A Gestalt Approach to Group Supervision

Joseph Melnick & Marijane Fall

The authors define and then describe the practice of group supervision. The role of creative experiment in assisting supervisees who perceive themselves as confused, moving in circles, or immobilized is described. Fictional case examples illustrate these issues in supervision. The authors posit the “good fit” of Gestalt theory and techniques with supervision groups.

My client is not doing anything in our sessions. He comes in regularly, never asks to leave early, and says our sessions are helping him, but I sure don’t see it. He just sits there, waiting for me to ask questions and lead him [with laughter and a side glance at another supervision group member].

Sort of like you, John. You come, but you don’t ever seem to have an issue to bring to the group. Anyway, I want some ideas for what to do with my client.

—Amy (one member of a supervision group)

If one is the leader of this group, one is faced with many possibilities for interacting with Amy. One can focus on what is going on intrapsychically, helping Amy explore her awareness of what is happening for her. One can heighten the interpersonal issue between the client and the supervisee or between John and Amy. If one chooses to work with John and Amy, one can keep the focus within the supervision group, or one can allow the learning from this focus to lead the way back to the exploration of the supervisee–client concern. One can even present these options and ask the group members to select which is of the most importance and ask them to explain what it is that draws them to a particular focus. These options are only the start of the list of possibilities.

Four layers of decision making are a part of group supervision. First, supervisors are faced with decisions regarding emphasis, that is, toward client monitoring or toward supervisee growth. Second, supervisors need to define the focus of the group supervision: intrapsychic (within the individual), interpersonal (between individuals), subgroup, or group as a whole. This is referred to as level of system. The third layer of decision making follows the first two. What learning situation will increase a supervisee’s awareness and assist him or her in making decisions for successful practice? Finally, the fourth layer of decision making concerns what is best for the learning of the group and is crucial to the overall goals of group supervision.

Bernard and Goodyear (2004) defined group supervision as an ongoing meeting of a group of supervisees with a designated leader for the
dual purposes of monitoring client welfare and providing professional and personal growth for clinicians. The supervisees achieve personal goals by work with the supervisor and by feedback from and interactions with other group members. The complexity that is inherent in this definition is mentioned by Borders (Borders, Benshoff, Armenios, & Coker, 1999) when, in her video, she described supervision as being like a Bach fugue: “There is a simple melody going on at several different levels. They come together in an elegant composition, but you almost can’t hear the individual strains because they are woven together so well.” Being a supervisor of a supervision group adds several more strains, dimensions of complexity and depth, to the melody referred to by Borders.

Even a Bach fugue needs sheet music to orchestrate the melody, and so it is for group supervision. Most supervisors follow a format that they experienced as students or that follows a counseling theory (Fall & Sutton, 2004b). However, group supervision models are surprisingly few, considering the requirement for this format from accrediting bodies and professional schools (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2001; Riva & Cornish, 1995). As an example, in one model of structured group supervision, there are five steps (Wilbur, Roberts-Wilbur, Hart, Morris, & Betz, 1994):

1. The supervisee requests help from the group and provides a summary of what leads up to this request for assistance.
2. Group members ask questions that arise from Step 1.
3. Group members give feedback concerning the supervisee’s dilemma and specific questions.
4. The supervisee responds to each member of the group in turn.
5. The supervisor may conduct a discussion of any aspect of this process.

This model is similar to others in the literature and presents a view of a framework for how a supervision group could function; yet, it gives no accounting to the relationships among group members, the levels and dynamics of group and member development, and the differing ways individuals learn. There are questions that remain unanswered. How is group supervision practiced? Is there a theoretical basis for group supervision that is different from the literature on other forms of group work and the literature on supervision? How is a supervision group different from other groups, such as therapy or work groups? How do the two dimensions of individual and group development become integrated within a unified model of group supervision? How is feedback given in a group that has the dual purposes of maintaining client welfare and facilitating supervisee professional growth? Most important, are there other models that might adequately address these questions?

These questions remain unanswered because the literature on group supervision is sparse. Major texts on supervision devote a few pages or
a chapter to this topic and typically conclude by calling for research or a systematic analysis of the process of group supervision (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004; Hawkins & Shohet, 2000; Hayes, Blackman, & Brennan, 2001). Yet, despite this inattention, group supervision is necessitated by the counseling accrediting body CACREP (2001) and is included in the practice of many therapists (Fall & Sutton, 2004a, 2004b). Such importance deems attention.

One answer may lie in Gestalt therapy theory, a theory that has long been associated with training in group process. The emphasis on awareness, the present experience, and creative experiment are some of the reasons for the “good fit” between this theory and group process. However, although many articles and books deal with Gestalt groups (Feder & Konall, 1980; Huckabay, 1992), and a few journal articles deal with Gestalt supervision (Resnick & Estrup, 2000; Yontef, 1997), we were unable to locate literature on Gestalt group supervision. This was surprising given that the features of this theory, of group process, and of Gestalt supervision, all suggest that a Gestalt group supervision model might provide the necessary theoretical framework to help guide supervisors in practice and address the issues raised in the beginning scenario. For these reasons, we present a view of Gestalt group supervision as a response to a theoretical void supporting group work in supervision.

Gestalt Therapy Organizing Principles

We, ourselves, are a unique combination of authors, both practitioners of many years, one fully immersed in the practice and literature of Gestalt therapy for decades (first author) and the other a more recent learner of Gestalt, previously concentrating on clinical practice, supervision, and play therapy (second author). Combining these areas brings a blend of clinical practice, Gestalt theory, clinical supervision, and experiential foci, the very essence of our model. However, in our struggles to communicate our sameness and our differing perspectives in this work, we needed clear definitions and perceived that this might be true for readers as well. We provide the definitions and examples that follow to aid the reader in understanding the group supervision model described in this article.

The Continuum of Experience

Because Gestalt therapy, at its core, is concerned with the organization of experience, the supervisor is concerned with how the supervisees organize their own and their clients’ experiences (Yontef, 1997). The continuum of experience is a schema of an ideal encounter, such as that referred to by Zinker (1977) and Mcnintick and Nevis (1999). The continuum starts with sensation—seeing, hearing, feeling—and then tracks how sensation is organized into a growing field of what is and what is wanted. As supervisees become aware of their sensations, energy or excitement begins to build into a want. The supervisor might then ask the supervisees what they wish for themselves (or from one
another) today. As the energy continues to build, supervisees might say, “I want to discuss a client,” “I want to deal with unfinished business from our last session.” “I want to discuss my wish to not be here,” and so on. As supervisees move to action (i.e., the speaking of their wants), they are responded to by the supervisor and other members of the group and contact occurs. Contact involves the meeting of the organism (supervisee) and the environment in a way that promises satisfaction. After the discussion, reflection of the experience occurs as the supervisees discuss what they learned from the experience.

Field Theory/Systems Theory

All supervision takes place in a phenomenological field that consists, in part, of the assumptions of and relationships between the participants, both the constantly changing ones and the relatively fixed ones. Supervision also requires a context. As indicated in the introduction, one way of conceptualizing context draws from systems theory. Many Gestalt practitioners use the concept of level of system as a way of mapping context (Melnick, 1980a). The supervisor can choose to focus the group at any level of system, from intrapsychic to group as a whole. The four levels of system are as follows:

1. Intrapsychic: What is going on with the supervisee? The leader might ask, “What are you aware of as you speak?”
2. Interpersonal: This level of system occurs between the supervisee and another individual or other individuals, such as a client, supervisee, or supervision subgroup. The leader might ask, “Are you aware that as you talk you do not look at each other?”
3. Subgroup: This term refers to small groupings. Some groupings are relatively fixed, such as men and women or introverts and extroverts. Other groupings are more situational, such as those who are interested in what is going on and those who are not. The group leader might comment, “Only three out of the six of you have chosen to speak so far.”
4. Group as a whole: Questions that may direct the group focus include “Are we a group that laughs at ourselves?” and “Are we generous with each other?”

Present Focus

The Gestalt therapist believes that the present moment, the here and now, encompasses the past and helps to influence the future (Melnick & Nevis, 2005; Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951; Polster & Polster, 1973). Thus, much of the work of supervision can be conducted with the data from the immediate present. The supervisor pays attention to what the supervisee does well and how he or she limits the possibilities by not using available energy within himself or herself or within the group to complete some cycles of experience. Examples are the supervisee holding his or her breath, not speaking, or looking down rather than turning visually to the group. These data allow
the supervisor to form hypotheses about the supervisee's ability to organize an experience.

The following scenario provides an example of present focus in group supervision. Mary, a supervisee, speaks of not being heard by a client. She relays her experience in sentences and paragraphs that run together without a break and apparently without awareness as to the impact of her speaking style on the other members of the supervision group. She does not even raise her eyes to look. However, she is not alone in this lack of connection. The members of the group remain silent, some fidgeting nervously, others looking out the window or at objects in the room. One begins to write on a pad. All of the individuals in the group have a role in what is happening. Not surprisingly, boredom, the withdrawal of energy, is often the result when Mary speaks. Because the members of the group silently disengage, Mary loses out on feedback from her peers, and the peers may feel cheated in that they do not feel invited in.

The supervisor (choosing to work interpersonally) asks Mary if she is interested in getting some feedback concerning how her style of presenting affects others and asks the members of the group if they are willing to give her feedback. All agree without hesitation. The supervisor then assists the group in giving feedback that expands her awareness of herself. (Of course, the other supervisees have a role in this drama, and the supervisor could focus on them: What is it about them that causes them to remain silent? Why does one member write and another look away? However, in this particular case, the supervisor has decided to focus on Mary's role.) Mary learns that she has a pattern of speaking that works to hold her audience in silence. One result is that she does not know if she is really being heard. She may deal with this issue in the present with the group and decide whether to change it. Before having the awareness of the pattern and how it affects others and judgments about herself, she did not have the data to allow herself a choice.

Paradoxical Theory of Change and Awareness

The freedom to choose new behaviors is what the paradoxical theory of change and the construct of awareness are all about. These two form the base for Gestalt beliefs about how people grow and change, because it is only by coming to know themselves, even the dysfunctional parts, that people will change (Beissner, 1970; Zinker, 1977). Individuals change not by trying to be different, but by becoming aware of themselves in the present moment and by expanding awareness of what they are sensing, thinking, doing, being, and feeling. That is the paradox, because many people believe that they only need to change behaviors. In fact, they do not need to "do" anything. One cannot change by "trying." One changes as awareness increases. Individuals can then choose behaviors that fit their expanded awareness.

As supervisors, we can assist supervisees in expanding their awareness. With expanded awareness, the supervisees are no longer able to have the same perception. There is a new moment, and the supervisee
develops. For example, increased awareness may dissolve the block he or she was experiencing with the client or open the door to new possibilities in clinical work. Thus, the supervisor does not need to focus solely on the facts of the past and the case details. Instead, the supervisor can assist supervisees with awareness of the present, of how to talk about clients, and about what they notice about themselves. Because Gestalt therapy focuses on self-awareness, new awareness assists the individual in adapting to the new moment and the constantly changing environment (Perls et al., 1951; Polster & Polster, 1973).

This phenomenon of awareness is exemplified in the following case. A supervisee, John, asked for assistance with a felt sense of sadness. He had just learned that his client of several years ago had committed suicide, and although it was understandable to have strong feelings about such an event, he recognized that his reaction was extreme. John remembered that countertransferential reactions are often marked by such extreme emotions and decided to bring it to the group. His supervisor kept him in the present moment and invited him to dialogue with the deceased client, to share his thoughts and feelings. During this creative experiment, the supervisee told the deceased client that he was glad the pain of so many years had left with death. However, John said he was terribly, terribly sad for the family, for the wife and children left behind. At that moment, the supervisee stopped the dialogue. He said that he recognized that this present feeling of sadness was also connected to feelings related to his wife’s attempted suicide 20 years ago. From that increased awareness came a reduction in the strength of the present sadness and a separation between the sad feelings for the former client’s family and John’s countertransference of feelings from the past. Awareness had changed and movement commenced.

Creative Experiment

Perls often demonstrated Gestalt techniques with an individual in a group setting (Feder & Ronall, 1980). Remarkable change occurred for the client as a result of dramatic, dynamic interventions that brought an expanded awareness. Although Perls exemplified creative experiment, in reality, it is not solely an art and can be taught and learned. The experiment begins as an invitation from the supervisor that arises out of the moment for the purpose of expanding the supervisee’s awareness (Melnick, 1980b; Zinker, 1977). It is often the result of moving beyond intellectual activities to the felt sense and the arts. It may be body movement instead of talking. It may call for imagination, for fantasy, for drama, and for fun. Even the experienced supervisor may be surprised by the technique itself and by how well it works to assist the supervisee. In its simplest form, an experiment addresses the question, “Would you be interested in trying this?”

The following dialogue is an example of creative experiment, heightening of awareness, cycle of experience, choice of level of system, and Beisser’s (1970) paradoxical theory of change. In the dialogue,
Ann, a seasoned professional, when asked what she would like from the group this day, responds that she needs to explore the fact that she is not having much fun in her work. When Jane, the supervisor, asks her if she has any sense of what is going on, Ann replies as follows:

Ann: I feel silly mentioning this, but I keep thinking of this gorilla that I have on my shelf. I know that the gorilla is important, and that it is connected to my sense of boredom, but I can’t seem to get beyond that.

Jane: Say some more about that. (This simple interaction involves choice. As the supervisor, Jane could have focused on awareness [e.g., “What are you noticing about yourself?”], resistance [e.g., “How do you stop yourself?”], or many other kinds of foci. However, Jane decided to support more talking to encourage Ann and to help transition her through the awkwardness of beginning to talk in front of the group.)

Ann: Well, the gorilla was given to me by a friend who used it to represent a decision I was debating of whether or not to leave a university where we were colleagues. I think she saw it as the 800-pound gorilla on my back. She would say to me, “Well, what about the gorilla [the idea of leaving and going to another university]?” Four years after I left, she mailed me a small figurine of a gorilla and said she knew it was hopeless that I would return to the university where we had been colleagues. I’ve kept the gorilla hidden on a shelf since then and, suddenly, I’ve started keeping him out where I can’t miss seeing him every day. I know that it is significant, but I don’t know why.

Jane: Would you like to try an experiment? (Jane wants to support the supervisee’s power to choose by asking permission. Jane assumes that the individual and the group are cohesive enough, and are mobilized enough, to be ready to move to action.)

Ann: Sure.

Jane: Would you be willing to pick someone to be the gorilla? (This intervention models choice of level of system. Jane suggests working interpersonally in the here and now. Jane wishes to involve the group members in the experiment, both by having Ann pick someone and by having the members of the group be more actively involved in the experience.)

Ann: Before you do that, I want everyone to understand that you can say no to Ann’s request. (Jane continues to support the issue of choice in being able to say yes or no, thus addressing issues of power, hierarchy, and authority.)

Ann: Mary, would you be willing to be the gorilla?

Mary: [Taking the request seriously] I’m not sure I will be much of a gorilla, but I am willing to give it a try.

Jane: Great. In terms of the rest of the group, I would like you to pick something to focus on. (Members pick certain aspects of experi-
ence, such as with whom they are most identified—serious Ann or the outrageous gorilla—with the quality of contact between Ann and Mary, the tension that each of the protagonists carries in her body, etc. Jane could have recommended a singular group focus but decided that there was enough group connection to support separate foci.)

Jane: Now I would like the two of you to have a conversation. If you get stuck, please ask for help from me. Is that clear? (Jane creates a permeable boundary and wants the supervisees to know that they are not in it alone.)

Ann and Mary: Yes.

Jane: Ann, what do you want to say to the gorilla?

Ann: [Looking up as to a vine up high] I used to swing from the vines. I used to laugh and have fun, be silly like you. I guess I do what graduate students do, sit around and be serious. I think I've taken the fun part of me away from my academic life. It doesn't seem to work when I "play" in front of my colleagues. I guess I've abandoned it.

Jane: I am assuming that the "it" is the gorilla? (Jane knows that the more clear and descriptive the language, the fuller and deeper the experience.)

Ann: Yes.

Jane: So say that to the gorilla.

Ann: Gorilla, I guess I abandoned you.

Mary: Yea, I guess you have. It is sort of funny! So are you like everyone else now? Is that what you want?

Ann: [Sadly] No. No, it's not what I want. I'm not letting all of me be seen, only a part. I miss the other part, the fun part. I want you back.

Mary: I miss you too. Fun gets boring unless there is some seriousness, too. (The polarity emerges.)

Ann: I'm sad. And I'm clearer. No wonder I kept looking at the gorilla on the shelf. I had put a part of me there. I wonder if I'll change now that I've seen that?

Jane: Are you asking the gorilla? (Jane notices that Ann is beginning to move intrapsychically and decides to support the interpersonal work a little longer.)

Ann: Sure.

Mary: I am part of this equation. I have let you down, too, by going underground and making your life less fun. You can keep me down only if I let you. I promise to be more overt. I promise that when you are getting too serious I will hop off the shelf and make wild sounds in your ear. (Mary jumps up and, imitating a gorilla, goes over to Ann while making wild sounds.)

Ann: [Laughing] That's a deal.

The supervisor debriefs Ann and Mary, asking them for the meaning that they drew from their experience. The rest of the group members give feedback regarding what they were tracking. The feedback is
descriptive, phenomenological, and only minimally interpretive. For example, rather than telling Ann, "You look sad," Ann is told, "I notice your eyes became watery when you described missing your gorilla self." In the next stage of the debriefing process, Jane asks the supervisees to summarize in one sentence something new they learned about themselves from their participation. Jane's purpose in doing this is to de-emphasize individual work and emphasize group work. All of the group members are part of one another's learning.

These scenarios point to the emphasis that can come from Gestalt therapy and its valuing of present focus, increased awareness, and creative experiment. The practices of Gestalt group process and clinical supervision are emphases that are contained in the integrated model to follow.

A Gestalt Model

Group supervision gives supervisors the opportunity to deal with the increased complexity and chaos that results when group dynamics and development are added to the variables present in supervision. Thus, group supervision is both similar to and different from group therapy and individual supervision. It is the similarity in the words supervision and group that perhaps deludes counselors into thinking that they know what group supervision is. One is reminded that the combination of the primary colors of red and yellow is not "red-yellow," but rather an entirely different color—orange. So it is with group supervision: The red of supervision and the yellow of group bring about the orange of group supervision.

In the following sections, we provide a description of how group supervision differs from individual supervision and group therapy. We then present and provide examples of our group supervision maxims that are descriptive of differing levels of group interaction.

Differences Between Group Supervision and Individual Supervision

Group supervision differs from several aspects of individual supervision as far as the supervisor role is concerned. First, the relationship is different because the one-to-one intensity is changed with the addition of members of the group. Although this is a given, what is not commonly spoken of is the loss of one-to-one intimacy and anonymity, for supervisees and supervisor alike. In a group environment, there is also the sharing of relevant ideas from multiple perspectives, possible negativity, and additional empathy. Adding to this difference is the complexity contributed by the addition of relationships: each group member to the supervisor, each group member to one another, group members to subgroups within the group, and group members to the whole group. The effect of these multiple relationships has the potential that both enhances and dilutes the learning. It is the group supervisor's responsibility to enhance the learning for all group members while balancing the new role of managing a number of simultaneous processes. To manage the complex "stage" is not easy.
A second difference between group and individual supervision is that supervisors need to pay attention to rules, group norms, and group process. This means that the attention of the supervisor is divided, because rules are constantly changing as norms are defined and redefined. It is the supervisor’s responsibility to facilitate rules becoming explicit instead of functioning under the surface in an implicit fashion. Some examples of rules are (a) members should give direct feedback, (b) members should not give patronizing advice, and (c) time is shared.

To manage this complex process is not easy. Attention needs to be directed to variables of interpersonal relationships among group members and levels of system operating at any one time. Variables that are very influential to the group’s process are competition and power dynamics among members, support that is both needed and given by members, and monitoring the balance between individual and group needs. The concept of level of system mentioned in the introduction presents the supervisor with the dilemma of how to best benefit the group while simultaneously benefitting the individual supervisee who is raising a concern or issue. In one example of this point, the leader has the responsibility to make sure that closure occurs for all members. However, because of the relative complexity of a supervision group, this can be a difficult task. It is these differences that add to the complexity.

_Differences Between Group Supervision and Group Therapy_

Group supervision also differs from group therapy. Some of the reasons for this difference follow.

First, there is a difference in the norms that develop in the group over time. Group therapy is designed to facilitate growth and development of the individual. The focus for the growth is a cocreation of all involved. There is not a fixed content or goal to the work. The norms and rules involving group supervision are more explicit in that the supervisor is not operating in the role of a counselor or therapist. We believe that the norms of growth and development are more limited and focused. Insight, awareness, and exploration of the past are only relevant if they shed light on present professional work.

Second, there is an evaluative component for the supervisee in supervision. Often, group supervision is conducted in university settings, and the supervisees are evaluated and graded by the supervisor. This adds a level of complexity to the process. If the supervision group consists of seasoned clinicians in agencies or private practice, the evaluation is often less formal, yet it is constantly occurring.

Third, there is a different legal component because of the responsibilities inherent in being a gatekeeper of the profession. The supervisor has to take into account the competence of the supervisee regarding care of the client. There is a certain content that is a crucial part of the process, and it places the supervisor not only in the role of facilitator and teacher but also in the role as gatekeeper. The role of
complexity needs to be kept in the supervisor’s awareness and continually addressed.

**Group Supervision Maxims**

Following is a list of group supervision maxims, beliefs, and assumptions that we view as touchstones to help guide the supervision process. Some of them are integral to Gestalt supervision process, whereas others are common sense shared by all who do group supervision. Some have been explicitly presented in this article, whereas others are implicit. What they all have in common is that we have found them useful in guiding our work.

1. There has to be the right amount of connectedness among all participants to support the work. If there is not enough, the potential for growth or change is diminished. It is also true that if there is too much support, the potential for growth or change may be diminished. The supervisor has the responsibility for monitoring and adjusting this level. This is done by working at different levels of system and modulating levels of learning.

2. As indicated earlier, there is a continuum between safety and risk taking (e.g., regarding disclosure or providing feedback). The “right” level will vary for each person, each subsystem, and the group as a whole at different moments in time. Too hard or too easy are contextual descriptors.

3. Individuals are all functioning at and within different levels of system at the same time. This awareness is integral to a supervisor’s interventions. The supervisor must decide which interventions, at which time, with which level of system will most aid the group learning.

4. Supervisors want the group to get to different places, not just to one. Nobody owns the client. The client is in each individual and presents a unique learning experience for each member of the group.

5. Possibilities for learning are increased in group supervision when everyone is maximally involved. If full participation is not occurring, then it is the supervisor’s responsibility to help the group address this issue.

6. As indicated previously, the relationships between supervisors and supervisees in group supervision are different from those in individual supervision. In a one-to-one relationship, the evaluative component of supervision may lead to a more pronounced hierarchical relationship. The relationships in group supervision may lead to more complex dynamics.

7. The supervisor must constantly hold an awareness of supervising all members of the group at all times regardless of whether they are actively interacting.

**Discussion**

Gestalt concepts such as continuum of experience, field/systems perspective, here-and-now focus, paradoxical theory of change, and
creative experiment provide the supervisor support in knowing where to focus, how to conceptualize, how the supervisee configures the field (i.e., what stands out for him or her), and how the supervisee’s phenomenological experience interacts with that of the supervisor and other supervisees. Yet, although these Gestalt concepts can greatly aid the supervisor, to our knowledge, research involving Gestalt group supervision is nonexistent. Questions need to be both asked and answered. For example, does Gestalt group supervision aid all supervisees? How are supervisors trained to facilitate group supervision? Do present focus interventions that involve the whole group aid the development of all group members? Is Gestalt group supervision more effective with one subgroup than another? As each area is explored, many more questions arise. Despite the difficulties of doing empirical research, we believe that there is little that is of more importance for the supervision field than generating research to validate approaches for training and supervising counselors.

The challenge of group supervision involves the ability to balance the individual and group needs while at the same time holding the well-being of the client as central. Exciting, generative, and powerful group supervision awaits.

References


