us from this project? Joy. A feeling of satisfaction. A wealth of new experience. Progress. The importance of regular meetings. Closeness. Connection. Attachment. Distance. Humour. Authenticity. The gathering of fruit. Reciprocal enthusiasm and compassionate support. A supportive network, and feeling of belonging to a wider community. Silent processing of an absence. Unarticulated words. Refreshed memories of the past. Satisfaction. Knowledge. Self-care. Skills. Proper demands. Competences. Strategies. Exchange of experiences. Awareness that one can be understood. Laughter. The full table of the host. Trust. Confidentiality. Ethics. Memories of tiredness and illness. Caducity. Constant presence. Adherence to an idea and people, even oneself. Connection with oneself. Quality. Vitality and a well-spring of energy.

Finally, we take with us reflections on the surfaces of thoughts which show that the openness, sincerity, and positivity experienced in the supervisory group can effectively be transferred into the professional environment.