

Learning through ourselves: the supervision group as a training tool

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Introduction

This paper aims to explore the importance of psychodynamic group supervision as a training tool in the psychology and psychotherapy professions, given how these are each characterized by relational dimensions. The contact between a client, who asks for a counselling, and a psychotherapist, who provides it, initiates transference and counter-transference dynamics. Supervision represents a space for thought, understanding and growth in which the therapist can explore, through their own subjectivity, the client's experiences. Thinking and observing our movements in the analytic space means looking at ourselves (and not only at our client) through a mirror that reflects the image of our own subjectivity.

We believe that a constant observation of our own inner space can facilitate professional growth, as it is quite impossible to enter a relational dimension with complete neutrality. We also acknowledge the emotional frame of a learning process (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1987). Unless recognised and acknowledged every psychologist expresses, not always consciously, her/his own more hidden, threatening, unconscious feelings that can be activated in the therapeutic space and therefore risk contaminating it. Being people who work in such intense relationships requires us to face our own emotions that are transferred in therapeutic work alongside all the defence mechanisms employed to neutralize the threatening, unconscious feelings emerging in the relationship space (Nunziante Cesàro, 2003). Conversely, working on a psychologist's subjectivity (considered both as the object and subject of knowledge) allows for the richness of their counter-transference to be drawn upon, by means of recording what is observed and reported through their observations.

Subjectivity as a means of knowledge

According to Balint (1948), the human mind could be considered the best recording instrument, unless strong emotions impede its functioning. Supervision becomes a means of understanding, a way to get in touch with ourselves and with the others. In our model we use a written report to

translate a lived experience into words; to see more clearly the impalpable and confused sensory mnestic traces that help to build up an understanding of what happens in the clinical work (Boursier, 2007). Nevertheless, a report is already a kind of translation compared with the richness and complexity of the lived experience. It represents our thought processes but is contained by the limits of our own language. In a sense, language has some "representative limits" (Ciccone, 1998) and it cannot fully explain the breadth of emotional experience. However, a report represents a way to communicate and share the therapeutic dimension that can be experienced (Scaglia, 1976) with ambivalence, as a repository for personal phantasies that are not completely accessible to the group.

In this way, group supervision promotes in its participants learning by doing. This process encompasses the experience of self and the situation we are part of (Bion, 1962): this includes emotional meanings, behaviours and relational difficulties that may emerge in the clinical setting as well as in supervision. Supervision allows us to see ourselves and the others through the words and images evoked in the report, to get in touch with emotions and experiences that belong to us and/or to the interaction with our client. Importantly this is achieved by exploring meanings together with the supervision group members.

The written report represents both a tool for sharing and a knowledge instrument for the psychologist, facilitating counter-transference dynamics. In this context a supervision group plays a critical role, despite the persecutory feelings that it may cause. Thinking and reflecting together helps understanding by using others to magnify the individual's experiences and thereby identify submerged thoughts.

Observing the other, observing ourselves

Psychology uses subjectivity as a means of knowledge. Borgogno (1978) thought that,

"psychological observation cannot be based only on watching or understanding, it should also focus on the being and feeling; this means that we cannot watch only outside the Self, but we have to consider what's inside. We can observe a person only if at the same time we observe ourselves".

This idea can also be applied to the psychologist's position in the double role of being part of a therapeutic relationship and of being subject/object of a supervision process. In a sense, it is necessary to integrate different levels of reality, their life, their experiences, their cultural system, and those values that characterize their way of being and of getting in touch with the others. These elements also represent the lens through which the psychologist experiences and elaborates the therapeutic dynamic, as well as their belonging to the supervision group. If the psychologist makes their position clear: what do they observe? But above all, which parts take place

in the relationship with the others? The supervision phase allows the elements that trouble and defile their being-with-the-other to be integrated, starting a decoding process of what belongs to his/her subjectivity and what belongs to the client's experience or to their own relationship.

The observations shared within the supervision group, together with the chance to compare with other psychologists, seem to play a key role in defining a holding mode. This is a useful frame to understand the other through the self and, in a certain way, the self through the other, keeping firmly the boundaries without being rigid. Scaglia (1976) defines the frame as "non-process based on those constants among which the process takes place". The setting is made up of those unchanging elements that allow the meeting to act as a holding environment for both for the client, that will be reassured, and for psychotherapist. Rather, we think that it is maintenance of the setting that allows them to use the potential of knowing and understanding their relationship with another person, both for his/her self-awareness as well as for a client's therapeutic process.

Field experiences

Our attention has focused on two experiences of group supervision carried out within our research team: the role of group supervision in a project called "Nidi di Mamme" (Mothers' Nests) and the supervision group for psychologists and psychotherapists involved in the psycho-diagnostic procedure for GID (Gender Identity Disorder).

The "Mothers' Nests" project represents an initiative devoted to support and prevent psycho-social risk in childhood; at the same time it pursues a social inclusion goal for women coming from difficult emotional, social, economic and cultural contexts. The project derives from the cooperation among different public services historically involved in a high risk area of the city of Naples, known as the "Spanish Quarters": this is a place characterized by illegality, urban decay and social exclusion. The project oversees day nurseries for children between 0 to 3 years, where women - hired from the 'quarters' - can become nursery assistants under the guidance of educators. The project model (Nunziante Cesàro, 2005; Nunziante Cesàro, Boursier, 2007) makes use of a specific application of psychoanalytic methodologies, such as direct observation and group supervision. These observations are used for the early identification of psychopathological risk in children and as a way of supporting development and integration processes within the nursery team.

Supervision of the psychologists is based on reading and discussion of observation reports, and the process also applies to the educators. It allows light to be shed on the psychodynamic relationships between the adults and children and fosters what we can call, a process of learning by doing. The

priority for clinical psychopathologists who operate in this social network is to provide an opportunity for healthy growth by preventing developmental risks and possible psychopathological outcomes.

The project ensures that every day nursery (with about 18 children) is supported by a team including two educators and one psychologist. The educators are psycho-pedagogically trained to work both with children and with the women helpers to pursue positive outcomes for the children. The psychologists are psychoanalytically trained to provide the perspective from which the group of children is observed, and the techniques through which the prevention programme is achieved. They join the day nursery once a week. During their time there they observe the class, meet the children's parents and the team. Both the psychologists and educators are supported by a supervisor who is well experienced in pedagogical and psychological areas.

We are aware that observers, working with their subjectivity, will draw from the richness of their counter-transference while recording and reporting what they observe; and that this enables signs of healthy development, or of unease, to be identified from the children's behaviour. Therefore, 'through the looking that holds and seeks a meaning' (Nunziante et al. 2007), the observation of children's behaviours and interactions (sometimes with their parents, but more often with educators, auxiliaries and with other children) enables the tracing of developmental profiles and the identification of possible psychopathological risks (Winnicott, 1958; Winnicott, 1965; Mahler, 1975). Moreover, within the team, the observer/psychologist's observation function is translated into a thought and word function (Boursier, 2005) that facilitates reflections and supports the educators' activities. The application of direct infant observation and its use in an intervention research project provides a learning environment for the professionals involved. The dynamic derives from the fundamental importance of holding as a principle of psychological supervision. This working methodology is innovative as it is based on the sharing and discussion of the observers' reports with the educators, which promotes their learning by doing from the direct experiences of emotional meanings, of behaviours and of relational problems in the day nurseries. At the deepest level, it facilitates the observing of self in the words and images of the report and therefore creating a possibility of being in touch with emotions that belong to the self or to the interaction with the other. It is then possible to handle and elaborate meanings by comparing with oneself and with others, within the supervision group.

Finally, the elaboration and examination of significance within these reports helps the educators to benefit from a mutually enriching activity based on exchange and cooperation. The model used creates a shared frame of reference and it initiates a learning process where everyone, in accordance with their skills, can become more self-aware and understand their resistance to change (Nunziante Cesàro, 2005).

Supervision can be a powerful means of learning not only for the 'Mothers' Nests' teams but also for workers involved in the psycho-diagnostic process of Gender Identity Disorder (GID). This group plans a weekly meeting with the workers that follow transsexual people in what may be called their psychopathological journeys (in Italy this is the first step of a psycho-surgical-legal procedure to realize the transition between the sexes). A GID diagnosis process does not seem easily achieved. It is a very painful journey for those who seek to reconcile their body and gender identities. Those who arrive at this frontier have often crossed a land of troubled reflection, of doubts, of fear. They are afraid of continuing to live in their original position (their biological sex); this creates an unsatisfactory and unthinkable link with their own body and a distorted relationship with the world. They are afraid to cross the frontier, and to embrace the unknown condition of the "post-operation" stage with hope and positive expectations. Sometimes we met people who have arrived at the surgical operation without any kind of awareness about their path, as if they have conceived the physical loss of genitalia as a miracle that would have solved their suffering life. It is hard to get in touch with the "post" fears, imagining the effort to meet a new body, to think impossible dreams (e.g. motherhood and fatherhood), considering too the probable loss of genital pleasure. However, if everything is unbearable and the present and the past are so painful, then the idea of a future life, even if unknown, can seem less difficult.

We have to consider the negotiation of such worlds through a therapeutic frame. At the same time, it is necessary to carry out a precise analysis of the client's demands while being aware that there is no way back. Once you have passed the frontier, the visa is cancelled. People become citizens of a new world, without the possibility of a migratory return. In this case it is vital to consider the psychologist's emotional background (Nunziante Cesàro, 1995). For example, which parts of the psychotherapist does a transsexual client touch with their inexorable desire to change sex? Which categories do they belong to? Does the client's belief, concerning castration, cutting and renouncing of a body (usually close to ours), frighten us, and how? How does the worker manage their desire to stop the client in relation to the acting out represented by the surgical operation? The supervision group aims to support the psychotherapists' elaboration processes, starting from the rich experiences derived from growing awareness of their counter-transference.

We consider Valerio's (2000) ideas to be important in terms of the counter-transference with transsexual people; he said that this kind of relationship seems to be focused on the "look": on one hand, the "transsexual's compulsive need to capture the psychotherapist's looking", a look that allows them to substantiate their own life; on the other hand, the psychotherapist could be irritated by a look that robs (expropriating her/him of her/his gender qualities) or decorates them (invading the worker with a gender image complying with the transsexual's way of being). Therefore, it is

fundamental for a trainee-psychotherapist to have a place for 'thinking about' such matters, as in the supervision group. This is a place where the dynamics belonging to the relational area can be re-actualized through the written report; a place where the elaboration process focuses moves from the client towards the psychotherapist; a chance to see oneself looking at the other. Supervision therefore seems to be a most important tool for a psychotherapist, whatever their intervention field. It provides not only the principles for a lifelong learning, but also, as part of this, for the psychotherapist to be in touch with him/herself: a necessary condition for the effectiveness of any therapeutic process (Rogers, 1951).

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