HOW TO USE THE "GROUP DYNAMIC SPACE" IN SUPERVISION

UPORABA »PROSTORA SKUPINSKE DINAMIKE« PRI SUPERVIZIJI

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ABSTRACT

Working in and with groups is common in supervisory work. Nevertheless, competencies in group dynamic theory and practice vary. We present an outline of a group dynamic theory and its possible application in supervisory work by applying it to a model of supervisory competencies.

"I have striven not to laugh at human actions, not to weep at them, not to hate them, but to understand them." Baruch Spinoza, Tractatus Politicus, 1676

KEYWORDS: *group supervision, group dynamic space, change.*

POVZETEK

Pri superviziji je pogosto prisotno delo s skupinami in v skupinah. Kljub temu se kompetence pri teoriji in praksi skupinske

dinamike razlikujejo. Članek predstavi teorijo skupinske dinamike in razišče, kako bi jo bilo mogoče uporabiti pri modelu kompetenc za supervizijo.

>»Prizadevam si, da se človeškim dejanjem ne bi smejal, jih ne bi objokoval, ne sovražil, temveč bi jih razumel.« Baruch Spinoza, Politična razprava (Tractatus Politicus), 1676*

KLJUČNE BESEDE: *skupinska supervizija, prostor skupinske dinamike, sprememba.*

WE WORK IN GROUPS, BUT WITH WHICH COMPETENCIES?

Supervision without groups is almost unthinkable. Even more, when it comes to facilitation, mediation, organizational development, and all the other work-related consulting formats, working with groups is indispensable. Hence, it is highly likely that all supervisors count "working in and with groups" among their competences—and rightly so. It is necessary, too: dynamics in groups can influence our behaviour beyond most other factors. They influence our well-being, and our ability to work and to achieve results.

Our backgrounds vary—many schools of thought (be they the systemic, psychodrama, Gestalt or any of the other many schools) developed different approaches on how to interpret, use, and approach groups. The knowledge and practice of dedicated group dynamics theory and practice is scarce among supervision experts. This is in part understandable: group dynamic theory with its roots in depth psychology and psychoanalysis is sometimes difficult to understand. The institutionalization of academic research collides with the group dynamic paradigm of "communities of theory-generating practice"—in fact, there is no academic chair for group dynamics I know of. Its training with its inherent practice of confrontation and self-reflection is much harder to sell on the education market than other more toolbox-oriented approaches. A practice grounded on the development of the inner self—"being a tool" rather than "having a tool"—seems to be falling out of time.

On the other hand, we tend to neglect what we lose. Human psychology has changed much less than its cultural, societal, and economic environment. Humans are still a species which mostly decides based on subconscious—hence unknown—processes and who employ their ratio to rectify the decision they have made there (a rather polemic diagnosis with solid psychological foundation made by Haidt (2012)). So, if most of our actions are from our subconsciousness, why not use it? And there is no better place for our subconsciousness to surface than in groups. As practitioners of group dynamics, we are still convinced that the understanding of at least some essential group dynamic theories can provide an important contribution to supervisors in their work with groups and teams.

THE GROUP DYNAMIC SPACE

"There is nothing as practical as a good theory"—a quote attributed to Kurt Lewin, definitely the most prominent founder of group dynamics. But we have to bear in mind that a theory is primarily helpful as a guidance to interpret the chaos our five senses pick up. We all have theories about group dynamics—if we cannot name them, they are implicit and unknown. Nevertheless, what we see with a theory is not a fact, but a perception: "Facts are like cows. If you look them in the face hard enough, they generally run away", says Sayers (1958, p. 67). In this sense, the formulated theory helps us to make more guided perceptions and to reflect our implicit theories about groups. Sometimes, they then run away for good.

The idea of a group dynamic space dates back to the aforementioned Kurt Lewin. In his field theory, he describes how the complex social interactions in a group create a dynamic field which influences our behaviour in such a way that a particular action is more likely than another (Antons & Stützle-Hebel, 2015). That idea found fertile ground: Schutz (1966) developed the idea of three dimensions—belonging, intimacy, and power. As a two-dimensional "field" would not fit logically, the term "group dynamic space" emerged and was further developed by more recent scholars (Antons et al., 2004). What do these three dimensions mean?

BELONGING

 "Belonging" distinguishes between inside and outside. This distinction is the very basis of a group: it establishes the space, in which the group acts and develops, and the boundary to the outside, where it doesn't. Lewin called this boundary "group skin", thinking of it as a semipermeable membrane: It lets something through, but still, there is inside and outside, and it is possible to tell the one from the other.

At the personal level, this boundary serves as protection: you might be a neglected or discriminated member of the group, but still a member—maybe not heard or allowed to speak but allowed to exist here. Being along or "in" this skin is very delicate: affectively charged, endangered, sometimes also powerful as a gatekeeper to the outside world. Since historically the Jews used to blame a goat for all their sins and send it out into the desert to die (in fact they blamed two scapegoats and ate one of them in a cathartic feast, a literal "integration exercise" of the excluded self), exclusion is a terrible threat.

At the group level, this distinction between inside and outside stabilizes the group. The skin regulates the entry or exit of persons and the perception of information. We see the outside distorted and filtered through a set of implicit collective assumptions. Without this skin, the group will either disintegrate at the first sign of trouble or else import basic assumptions and norms from the outside, incapable to act autonomously. Protected by this skin, dissent is possible so that the group can develop.

INTIMACY

"Intimacy" establishes individual contact and enables us to share the feeling of being close to each other. Let's remember that being in groups is a state which can be inherently fearful too: We are unable to predict with certainty everyone else's feelings and reactions towards us. Our subconsciousness reacts to this anxiety and searches for a remedy, and that is allies. Symptoms of intimacy can be of a very transparent nature, such as spending breaks together or openly referring to "we" in front of others. It also has very subtle forms, such as who we pay attention to, who seeks eye contact, or who supports whom in interventions.

At the personal level, it also allows us to be different without being all alone. It is the axis of like and dislike and the space for sharing more intimate thoughts and feelings. If a group does not allow intimacy, fear will be high. Rarely anyone would expose anything from the unprotected inner self. Many might feel lonely.

At the group level, intimacy holds two keys to its dynamic potential. The first key is the regulation of feelings, especially fear. This creates an environment in which contact can be established and trust developed. The second key is the ability to differentiate: We cannot be equally close to everybody in the group. Therefore, intimacy is fearful as well as comforting, including and excluding alike.

POWER

We must be careful with the concept of power, as it is understood in many different, contradictory ways, often emotionally charged. We see power as a social process which emerges while people interact—a definition we owe to the philosopher Arendt (1970). It reduces complexity and creates "order" by establishing hierarchy. It is a property of a social relation: Leading comes from following, thus power comes from people voluntarily doing and supporting what others do and say. Arendt describes "following" as the autonomous and willful act to replace one's own will against another.

At the individual level, power relieves us from complexity. We don't have to think it all through by ourselves. It also offers protection in the uncertainty of an enterprise failing, because it is easier to think "we failed" than "I failed". In such a group, we dare more and achieve more. It also enables us to feel the strength of having more than just one body, being able to achieve so much more than alone. It also enables us to experience the twin of trust and responsibility: Followers trade their will for trust, leaders assume responsibility not only for themselves, but also for their followers.

At a group level, power enables groups to move forward: The group can take decisions and develop coordinated actions. It can implement strategies that reach beyond first signs of mischief or failure. If a group is unable to establish power relationships (such as when the first to call for action is denounced or ignored or otherwise punished), the group won't achieve anything.

HOW THE DIMENSIONS SHAPE THE SPACE

The theory says these three dimensions relate to each other in a permanent meta process: The group wanders dynamically in its focus between the dimensions. As humans have the tendency to make sense of a situation, groups do too. We understand this process as being very dynamic: Focus can shift in moments, or it can stay for hours like the infamous "elephant in the room". Unresolved dimensions tend to come back like the very same morning in the famous film "Groundhog Day".

We can also understand the space between the three axes as the space which is accessible to the group in a particular moment: Which span and which dynamics of (for example) power can be sustained? The larger the space the group "allows", the higher the ability of the group to regulate itself.

We can understand this as a mostly implicit process: Only on rare occasions, is the group aware of its wandering between those dimensions. People mostly follow their affections and instincts. They work hard to make sense of a situation to reduce the emotional pressure and to feel more at ease. The resulting behaviour feeds Lewin's interdependent "field", making the group move. Some axes might be more dominant in typical phases such as the beginning or the end of a group process, but the theory of the group dynamic space is not a phase theory: it does not describe a specific process, but a space for a process which develops individually in every group. This is what makes every group unique.
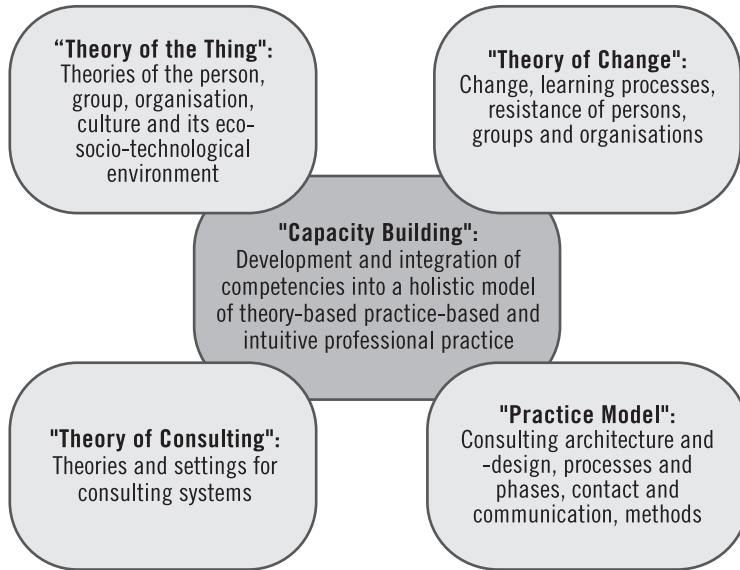
HOW TO USE THE THEORY

We owe our thanks to the organizational developer David Kantor and the supervisor Kornelia Rappe-Giesecke (2002) for a precise, manageable framework for the knowledge and capabilities that supervisors need. We will first peak into this model (see FIG. 1), so that we can explore what a group dynamic theory has to offer.

In the "Theory of the Thing" we collect the competencies to understand the objects we deal with. In the context of supervision, that is the person, the group, the organization, and its environment, namely society, culture, and economy (and frankly, we should have

FIG. 1
Competence Model (David Kantor (Rappe-Giesecke, 2002) and with own modifications)

"Theory of the Thing":
Theories of the person, group, organisation, culture and its eco-socio-technological environment

"Theory of Change":
Change, learning processes, resistance of persons, groups and organisations

"Capacity Building":
Development and integration of competencies into a holistic model of theory-based practice-based and intuitive professional practice

"Theory of Consulting":
Theories and settings for consulting systems

"Practice Model":
Consulting architecture and -design, processes and phases, contact and communication, methods

known more and earlier about ecology which determines our survival in the next hundred years).

In the "Theory of Change" we collect competencies to understand how these develop and how intentional development can be introduced and guided. People, groups, and institutions change all the time—supervisors and OD practitioners are usually called into the field when there is a perceived need of intentional change.

To accompany a system a "Theory of Consulting" is needed. König (2003) argues that we have an "impossible profession", working not for somebody, but only with somebody, having a "relationship profession". This is why it is sometimes difficult to describe to outsiders what we actually do. We do this, for example, by knowing about setting, typology of consulting, phases, basic assumptions, and basic epistemology.

The "Practice Model" is our toolbox. It contains our process models and all other interventions which put our theories of change and consulting in practice. Logically, this container has very diverse content, depending on the schools of thought we originate from, our professional and personal environment, and personal preferences.

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"Capacity Building" makes this picture complete and indicates that knowing a lot might make us wise, but not capable. To intervene our way, our theories and methods need to sink into an intuitive practice with many names, such as "attitude" (Krizanits, 2015) or "the use of self" (Rainey & Jones, 2014). Rappe-Giesecke (2002, p. 56) says: "The application of methods in supervision has to go through 'the needle's hole' of self reflection". This practice needs to be trained and constantly maintained. It evolves over time in constant contact with our environments.

These five spaces of competence all work together. Concentrating too much on only a few of them lets us fail in practice.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE GROUP DYNAMIC SPACE TO OUR COMPETENCIES

On the **"Theory of the Thing",** the first item is fairly obvious: The theory rests well between the theories about individuals and organizations. It is one of many concepts of how we can perceive groups from a particular group dynamic angle: The angle that assumes that group dynamics are driven by emotions, and that this "field" (Lewin) is self-governing: The group cares itself about its inner functioning. It is also a theory which describes group development as a dynamic, unforeseeable process. (König & Schattenhofer, 2022, p. 23f) describe the "vertical cut" between the group and the environment (see **FIG. 2**), which is twofold. On the one hand, the group meets individual inner environments of their group members (the "psycho-cut"). On the other hand, the group meets the outer environment of its own context (the "socio-cut"). When wandering around in its group dynamic space, the group influences and is influenced by both environments. We can understand the group's movement as a reaction to its perception of these both "outside worlds".

On the **"Theory of Change"**, the important assumption might be that we need to say goodbye to the notion that change is a continuous development. Extra miles and setbacks are not an aberration of the norm, but a result of systems changing all the time with the intention to adapt and to stabilize in their perceived context. Imagine a person standing still: We would fall if we didn't stabilize our equilibrium in constant movement.

FIG. 2
The "two cuts" of group dynamics (König & Schattenhofer, 2022, p. 25)
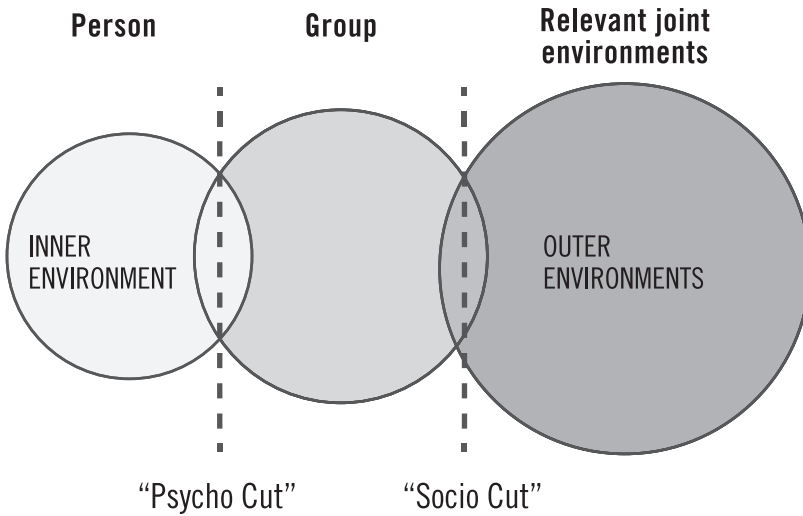
It might make sense to see this simultaneous movement-and-stabilization through Lewin's old theory about change: "unfreeze – move – refreeze". We can think of the attempts of a group to tackle a certain dimension as an attempt to unfreeze in order to establish conditions for movement. If a group discusses leadership repeatedly, then it might attempt to establish power structures. Once it is established, who is listening to whom, the group can move.

In this process of movement-and-stabilization, groups tend to wander around those dimensions that emerge in the group process as being most prominent in a particular time, like a cat sneaking around a pot of hot food. It is useful to assume that there are reasons as to which pot a group sneaks around. As outsiders, we might not know them. But we can ask ourselves what would enable the group to move into the direction it wants or needs to go.

On the **"Theory of Consulting"**, the group dynamic space might be helpful to understand our role as supervisors in a group. Kurt Lewin's group dynamic theories emerged out of the practice of action research (Adelman, 1993), which in short redefines participation in a group: we all participate in observing, intervening.

We all are on a research path of ourselves, in different roles. As a supervisor, we can assume a role to support the group in its internal development. We are not part of the team we supervise, but part of the group. In this case, the relations within the group are as relevant as the relations with us. The most important distinction of our role as group dynamic supervisors is that we do not focus on the task the group is engaged in, but on the interaction, how the group engages: While the group may discuss an issue of leadership with their team leader, we focus on how the group handles leadership in the here and now. Then we have a diagnostic basis for how to support the group in establishing leadership to move. We might do this in relating our observations, but more often we will just intervene according to it without relating. Consider the following example from a recent supervision setting:

A team of street workers frequently complains about "the organization" as a whole, without being really precise. Complain is about all they do—ideas about tackling their own situation remain sporadic and weak.

Based on a group dynamic view, we think along the questions: "What is happening in the group so that it does what it does?" We might not know, but relying on the assumption that the group stabilizes and adapts to its perceived environment, I conclude: The members don't see much of an environment: They are imprecise, they generalize, they resist something they don't really name. In my diagnosis, I focus on the dimension of "belonging", which seems to be so strong ("we against all the rest") that it is virtually impossible to differentiate—a flock sticking together, locked in, endangered.

What does the group need to "unfreeze"? It is internal differentiation: I notice that there are small glimpses of doubt and resistance from group members, which are regularly turned down or ignored. Strengthening this resistance (for example by being willing to understand dissident views, explanations, or feelings), I introduce the first differentiation (myself) and the second (a group member who speaks up uninterrupted). The group suddenly faces the "outside within". By sustaining this differentiation, the group develops the ability to deal with the "outside outside" on the example of the "outside inside".

Practitioners in group dynamics are infamous for not having tools. There is some truth in it, as our **"Practice Model"** is not focused on methods. A few tools can be named, such as the round sitting circle, which enables everybody to see and interact with everybody, without a table or even a flowerpot in the way. It allows us as supervisors and the whole group to feel and experience all the dynamic which unfolds. Another important tool is to have every supervision session followed by a reflection on the group process and assuming a prognosis for further development: Where will the group develop? Where shall we support this development for which purpose? Before the next session, the prognosis gives a starting point: Is the group where I left it? Is it where I assumed they would develop or somewhere else? Which direction of the group movement will I support in this session? This theory-based diagnosis and intervention is crucial to group dynamic work.

As our toolbox is rather empty, **"Capacity Building"** matters most. We follow our basic assumptions from depth psychology (with its great-grandfather Sigmund Freud), subsequently developed by his scholars like C.G. Jung into object relation theories: In short, we assume that our unconscious self can be seen in our relations to any "object" in the sense of "other-than-myself"— another person, a physical object, or a group. When we talk about the capacity to understand group dynamics, we talk about or own capacity to explore our own subconscious. We do this by recognizing ourselves by the echo of the others. "There is no I in itself", wrote Buber (1970). What defines us is our relations. In our practice, we rely on accessing our own unconscious. We do this with self-awareness training such as sensitivity training, skill training, or organizational labs (Rechtien, 2007; see also Faber & Tonin, 2023 for an example). This training enables us to do two things at the same time: more transparent hypotheses for intentional deliberate action, and at the same time the development of spontaneous action. It trains the "impulsive" as well as the "deliberate". As supervisors, the concrete, authentic relationship we have with clients is not only a basic condition for our work, but also our most important tool and practice model. Here, too, our own subconscious necessarily emerges and wants to be experienced and worked on. The benefit is the expansion of one's own ability to act, both in thoughtful and spontaneous, intuitive action.

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