

# **SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN SUPERVISION AND PSYCHOTHERAPY**

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## **Abstract**

In this article on supervision, similarities between supervisory and psychotherapeutic activities are pointed out as well as significant differences with regard to the tasks within the respective professional fields. It is particularly useful for psychotherapists who are supervisors or strive to become supervisors to develop their own supervisory identity. On closer inspection, the basic and personal skills that both a psychotherapist and a supervisor should have are very similar. Essential in both formats is dialogical collaboration, which is a basic prerequisite for the relationship as a dynamic process. Another common aspect is empathic, scenic and biographical understanding, which prove to be valuable for understanding and analyzing personal and professional contexts. The difference ultimately lies in the starting position. The client is a person seeking help for a personal problem. Psychotherapist and client meet in the therapeutic space. The supervisee is a questioner for a professional problem. There is a triangular relationship between the supervisee, their work assignment and the supervisor.

**Key words:** supervision, dialogic cooperation, relationship dynamics, tacit knowledge, Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Supervision has become an important tool in the work and teaching of various professional groups, particularly in the clinical and psychosocial fields. For psychotherapists, supervision has long been an integral part of their training and everydaywork.

This article focuses on the field of therapeutic and clinical work, which is essentially concerned with the quality of professional relationship work and

professional action. The content of this article is based on reflections on supervision from the perspective of a psychotherapist and supervisor, in which the respective identity of the two professional groups is at stake [1]. In the therapeutic field, we distinguish between training and professional supervision. The former is characterized by a "teacher-student-relationship", where an experienced colleague supports a less experienced colleague in learning the respective therapeutic method, thus also fulfilling some sort of a control function. Professional supervision is primarily about expanding skills in the sense of improving professional tasks with the help of a trained colleague who accompanies reflection processes. The aim of both is the (further) development of one's own professional role and identity.

There have been many attempts to define supervision ever since the profession started to claim scientific legitimization, i.e. to conduct supervision research. I would first like to quote Rappe-Giesenecke (2003), who summarized the format of supervision very succinctly,

"Supervision is person-related professional counseling for professionals. Its task is to enable individuals, groups or teams of professionals to engage in individual and social self-reflection. The aim of this reflection is to review and optimize professional and methodological actions."<sup>1</sup> [2, p.12; transl. by UW]

and also Harald Pühl, who formulated another important aspect of supervisory activity.

"The goal is always the expansion or acquisition of competence by the supervisee or the supervisee system (e.g. team, institution). Supervision is therefore clearly part of a pedagogical tradition, as it is about learning."<sup>2</sup> [3, p.13; transl. by UW]

These quotes emphasize two essential aspects of supervision, the aspect of reflection and the aspect of learning. Supervision has its own identity. It is inevitably a goal-oriented activity, the main activity being a joint reflection of professional activity based on the relationship between supervisor and supervisee. Various levels are reflected upon: *counseling skills and abilities, professional*

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<sup>1</sup> Original quote from Kornelia Rappe-Giesenecke: „Supervision ist eine personenbezogene berufliche Beratung von Professionals. Ihre Aufgabe ist es, Einzelne, Gruppen oder Teams von Professionals zu individueller und sozialer Selbstreflexion zu befähigen. Ziel dieser Reflexion ist die Überprüfung und Optimierung des beruflichen und methodischen Handelns.“

<sup>2</sup> Original quote from Harald Pühl: „Ziel ist in jedem Fall die Kompetenzerweiterung bzw. der – erwerb des Supervisanden bzw. des Supervisandensystems (z.B. Team, Institution). Supervision steht somit eindeutig in einer pädagogischen Tradition, da es um Lernen geht.“

*roles and its boundaries, case conceptualization, emotional sensitivity, self-evaluation* [4], values and attitudes, meanings, life backgrounds, cultures, society, ethical boundaries, etc. Ultimately, supervision is necessarily aimed at autonomy, critical self-reflection and "going beyond one's own limits" in the sense of learning processes.

Supervision is focused on the work of the supervisee, it is a kind of practical learning, learning from concrete practical experience by allowing for shared reflection between supervisee and supervisor.

## 2. PARALLELS BETWEEN SUPERVISORY AND PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC WORK

There are some of the key aspects of supervisory work, which also reveal similarities between supervisory and psychotherapeutic work. I will start by explaining terms that can be found in the specialized literature on supervision and which, in my view, apply to both professions, such as empathy, empathic understanding, scenic understanding, biographical understanding, dialogical collaboration, relationship dynamics and implicit knowledge. These are, above all, similarities in terms of the skills and abilities that both supervisors and psychotherapists should develop.

Subsequently, the main differences between these two professional groups are highlighted, which lie primarily in the goals of the respective professional fields.

### 2.1. THE ASPECT OF ATTITUDE

"The most important thing is always the same: to preserve the human being with all his inner richness, to allow him to develop his energy for the good, for the understanding for others and for humanity."<sup>3</sup> [5 p.141; transl. by UW]

This quote initially underlines the parallels between the two professional groups. An appreciative and respectful attitude towards one's counterpart must be established in any case and will significantly influence both the therapeutic and the supervisory process. This means that essential characteristics that a psychotherapist should have, such as *congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy* [6] also apply to a supervisor.

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<sup>3</sup> Original quote from Ryszard Kapucinsky: „Am wichtigsten ist immer dasselbe: den Menschen mit seinem ganzen inneren Reichtum zu bewahren, ihm zu gestatten, seine Energie für das Gute, das Verständnis für den anderen und die Menschlichkeit zu entwickeln.

## 2.2. LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING

When we talk about empathy, we mean a kind of "resonating" with the feelings of our counterpart, we try to put ourselves in the position or point of view of our clients, to empathize with them, to empathize in order to learn to understand them better.

Supervision is also about "*empathic understanding*"<sup>4</sup> [7] the ability to take on the perspective of the supervisee, to identify with them to some extent and then to return to our own, to understand the feelings or motives behind their actions, reactions and relationships. In the role of supervisor, it is important and necessary above all to develop a basic contextual understanding. This means thinking in contexts and learning to better understand contextual dynamics and always keeping them in mind.

In addition to the supervisee's internal frame of reference, this also means exploring and learning to understand the external context in which the supervisee finds themselves. This is usually embedded in an institutional framework, which in turn is based on certain rules. It is therefore often helpful for the supervisor to have both field-specific knowledge and knowledge of how organizations and structures work in order to be able to identify and uncover interactions that are effective in the social sphere.

At the same time, supervisors are also required to develop a kind of "*scenic understanding*"<sup>5</sup>. A supervisee describes a practical situation, talks about their relationship with their client, possibly also about the influences of their colleagues, etc. This creates a scene of action sequences and relationships within the field of work that now needs to be explored. The aim is to understand the information and meanings of the scene, to get involved in the atmosphere of the scene, to grasp the roles that exist in it and the theme that underlies the whole.

The scene is the starting point for reflection, so to speak, and the combination of scene and reflection can lead to insights and solutions. The supervisor has to recognize the underlying level of meaning, which requires sensitivity and a willingness to engage with the experience of this scenic representation.

Self-awareness plays a key role in training to become a psychotherapist. It is about life-historical experiences that need to be grasped in their entirety. The holistic approach of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy is helpful in this context, as a holistic view, analysis and reflection of the life situation always start from the overall situation. In this context, life-historical experiences can be understood and integrated into the self. Within the overall situation, individual historical experiences as well as social and socio-political factors are significant [8]. This

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<sup>4</sup>The terms "empathic, scenic and biographical understanding" are also mentioned by Bernd Oberhoff as three levels of understanding, which can be viewed conceptually and methodologically as a process of understanding empathic.

<sup>5</sup>*Idem*, nota 4.

"*biographical understanding*"<sup>6</sup> also has an important function within the supervisory process. Certain problematic relationship constellations of the supervisee can be connected to earlier life-historical experiences and can be explanations for current relationship situations.

### 2.3. DIALOGIC COOPERATION – RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS

The ability to engage in dialogue plays an important and central role in both professional fields. Psychotherapist and client or supervisor and supervisee meet "in the here and now". The respective encounters lead to what Galli calls, *dialogical collaboration, which proves to be essential for the deepening and meaning* [9] of a problem. The relationship is the dynamic element that co-determines how processes unfold and develop.

Within psychotherapy, a supportive framework is created in the therapeutic space through holding, which enables the processing of traumas, stabilization and improvement of psychological states of suffering, personal change and development. Supervision has a similar aim of creating a space in which people can think and fantasize again, as difficult and stressful events in therapeutic work repeatedly lead to resignation, depressed and hopeless moods that prevent constructive and solution-oriented reflection.

Elisabeth Holloway [10] describes the supervisory relationship as a formal relationship in which the supervisee and supervisor jointly consider and work on the respective situation. The supervisor's tasks include asking targeted questions, formulating the problem as concretely as possible together with the supervisee, imparting specialist knowledge and sharing responsibility for the process. It is important to establish an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. The supervisor automatically assumes formal authority by virtue of their position. Appreciative behavior towards the supervisee, working at eye level, enables a reciprocal relationship process in which the relationship can more and more develop, thus contributing to developing the feeling of security.

In our work as psychotherapists, we have become experts in relationship dynamics, which is important and an advantage if we also work as supervisors. The relationship events within the work of both psychotherapeutic and supervisory events play an important role. Within psychotherapy, holding creates a supportive framework in the therapeutic space thus enabling the processing of trauma, stabilization and improvement with regard to psychological suffering and also fostering personal change and development

The *mutuality of influence* [11] within supervision and the resulting relationship are based on joint reflection. The setting represents a framework in which a process takes place that is based on shared assumptions. We start from

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<sup>6</sup> *Idem*, nota 4.

general structures, methods and categories, as well as intuition and understanding. The focus is on the supervisee's work, reconstructing and reflecting on what has happened in the treatment. What assumptions are there, how does the supervisee see their client, what feelings are remembered, both their own and those of the client, etc.? The focus is on helping the supervisee to achieve emotional and methodological depth. The aim is for the supervisee to be able to use their skills and abilities and, in the best case, to expand them.

## 2.4. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

In difficult supervisory and psychotherapeutic processes, it is important for supervisors and psychotherapists to have a solid theoretical knowledge in order to be able to act to the best of their knowledge and belief. Lewin's famous sentence, "*Nothing is as practical as a good theory*"<sup>7</sup> [12 p. 5; transl. by UW] The difference ultimately lies in the starting position. The client is a person seeking help for a personal problem.

Psychotherapist and client meet in the therapeutic space.

The supervisee is a questioner for a professional problem. There is a triangular relationship between the supervisee, their work assignment and the supervisor. underlines the usefulness of engaging with theoretical knowledge. It can be helpful and fruitful for reflecting on and analyzing practical experiences. Defining therapeutic knowledge is not easy, as it involves competencies on many levels. Theoretical knowledge is an essential basis from which methods, interventions and attitudes can be derived. At the same time, this also corresponds to a scientific requirement that is necessary within psychotherapy research and increasingly also in supervision research in order to be able to examine the benefits and effectiveness of theoretical concepts.

In addition to theoretical knowledge, the experience acquired in the course of training and professional practice is also an essential part of our skills. Especially when we learn from them to name and reflect on events and processes. Supervision plays an important role in this learning process. Sometimes we can only understand processes better and more comprehensively by reconstructing the treatment situation and reflecting on events.

## 2.5. TACIT KNOWLEDGE

Another aspect of knowledge should be emphasized here. M. Polanyi [13] introduced the term "tacit knowledge". The term comes from the English, "tacit knowing", it is more about a skill than a knowledge, "*we know how something*

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<sup>7</sup> Original quote from Kurt Lewin: "Nichts wäre so praktisch, wie eine gute Theorie."

*works, but cannot say exactly how*", i.e. we lack the words to grasp and describe it. Tacit knowledge attempts to describe intuitive knowledge that unconsciously underlies our actions.

"Knowledge, which is a skill, merges with the person acting, so that with the best will in the world it cannot be objectified. The doer 'embodies' this knowledge.

That is why it is personal in a radical sense."<sup>8</sup> [14 p. 350; transl. by UW]

This type of knowledge can certainly be explained with the concept of "demands of the situation". The actor finds himself in an overall situation, he manages to perceive essential facts, empathize with the situation, develop a so-called "feel" for it and does what the situation requires. He has the feeling that he is doing the right thing, even though he may not yet be able to justify it. In this context Metzger's quote: "*It is not the freedom to do anything, but the freedom to do what is right.*"<sup>9</sup> [15 p. 75; transl. UW] What should be emphasized here is the field of perception; we perceive a situation, we react, so to speak, with our "*explicit knowledge*" and at the same time with our "*intuitive ability*".

Therapeutic and supervisory knowledge involves several levels, and it is helpful to be aware of these. It is helpful for both supervisors and psychotherapists, especially in extreme situations, to know which criteria they need to pay attention to.

There are also different settings for supervision, such as individual, group or teamsupervision. In the latter case in particular, different areas can be focused on depending on requirements, such as case supervision within a team or looking at tensions and conflicts within the team. For a supervisor, this means being theoretically and methodically well "prepared" for all possibilities in order to be able to be helpful and supportive for the individual and the team.

### **3. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SUPERVISION AND PSYCHOTHERAPY**

It is particularly helpful for psychotherapists who also work as supervisors to develop their own supervisory identity without denying their experience and knowledge as a therapist; on the contrary, to incorporate and use it in the right

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<sup>8</sup> Original quote from Rolf Haubl: „Wissen, das ein Können ist, verschmilzt mit der Person des Handelnden, dass es ihm beim besten Willen nicht gelingt, es zu objektivieren. Der Handelnde ‚verkörpert‘ dieses Wissen. Deshalb ist es im radikalen Sinne persönlich.“

<sup>9</sup> Original quote from Wolfgang Metzger: „Es ist nicht die Freiheit Beliebiges, sondern die Freiheit das Rechte zu tun.“

place and to the right extent. But what boundaries and demarcations should we be aware of and take into account when we act in a supervisory capacity? The distinction is essentially to be found in the professional context and the associated goals.

A client who seeks therapeutic help has a personal problem which they are trying to solve with the help of a psychotherapist. The client is a seeker of help, the psychotherapist is a helper.

A supervisee uses the framework of supervision to confront a professional problem. She wants to better understand the practical situation presented, gain new perspectives and get advice that will enable her to act more effectively. She needs clarity and certainty about the next steps she can take in order to be responsible and helpful to her clients in her therapeutic work. The supervisee is a questioner, the supervisor supports her in finding answers and solutions.

In the therapeutic space, the work concerns the entire living space of the person. It is usually about healing in a comprehensive sense. The framework of supervision, however, is oriented towards the field of work; the starting point is overcoming professional difficulties. Although the supervisee's living space is just as important here, the focus is on the field of work. Biographical understanding therefore also plays an important role in the supervisory process, but in this setting the focus is on processes of identity formation with regard to the professional role and social learning.

In the field of supervision, we find a triangular relationship between the supervisee, their work assignment and the supervisor. The supervisor has to ensure that the goal of the work assignment, which was introduced by the supervisee, is fulfilled. This is what has priority, the point of reference. In the case of team or group supervision, we are almost naturally aware of this, but less so in the case of individual supervision.

However, it is also crucial to stress the boundary to therapeutic work.

These three cornerstones (supervisor, supervisee, work assignment) reveal a difference to psychotherapeutic work, the aim of which is to find adequate solutions or strategies for coping with the professional situation. This in turn means that the unconscious meaning of a situation, in the sense of a therapeutic objective, is only significant if it is related to completing a professional work assignment, in terms of qualified professional action.

It might happen that the supervisee's individual past comes into play or that the supervisor-supervisee relationship comes to the fore, e.g. through spontaneously occurring transference. It is therefore all the more important not to lose sight of the actual point of reference in order to avoid drifting into a therapeutic setting. Questioning and analyzing different feelings or projections "*in the here-and-now*" of supervision, which limits or impairs the supervisee's ability to perceive and subsequently to act, is part of the original supervisor's work. It is part of a supervisor's work to deal with these phenomena in a competent manner, even if we would may consider this competence to be rather therapeutic.



This means that if problematic relationship patterns of the supervisee become recognizable within the supervisory process, which can be traced back to the family past, then the origins of a professional relationship problem can be seen, but these should only be dealt with to the extent that they have to do with coping with the current practical situation.

#### **4. SUPERVISION AS A LEARNING FIELD**

Supervision is a special type of learning. The extent to which a successful learning process can be achieved depends on several factors. The supervisor is actively involved in shaping the learning process, she stands on the side of the supervisee and bends over the problem posed in order to ultimately share and reflect on it together with the supervisee on all levels. In doing so, she encourages, confirms and confronts him. She will try to give the supervisee security through a supportive and appreciative attitude, which allows him to engage more deeply in the process and helps him to rediscover his own creativity.

When a supervisee seeks supervision, he or she primarily wants to deal with a professional problem. At the same time, this is inevitably closely linked, often unconsciously, to a desire to solve problems that may be connected to unresolved relationship patterns. There are strong forces in people that push for further development and the resolution of problems.

"Although there are often strong forces working against right centering, there is nevertheless a clear desire in human nature not to be structurally blind, a need to center appropriately, to do justice to the situation, to center in accordance with the nature of the object, with the structural demands of the matter."

With regard to the concept of centering, it seems to be tacitly acknowledged that proper centering with its effects on objectivity and justice is of utmost importance."<sup>10</sup> [16 p. 26; transl. by UW]

Within supervision, the willingness of the supervisee to bring in current problematic relationship patterns is of essential importance. Therefore, the relationship with the supervisor and the supervisee's current resources will also be

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<sup>10</sup> Original quote from Max Wertheimer: „Obschon es vielfach starke Kräfte gibt, die gegen die rechte Zentrierung wirken, ist es gleichwohl im menschlichen Wesen ein klares Verlangen, nicht strukturelle Blindheit zu sein, ein Bedürfnis, sachgemäß zu zentrieren, der Lage gerecht zu werden, im Einklang mit der Natur des Gegenstandes, mit den strukturellen Forderungen der Sache zu zentrieren. Hinsichtlich des Begriffes der Zentrierung scheint man doch stillschweigend anzuerkennen, dass sachgemäße Zentrierung mit ihren Auswirkungen auf Sachlichkeit und Gerechtigkeit von äußerster Wichtigkeit ist.“

decisive in determining the extent to which a successful learning process can be achieved. That way, the supervisee can master relationships that posed difficulties in the past more easily, thus promoting a sense of self-responsibility.

Similar to the therapeutic process, phenomena of defense and resistance can occur. Within the supervisory process, resistance is that which opposes the clarification work in the supervisory process. This resistance can manifest itself in different ways and should be viewed and justified in different ways by the supervisor.

Resistance can sometimes only be dealt with to a limited extent within supervision. The limitation lies in the actual goal of supervision, namely to develop the necessary skills or to overcome a disturbance in the ability to learn in order to be able to act adequately in the field of work. It is particularly difficult when the supervisee's resistance manifests itself in a transference in the here-and-now of supervision.

Ultimately, it will always depend on the extent to which a supervisee can face up to the "*demand character*" [17], what resources they bring along to engage in the supervisory process, to face up to the necessary demands, so to speak, or to allow them to be uncovered.

The development of our professional identity, regardless of the field, is necessarily linked to our willingness and enjoyment of different learning processes and making good use of them.

"Our individual identity is not created in solitary isolation, but in interaction with others, that is, in dialogue. Therefore, it depends on the character of these relationships who each of us will become."<sup>11 12</sup> [18 p. 197; transl. by UW]

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<sup>11</sup> Original quote from Rystard Kapucinsky: „Unsere individuelle Identität entsteht nicht in einsamer Isolation, sondern in Interaktion mit anderen, das heißt im Dialog. Daher hängt es vom Charakter dieser Beziehungen ab, wer jeder von uns werden wird.“

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