

Supervision Groups at a Time of Violent Social Conflict in Israel

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Beginning in September 2000, terror attacks and large numbers of casualties became part of Israel's harrowing daily routine. The attacks occurred throughout the country, putting everyone at risk. These events also shattered the illusion of coexistence between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel and led to feelings of anger and suspicion between the two sectors. During this period we continued to conduct supervision groups for professionals in the helping professions, with some of these groups consisting of both Jewish and Arab participants. We expected to see the social conflict reflected in our groups, but they behaved quite differently. In light of our experience, this paper deals with the question of whether, at a time of existential threat and violent social conflict, the group can serve as a safe space for the participants and how external processes affect the level of group work and its basic assumptions.

Keywords: *social conflict; social trauma; supervision group; terror; violent conflict*

Relations between the Arab and Jewish populations in Israel were defined in the Declaration of the Establishment of the State, which promises equality for all citizens and grants full rights to the Arab citizens. The notions of equality, coexistence, and demarcated borders between Israel and its neighbors separating “them” from “us” persisted for many years. Subgroups within Israeli society itself were largely ignored, with the conflict and gaps between Israeli Arabs and Jews remaining far from the public eye and the media. The first signs of a change in this consensus began to emerge during the first Intifada (Palestinian riots against the Israeli occupation between

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1987–1993). During this period, for example, the authors were working with a group of Jewish women in Jaffa, a city with a mixed population of Arabs and Jews. It suddenly became dangerous for us to go to work, because we wondered each day whether stones were being thrown in the streets and whether the participants would arrive at the meeting. The tension dissipated after a short time. Life and coexistence seemed to return to normal, and the physical and economic concerns of daily existence appeared to win out. In time, however, it became clear that this was merely an illusion. When the second Intifada broke out, the picture changed drastically. Questions of universal aspects of identity and nationality, human rights, and exclusion were now being raised and legitimized in Europe as well. This trend, together with the realities and conflicts in Israel, set the stage for the dispute within Israeli society.

The dramatic change in Israel began in September 2000, when mass terror attacks and casualties became part of the country's horrendous daily routine. In the last 4 years, some 1000 civilians have been killed in terror attacks all over the country, in places such as restaurants, coffee shops, and buses. The casualties have included Jews, Arabs, newcomers, foreign workers, and tourists, with every person in Israel in danger of becoming a target. Simultaneously, for the first time the conflict between the Jewish and Arab populations in Israeli society has erupted into rioting, totally shattering the illusion of coexistence. These events, along with its international implications, have led to feelings of anger and suspicion.

During this period the authors continued to work with groups, some of them mixed groups of Jewish and Arab participants. This paper explores whether and how external circumstances influenced the level and basic assumptions of this group work. It considers the ways in which conflict can affect groups, particularly those whose members are representative of the two sides in the dispute. The question we address is whether at a time of violent political or social conflict, including real existential threat, the group can serve as a safe space in which the participants are able to examine themselves as well as their society.

SUPERVISION GROUP AND SOCIAL CONFLICT

The effects of the context on the therapeutic milieu, as well as deliberate use of it, have long been recognized by the helping professions. In particular, we could mention the "person in environment" concept in social work (Karles, Lowrey, Mattiani, & Wandrei, 1997) and the well-accepted intersubjective theories (Weegmann, 2001).

The literature also relates to the effect of dramatic events on therapists and their services (Bar-On, 2001; Beck & Buchele, 2005; Hopper, 2003; Lawrence, Bain, & Gould, 1996; Ramon, 2004), as well as to the effect of the social context on small groups, including therapy groups (Biran, 1997; Hopper, 2003), support and psychoeducational groups (Nuttman-Shwartz, Karniel-Lauer, & Dassa-Shindler, 2004), and task groups (Neretin, 2002). In order to implement the social environment approach in small group interventions, Hopper (2003) developed a useful paradigm that includes “here” and “there” levels.

This paper focuses on supervision groups of professionals at a time of violent social conflict. Although supervision is a common theme in the helping professions, little research has been conducted that can aid professionals to deal with social or political conflict (Ramon, 2004). Furthermore, the literature offers few studies of the effects of the social context on professionals or on the supervision of professional groups in particular (Bernard, 1999; Counselman & Weber, 2004; Friedman & Handel, 2002). However, before considering the effects of a context of tension and anxiety on a supervision group of professionals, we must first define the term “group supervision” itself.

Two definitions provide a useful starting point for our discussion. The first is offered by Bernard and Goodyear (1998):

Group supervision is the regular meeting of a group of supervisees with a designated supervisor for the purpose of furthering their understanding of themselves as clinicians, of the clients with whom they work, and/or of service delivery in general, and who are aided in their endeavor by their interaction with each other in the context of the group process (p. 111).

The second, broader, definition is that of Inskipp and Proctor (1993):

Group supervision is a working alliance between a supervisor and several counselors in which each counselor can regularly offer an account or recording of her work, reflect on it and receive feedback and, where appropriate, guidance from her supervisor and her colleagues. The object of this alliance is to enable each counselor to gain in ethical competence, confidence and creativity so as to give her best possible service to clients (p. 72).

These definitions emphasize the fact that group supervision brings together two distinctly different processes: group work and supervision. Thus it offers greater complexity, a rich context of individual viewpoints (York, 1997), and the “stimulation and excitement of cooperative enterprise” (Proctor, 2000, p. 240). Group supervision consequently places greater demands on the supervisor, who necessarily must be skilled in both supervision and group facilitation. Essentially, it provides a venue for learning in which the supervisor becomes a

learning facilitator who must provide balance in a number of key areas, such as: group members as spectators versus co-supervisors; structure versus no structure; group facilitation versus supervision; challenge versus support; and group needs versus individual needs. In sum, group supervision is a complex task even under ordinary circumstances. The main question here, however, is whether it is additionally affected by the context. In other words, does the underlying assumption of many theories that a group constitutes a microcosm of the environment in which it operates also hold true for professional supervision groups at a time of intense social conflict (Foulkes, 1964; Hopper, 2003)?

Some authors indeed hold that the group is a microcosm, as well as a part, of its social environment, and thus support the use of Hopper's paradigm in group supervision. Szoenyi (2002), for example, maintains that it is not possible to understand any group process without reflecting upon its context and the formative social surroundings. Moreover, Neretin (2002) claims that in time of crisis, the leader of a supervision group must relate to the outside world as it affects the participants'/students' life. Indeed, he believes there is an imperative responsibility to bring political life into the classroom and help make it relevant to the process of clinical supervision and practice.

This dilemma becomes even more relevant in the case of supervision groups of therapists who share the same reality and insecure environment as their clients. The uncertainty under which this population labors may be seen as a type of avoidance that might even be considered unethical behavior. Campbell (2001), for example, found that mental health social workers in Northern Ireland responded to political violence by adopting a "neutral" technocratic approach, and Bar-On (2001), who examined why Israeli psychologists were largely silent in the first Intifada, linked their response to the wish to remain scientific and objective.

In these cases, both the researchers and the participants played double roles: they were part of the therapeutic system, and they were also members of the same society living in political uncertainty. This obviously makes the professional situation more difficult (Shamai, 1998), and consequently the literature contains several references to the training of therapists who share a reality of uncertainty and anxiety with their clients (see, for example: Cwikel, Kacen, & Slonim-Nevo, 1993).

Five principles have been defined for the goals of supervision groups in conditions of uncertainty:

- 1) The role of the supervisor is to empower the participants by helping them to recognize their creativeness and skills.
- 2) The supervision process must allow participants to explore their feelings, attitudes, and behaviors associated with the situation of uncertainty.

- 3) Effective supervision must integrate in-group interventions with the out-group situation.
- 4) The group must serve as a support space and network for the participants.
- 5) Supervision must be contextual and work simultaneously on individual, group, and societal issues.

THE CASE OF ISRAEL—RELATING TO THE CONFLICT IN SUPERVISION GROUPS

The Problem: Blurring the Boundaries Between In-Group and Out-Group

The common approach to group supervision in Israel combines content (primary task) and the group process (Glickauf-Hughes & Campbell, 1991). It can be said to adopt an eclectic attitude based on Bion's (1961) theory of learning from experience and the parallel process (Friedman & Handel, 2002; Kadushin, 1992), and to be less task oriented than expected from a cognitive oriented group (Roffman, 2004).

The literature offers several examples of this approach in Israeli supervision groups, which operate in an anxiety situation provoked by political circumstances. They show that the primary task is change, that meetings are often devoted to sharing, and that it is sometimes even unclear who is treating whom (Kretch, Ben-Yakar, Baruch, & Roth, 1997; Nuttman-Shwartz et al., 2004). This was found to be true even when the group leader successfully acted without memory and desire (Bion, 1988), as a supposed exile from some other place, thereby enabling the group to discuss and process anxiety and then to move from self-occupation to the primary task. On such occasions the group leader acted as a container for the group. At other times the group helped manage the anxiety level of the group leader, thus enabling him or her to supervise. At still other times, both the group leader and the group were trapped in defensive avoidance of their primary task—supervision.

Although it is the job of the group leader to help the participants express their anxieties and understand that the tension within the group is a reaction to them, there are times, especially in shared reality situations, when the group leader's hands are tied. He or she is also devastated by separation and fear, and, like the group members, identifies with one side, thus unconsciously strengthening the fear within the group. The group responds to this countertransference. In these cases the group leader might be affected by any or all of three factors: society; the participants/professionals; and their clients. The literature reveals that traumatic events intensify the anxiety in group

meetings, making the supervision task that much more difficult (Nuttman-Shwartz et al., 2004).

The current paper attempts to analyze the relationships between the external violent social and political conflict and the internal group process as reflected in three supervision groups in Israel. We expected the social conflict to come to bear in the small group process and affect the level of group work as well as its basic assumptions. However, something very different occurred in our groups. The processes and defense mechanisms we found are described here with the help of examples from three different supervision groups of mixed Jewish and Arab participants that were all conducted during the same period.

GROUP DESCRIPTION

The case studies presented here relate to three different supervision groups of professionals from various disciplines, including social workers, psychologists, and youth leaders. The groups were conducted by the School of Social Work as part of a university course that ran from 2000 to 2002. Each group consisted of 10–12 participants, and met once a week for two academic hours for the specific purpose of group supervision. The ratio of Arabs in two of the groups was proportional to their frequency in our school, some 30%. In the third group (see below) Arabs constituted 50% of the participants. Each group was conducted by a single lecturer (one of the authors), who is also a group therapist. The authors transcribed all the sessions and chose the vignettes deemed to best illustrate the group processes for inclusion in the paper. As previously mentioned, the common approach in Israel combines content, the primary task, and the group process. Thus the supervisor sometimes uses this space to focus and reflect on group processes.

The participants introduced various issues, from dilemmas relating to their identity and supervising role to issues concerning therapeutic skills and methods of intervention. The context in which the groups operated, including facilitating and inhibiting forces in the organization that serve to elucidate the difficulties in structuring and activating groups, was also stressed. Since these were mixed groups, the intercultural differences regarding issues such as personal boundaries, directness, openness, and coping styles that emerged tended to be shared intensively by the group members.

CASE STUDIES

Each of the three following illustrations is drawn from a different supervision group. It is important to remember that the groups were

all operating during the first two years of the Intifada. As mentioned, at this time there were frequent mass terror attacks, the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) had re-entered towns in the territories from which it had previously withdrawn, and the sense of existential security was low and was accompanied by a feeling of personal threat and a reluctance to make long-term plans. Ideological and physical confrontations between Israeli Arabs and Jews also began during this period, and political and social opinions on both sides became more extreme.

Case Study I

The members of one group introduced themselves as professionals and looked for similarities in other participants in terms of the nature of their work and the difficulties involved in it. They noted that a comfortable atmosphere was created in a relatively short time, and expressed their expectation of working well together. In contrast, as group leaders we noted the similarities between the group members, but also recognized differences in national identity and in the way the participants related to the question of if and how we could bridge the gaps between us. In addition we pointed out to the group the different ways in which the participants coped with the external effects of events such as terror attacks, roadblocks, and interference with daily routine, as well as their concern for relatives and the differing focus of their anger that stemmed from dissimilar worldviews. These comments, voiced in an advanced phase of group work, were met with silence, until one of the participants expressed what we believed to represent the desire of the group as a whole: "What is happening is very difficult for all of us. We would rather ignore it and not let what happens outside and political differences between us affect the performance of our task."

This is an example of the group "preferring" to deal with "here and now" materials instead of the outside conflict and its effect on them on the level of both the "here and now" and the "there and now." It is important to note that it was the supervisors who introduced the external conflict and not one of the group members. How then are we to understand the group's response? Was it a defense mechanism indicating that the group was in basic assumption flight? Or were they operating on the working group level and thus dealing well with the external threat? Or perhaps we should reexamine the axiom that all groups are microcosms of the world in which they operate?

Case Study II

One of the groups consisted of female social workers, who stressed their special status as women and mothers. They sought to relate to

the cultural individuality of each member and noted the uniqueness of the group, with one participant remarking: "This is a most unique group of different women and we can learn from each of them. The level of openness is very high and I feel a meaningful emotional connection to everyone."

On one occasion, the day after a mass terror attack in Jerusalem, an Arab social worker from East Jerusalem arrived very late and told the group about the road blocks and her feeling of humiliation when she had to stop and wait at each barrier and be subjected to disrespectful questions. The other members identified with her difficulties, humiliation, and pain, and expressed anger toward the soldiers for not being empathic enough to human problems. Although the participants represented a wide range of cultural and political sectors in Israel—secular, religious, left and right wing, Arabs and Jews—no one related to the other side of the coin, as commonly happens in such situations and typically evokes arguments, anger, accusations, and alienation.

This case is an example of the group "preferring" to work on their cohesiveness as a protective shield against dealing with the members' actual extreme experiences "there and now." Here the conflict and threat were brought into the room by one of the participants, and so the group had to invoke more commonalities and shared mechanisms, such as cohesiveness. It was easier for them to identify with the victim and emphasize the similarities instead of relating to the other side of the conflict and exploring the inner aggressor in each of them on the personal, as well as the social, level. This response raises the same set of questions as the previous example and sheds particular light on the question of whether the cohesiveness we saw in the group was a defense mechanism or whether the group was an unsafe place and therefore the participants could not allow themselves to talk about inner differences or deal with the conflicts.

Case Study III

The third example occurred on Holocaust Memorial Day, which is a reminder of the existential threat to, and legitimization of, the existence of the State of Israel [see, for example: Volkan's use of the term "chosen trauma" (2001); see also: Nuttman-Shwartz, Karniel-Lawer, & Offir, 2002]. In the period under discussion here, this day also aroused intense emotions among both Arabs and Jews.

Two days earlier, a seminar on the subject was conducted at the School of Social Work, at which the students were invited to participate in a discussion following the screening of a film. The group consisted of about 100 students who were acquainted with one another. Some of them studied in small groups and thus their acquaintance

was personal and intimate. The majority of the participants were Jewish, with a minority of Arabs in attendance. At the beginning of the discussion, two Arab students referred to Arabs and Palestinians being deprived of their rights and compared the situation to the Jews being deprived of their rights during the Holocaust. A storm broke out in the hall. The audience immediately divided into two subgroups in an "us and them" process (Berman, Berger, & Gutmann, 2000). They were unable to conduct a dialogue and merely hurled accusations at one another. The hall became so tense that some students walked out. The lecturer leading the discussion experienced helplessness and loss of control, and the seminar ended in an atmosphere of anger, alienation, and mutual suspicion. It was obvious that the full intensity of the external conflict had invaded the hall and affected the social and learning process not only at this event, but for the course of the whole academic year.

One of our supervision groups, run by the same School of Social Work at the same university, was scheduled to meet on Holocaust Memorial Day itself. As supervisors, we were afraid that a similar process might take place there too, shattering the established cohesiveness and togetherness. At the beginning of the meeting, we announced that when the siren sounded, we would stop the discussion and all stand and observe a minute of silence according to national custom. We expected this announcement to trigger a debate on the meaning of the occasion and its situational "there and now" context. Despite our invitation to respond, the group preferred to continue its examination of a professional issue that was interrupted by the siren, following which the participants sat down and continued the discussion as if nothing had happened, as if there were no external conflict and no personal questions, thoughts, or feelings. In fact, the group behaved as if there were no differences between the participants.

This example offers the opportunity to compare a large and a small group. Social constraints were reflected in the large group so that it seemed to be reenacting the chaos, hatred, hostility, and helplessness outside. But although the leaders of the small group were biased and undoubtedly affected by the situation both in the school and outside, as well as by their approach to supervision as described above, this group evidenced a totally different emotional and behavioral state, "preferring" to continue to concentrate on the primary task.

The same questions still remain to be answered. Did the group have the power to set aside routine Israeli responses and not deal with previous traumas, continuing as if nothing had happened or was happening? Or maybe its behavior represented a defense mechanism that protected the group members from the intense anxiety existing everywhere in their world, in the "here and now," in the "there and

now,” and in the “there and then”? The authors interpreted the behavior as a defense mechanism, but it is important to stress that the small group continued to be effective and most of the time succeeded in operating on the working level, progressing with their tasks and working to achieve their goals.

The difference between the three small groups and the large group illustrate common theoretical assumptions. Social conflicts in the “here and now” are inevitably mirrored in a large group, and the participants are unable to prevent them from invading the group space. On the other hand, a small group constitutes a safe, intimate, familial space where the group members are capable of controlling events and keeping elements that threaten the cohesiveness (such as conflicts, problems, or tensions) out of the group space, whether consciously or otherwise.

ANALYSIS

Our analysis relied on several working assumptions. First, although the primary task of a supervision group is considered to be learning, group work in a university framework that includes both learning and dynamic experience is often a complex undertaking (Szoenyi, 2002). In addition, the approach to supervision in Israel tends to combine the “here and now” and the “there and now.” Finally, there is a general consensus among supervisors, therapists, and decision makers that in a condition of shared realities, it is incumbent upon the group leader to bring the outside world into the group, and this holds true for all groups, including supervision and task groups (Benson, Moore, Kapur, & Rice, 2005; Shamai, 1998). This is believed to be a condition for effective continued professional work.

The analysis produced several interesting possibilities. First, our case studies reveal that even though the conductors invited materials from the social context to intrude into the groups themselves, the group members resisted this intrusion and the groups remained “safe places” for learning. In the first example the members insisted that the social conflict be ignored; in the second, the group’s determination to remain cohesive caused them to deal with social intrusion in a skewed manner; and in the third, despite powerful provocation from a large group experience two days earlier, the working focus of the supervision group was not altered. Although the three examples were taken from different phases of the group work, in all cases the groups preferred to shield themselves from dealing with the existential anxiety. However, they did so in an adaptive way, continuing to work and learn.

It is thus clear that the groups closed themselves off from the outside world. In light of the approach to group work in Israel in general,

and to supervision in particular, we had expected this world to intrude on the groups. We thus interpreted their behavior as a preference for cohesion and an amiable atmosphere, and their decision to ignore the group leaders' invitation to discuss external events as a type of defense mechanism such as avoidance, rather than as a functional mode.

There are several possible explanations for the fact that our groups succeeded in creating cohesiveness despite the frustration, uncertainty, and questioning as to whether the group represents a safe space that characterizes the beginning of the dynamic experience in all groups. In the case of Israel, these attitudes accentuate the existing feelings of suspicion and hostility that make it difficult to conduct a fruitful dialogue, even on the political level. The direct reference of the group leaders to the differences between the Jewish and Arab participants undoubtedly raised to the surface group members' innate fears of the encounter. It is possible that even though there was no actual discussion of these issues, reference to them sufficed to release the negative energy and enable the participants to create a common ground and conduct a professional dialogue (Biran, 1997).

The groups' cohesiveness might also have been a response to the trauma of impending annihilation. In other words, the group may have sought to encapsulate its experience by throwing a protective membrane around itself and imaging itself as a coherent group.

In addition, the choice of the group members to recruit the ego functions and converse on a cognitive level may have reduced the existing load of emotional functions in the group and enabled reflection and exploration. The courage to choose the cognitive function has been found to be characteristic of psycho-educational groups such as the supervision groups we conducted (Ettin, 1999).

Another explanation for the cohesiveness observed in the groups relates to the perception of Elias (1978), who regards belonging to a group as a function of survival. In contrast to other researchers, Elias claims that the group is not the enemy of the individual members, but rather helps them to develop feelings of identification and belonging. In our case, whereas in general society the gaps between "us" and "them" are felt to be unbridgeable, the group members chose to define themselves as "we" in terms of gender, profession, and/or intervention field. The ability to find common definitions for themselves may thus have blurred the significant gaps in the "here and now" that exist outside and prevented the intrusion of external social processes and characteristics into the group space. This choice might have been unconscious. As one participant declared: "Despite everything, we will find the unifying element that will give us a feeling of safety and belonging." On the interpersonal level, in the small groups, contrary to the experience in the large group as described previously,

immediate interaction was triggered. The group as a whole strove to create a group mentality that emphasized the similarities without ignoring the differences. This enabled the members to fashion a relatively safe space. Benson, Moore, Kapur, and Rice (2005) found similar behaviors, whereby people gained safety within the group at the price of loss of individuality in order to cope with the unsafe environment in Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, it is also possible to interpret the groups' behavior in a different manner entirely. They may have closed themselves off from the outside world in order to achieve their primary task, and their ability to operate consistently as a working task group may be an indication of their strength.

The fact that the participants were all professionals and mature students may have enabled them to successfully encapsulate the traumatic circumstances in their environment in order to learn. This might reflect adaptation to chronic exposure to trauma rather than regression to a basic assumption level. Thus despite the social chaos and the group leaders' attempt to introduce it into the groups, they remained task oriented and constructive.

While most Israeli studies report that the political conflict is reenacted in small groups (Sagy, Steinberg, & Faheraladin, 2002; Weinberg, 2003), Pines (1989) suggests that functional subgroups can differentiate between the social systems, containing the differences and creating a dialogue. Our groups indeed displayed the ability to establish a "we" group, to organize themselves as functional groups, and to use cohesiveness to further their goals (Elias, 1978). According to the literature, only togetherness enables a group to develop the ability to work together (Whitaker, 1985; Yalom, 1970).

We next examined whether the unexpected behavior we observed in our groups might stem from the type of group. Is it possible that task groups in general, and small groups in particular, are capable of creating a safe space unaffected by the tumultuous world outside? As our examples show, external realities intruded on the large group so that it reenacted the behavior typical of Israeli society, while the small groups succeeded in creating a safe space that enabled learning. Indeed, large groups are commonly held to better reflect the social unconscious and the forces and behavior in society at large (Nuttman-Shwartz & Shay, 2000).

Our final question concerned the coping style of Israel society as a whole. Contrary to expectations, our supervision groups appeared to refute the notion that groups always reflect the social context in which they operate. However, studies of Israeli society reveal a similar pattern of behavior. It has been found that on all levels, from society at large (Bleich, Gelkopf, & Solomon, 2003) to professional groups

(Bar-On, 2001; Ramon, 2004); there is evidence of resistance, denial, and avoidance of the political chaos. In a sense, then, our groups did reveal the effect of the outside world. The need to leave the danger behind and create an isolated bubble has also been found to be a commonly employed defense mechanism in other groups in traumatized societies (Hopper, 2003).

It is no less important to consider the group leaders themselves. Operating in a shared reality of conflict exposes supervisors to unique pressures that may blur the distinction between their personal and professional lives and make it difficult for them to deal with professional tasks and serve as effective containers for their groups (Biran, 1997; Nuttman-Shwartz et al., 2004). In this context in particular, group therapists must take into account elements of mistrust, aggressiveness, and alienation that may result from communication failures. This is in accord with Benson et al. (2005), who claim that conducting groups in a situation of war or with ongoing anxiety might resonate internal catastrophic terrors and affect the therapists' function.

Foulkes and Anthony (1957) maintain that a containing setting which allows for discussion of the external conflict facilitates creation of an atmosphere of trust and fruitful dialogue. Bion (1961) suggests that interpretations of basic assumptions may release the barriers to group work. Similarly, Ettin (1999) proposes that the therapist raise emotional events pertaining to the group while ensuring that they do not deflect the group from dealing with its declared task. This may increase the participants' understanding and prevent the use of destructive defense mechanisms, such as split and projection.

Despite our attempts to relate to external events that would undoubtedly arouse disturbing thoughts and hostile feelings, the participants in our groups claimed that the interpersonal and cultural conflicts within the group were entirely different from events outside it. Some actually responded angrily to our endeavors to remark on the differences between in-group and out-group events. The resulting tension, confusion, and internal conflict we felt as supervisors might have been a form of projective identification that forged a cooperative coalition with the group's desire to create a different reality in the group space. On the other hand, if supervisors fail to cope sufficiently with their own traumas, they might unconsciously form a coalition with the group anxieties. Consequently, the group members might suffer the type of trauma described by Hopper (1997), the failure of an authoritative figure to meet and cope with their intense need for dependency in crisis.

The supervisor encounters the implicit demand to cope with the dismay of the group members. Failure to manage this need is likely to

result in the impotent rage of the group, and might also lead to formation of a "closed system." In other words, with its needs unmet, the group blindly seeks a way to cope with its own trauma and fumbles about for relief, oscillating back and forth between being a group of "singletons" (aggregation) and fusion to the extent that the identity of the members is blurred (massification). Neither of these extremes allows for authentic therapeutic progress. If the supervisor is unable to repair the situation adequately, he or she may be "locked out" of the system and have difficulty finding a way back into the group.

In our examples, countertransference might have prevented the groups from working on conflict issues. We might have been perceived as vulnerable, and therefore the groups may have avoided dealing with their heterogeneity and "preferred" to develop pluralistic dialogues and work toward their goals on a cognitive level in order to protect us from potential disaster. This kind of countertransference has been found to be common among group therapists in societies in conflict (Benson et al., 2005).

On the other hand, some researchers claim that avoiding external reality may sometimes be a functional mechanism, since it offers certain awareness and develops the potential for examination by softening the frustration and using the therapist as a containing figure. The therapist seems contained, even if he or she does not translate the thoughts that have not yet been realized.

Beyond the previous explanations, if we consider Bion (1961), the question remains as to whether our groups' quiescence was a protective mechanism, a solution of distancing and avoidance such as basic assumption flight? Can the avoidance of focusing on the threatening differentiation be explained in terms of a basic assumption level of cohesiveness that concealed the fear of dissemblance and the fundamental threat?

Bion (1962) speaks of the need of the mother to absorb the frustration her baby cannot bear, and to translate her baby's thoughts for him or her. The ability of the mother to contain the beta elements enables the child to adjust to a frustrating reality and to experience and be affected by reality in the future. The behavior of our groups might also be seen as a form of regression, whereby undigested elements that were not transformed emerged as beta elements.

It is possible that the supervision groups could not tolerate the frustration involved in facing reality, and therefore opted for splitting mechanisms, i.e., "we are not like them." The sense of calm and satisfaction produced by these mechanisms raises the question of whether the working level was sufficiently productive, or was the learning perhaps deficient.

CONCLUSION

Foulkes (1964) claims that groups have to maintain a delicate balance between emotional and cognitive processes. The emphasis in our supervision groups was on the cognitive elements, with the direction being client oriented. The anger of the participants toward our attempts to bring the outside conflict into the room may therefore have been a sign of the fear that the supervision group might turn into a therapeutic space. The group members may have felt the group contract was being breached. Such a situation would reduce their feeling of safety and could interfere with the learning process, which was their primary task.

The willingness to conduct a dialogue requires a high degree of maturity, which implies, among other things, a transition from the desire to control/possess to the desire to belong (Biran, 2002). Working with small groups enables intimate acquaintance and interpersonal contact. When the primary task is mostly cognitive oriented, professionals with awareness and a relatively high level of personal and professional maturity can create ecological codes within the group and the desire among the members to belong to something else rather than external reality. The ability and willingness of our groups to work together despite outside events allowed for development of productive working norms and a level of cohesiveness enabling dialogue. It should be noted, however, that the cautions and boundaries set by the group members regarding "what we should talk about and what we should avoid" indicate the existence of a conflict which, to a certain extent, is reflective of the social conflict in Israel, namely the question of if and how, despite our differences, we will all be able to live and work together in this country?

Certain limitations of the study must be noted. First, the number of groups and diversity of their composition was restricted. Secondly, no comparison was made with other, less volatile, periods. Indeed, this was the first time that the "enemy" came from inside Israeli society (Israeli Arabs), rather than being identified with the Palestinian Authority and occupied territories.

In addition, as mentioned above, the ratio of Arab students in both the large group and small groups was relatively low. They might therefore have felt a certain constraint about discussing the political tensions and elaborating on their reactions as a minority and excluded population. This situation may have promoted cohesion in the group as a whole instead of leading to the formation of subgroups, as might have been expected.

It is important to note, however, that even the third group, where Arabs constituted 50% of the participants, behaved in the same

manner at the very time that the Arab minority was rebelling in the world outside, implying that the proportion of Arabs in our groups did not affect the group dynamics. This may be the result of the fact that these were training, rather than conflict, groups, and were therefore dealing with the members' professional identity. In this sense, all the participants were ostensibly similar and no subgroups were created, contributing to the sense of cohesion and forestalling discussion of the divisive issues that are typically raised in conflict groups in Israel (Agmon, Sagy, & Schneider, 2005).

Thus far we have considered group dynamics from the perspective of the participants. However, in the "here and now" the supervisors were in the same situation as the participants: a chaotic reality generating a sense of helplessness and anxiety, as well as serious questions about the present, the future, and our relations as Jews with Israeli Arabs.

The literature on group work in a shared reality, particularly when existential threat is involved, speaks of the use of primitive mechanisms. It is possible, therefore, that the tension and confusion we felt as supervisors enabled the participants to employ projective identification to gain release from their own intolerable feelings. The shared distress may have prevented us from identifying this mechanism, creating instead something of a coalition that fed into the wish that the "here will be different." Our unspoken message may have affected the ability and willingness of the group members to feel safe and included enough to venture into "dangerous territory."

Bion (1988) recommends entering the therapeutic space "without memory and desire." Our ready acceptance of the group dynamics and belief that, indeed, the "here is different" may reflect the fact that we entered the group space with the unconscious desire for this to be so, a preconception which afforded us release as well. Thus the gap between the chaotic external reality and the calm and harmony within the group might be explained by our playing along with the group's defense mechanisms.

As our small groups reflected Israeli society as a whole in that the supervisors and participants all shared the same reality, an unusual group space was created. The issues involved in this situation will have to be addressed in training programs for group facilitators and therapists in order for them to better understand the group and personal dynamics at work under these conditions.

Our findings seem to raise the question of whether we need an entirely new frame of reference to describe group dynamics in societies plagued by violent social conflict, or whether such a situation calls for a change in the way groups are conducted. Future investigations which take into account not only the group composition, but also the attitudes and preconceptions of the facilitator, may help provide the answers.

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