Acknowledgement and Generativity in Reflective Group Supervision

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To appreciate the potential impact of the supervision practices we will introduce in this chapter, we invite you to pause for a moment to reflect on your own experience of two key phenomena. Firstly, can you recall what it is like to receive somewhat formalized recognition of who you are or what you have done—

earnest words of acknowledgment from someone who projects an understanding of what makes you unique and of what you have achieved? Examples of this include toasts or speeches delivered among family, friends, or colleagues that deliberately pause the proceedings to pay homage to someone through words. Hopefully you have had such an experience some time; can you recall what effect it had on your sense of yourself, and in cases of achievement, your energy for going forward and continuing your learning and development?

Having reflected on this momentarily, we invite you to consider an additional scenario. Are you able to tap memories or images of those moments when you and several others put their heads together in an earnest examination of some topic, responding to and building upon each others’ contributions? This might be in some unanticipated discussion at the tail end of a satisfying evening with friends, or a generative dialogue at a retreat among colleagues. What sort of richness emerges from this sort of mutually creative exchange and in what ways does it illuminate the topic at hand?

If you are able to identify instances of these two kinds of scenarios, it will help you to evaluate the practices we will present here on a basis that is more than theoretical, and grounded in your own lived experience. This chapter is devoted to exploring group supervision processes that achieve two key purposes which we have found critical in creating a group supervision venue characterized by supportive and creative exchange useful to supervisees and their clients. These ideas fit with inquiry into counsellor development (Orlinsky & Rønnestad,
2005; Rønnestad, & Skovholt, 2003), which demonstrates that for the first several years, professionals’ experience of their practice is characterized by self-doubt and uncertainty.

The first key purpose is acknowledgement of the practitioner who engages in the vulnerable task of sharing their work with colleagues. Supervision is an intensely vulnerable process; it is highly stressful to bare what feels like professional (and personal) limitations early in one’s practice (Larson et al., 1999; Merl, 1995). The process demands faith in those guiding us, support from our colleagues and trust in the safety of the space provided. As counselor educators and supervisors, we have found that unless we can create a space that is conducive for this sharing, the supervision process does not contribute to significant professional development because participants, understandably, play it safe, withholding aspects of their work and themselves which would most benefit from exploration and reflection.

The second key purpose in our approach to supervision relates to the generation of useful ideas that might be tried out in subsequent conversations with clients. When it is helpful, supervision is a venue where participants are fortified with a diversity of new possibilities for engaging in their work. Reflective practices provide that kind of generativity, while protecting against the sometimes insidious tendency to converge on one dimensional descriptions of clients’ lives, or supervisees’ abilities, that do not do justice to the richness and complexity of their experience.

Ethics and Multiplicity

In addition to making a case for the utility of the practices to follow, we will also explore the ways they attend to ethical concerns—in terms of both supervisor/supervisee and supervisee/client relationships. We will argue that reflective traditions help to protect against some of the most common forms of ethical violation in supervision by celebrating multiplicity and by
anchoring reflections in personal lived experience. Specifically, reflective practice challenges the assumption that there is an expert and correct interpretation of any event, especially one typically couched in arcane professional vocabulary (Paré et al., 2004). That said, the practice of supervision is a balancing act, because there is always the risk that by not asserting supervisor judgment in specific circumstances, clients or others may be placed at risk (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). To put this differently, multiplying perspectives enhances possibilities, but in some cases, specific perspectives or modes of sharing within the group need to be privileged for matters of professional ethics. This relates to the safety that we as supervisors endeavour to create. It includes both safety from abuse or violence for clients, and safety from unconstructive or harmful critique for supervisees. As we will describe below, we do not believe that providing leadership that protects this commitment precludes engaging in a group supervision process that leans towards a flattened hierarchy and celebrates multiplicity.

Situating Ourselves

We are both university-based counsellor educators, and also practitioners with several years accumulated experience in both the roles of supervisor and supervisee. David Paré is a registered counselling psychologist who engages in private practice in the province of Ontario and Jim Hibel is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in the State of Florida, where he has maintained a private practice for over 30 years. Our supervision takes place in two settings. We supervise masters and doctoral students completing internships at community agencies (DP & JH), and in a campus-based clinic (JH), as well as supervising practitioners post-graduation in private practice (DP).

We have both been influenced by the fertile thinking and practice emerging from traditions within family therapy which have
challenged longstanding individualist views associated with the three “waves” (Sue, Ivy, & Pederson, 1996) of Psychoanalysis, Humanism, and Behaviorism/Cognitivism. Through its consideration of people in context, family therapy evolved various strands based on the presupposition that individual experience is both embedded in and a consequence of the broader cultural milieu (Paré, 1995). From here, it is a minor leap to understanding the critical role of the cultural tool of language as the primary instrument of meaning making (Gergen, 2012; Shotter, 2009). We therefore understand clients’ and supervisees’ “lived realities” (Paré, 2012) as socially constructed in language, in the sense that it is through the language-based practice of making meaning that people attribute some form of coherence to what they experience (Bruner, 1990). From this perspective, group supervision is a fertile venue for meaning making that has very “real” consequences for clients and supervisees. It offers participants a creative context for generating a range of descriptions of what is going on for the clients, while also attending with care to how the participants receive and respond through language to the work presented by their colleagues.

A wealth of theory associated with postmodernism and poststructuralism has been useful to us by providing a vocabulary for speaking/thinking about our approaches to group supervision, and also inspiring practices founded on the process of reflection. In the next section we will provide a snapshot of some of this theoretical backdrop to reflective group supervision.

**Theoretical Resources**

Both White’s and Andersen’s work coalesced from theory focused on language, discourse, and power relations. Before examining how their specific practises developed, it would be helpful to touch on two key theorists whose ideas contributed to their emergence.

Michel Foucault (1972, 1977) engaged in an historical inquiry into broad patterns of social belief as they evolve over time, providing powerful insights into the role of cultural discourses in influencing individual experience. By examining the evolution of thinking and practice around topics like sexuality, mental illness, and the treatment of criminals, Foucault demonstrated how our taken-for-granted “knowledge” is always a function of prevailing social beliefs. In addition, he showed how beliefs that are widely entrenched are associated with established social institutions—the Church, the scientific academy, mass advertising, and so on—that are granted credibility and have the means of disseminating particular viewpoints. Put differently, we live in a world of many stories, but not all stories are equally privileged. For Foucault, society is a marketplace of knowledge claims, and there is an inextricable relationship between knowledge and power: “what we take to be knowledge may be nothing more than powerful concepts perpetuated by authorities, and those concepts may change our understanding of ourselves and our world” (Madigan, 2011, p. 169).

Foucault used the term “modern power” to describe how people come to police themselves—internalizing normative ideas set out in dominant cultural discourses and measuring themselves against these standards. The consequence of this process is a sense of coming up short or otherwise being inadequate. Foucault helps to make sense of how this plays out with clients or supervisees recruited into self-defeating discourses. His work also alerts to the possibility of this process being exacerbated in therapy or supervision—the risk of “colonizing” clients/supervisees (Paré, 2002; Todd & Wade, 1994) with meanings that may not reflect their idiosyncratic understanding—what Geertz (1983) called “local knowledge”.
The chances of this unfolding increases in the asymmetry of professional relationships where the therapist or supervisor’s voice is privileged for some of the reasons described above.

Not surprisingly, Foucault has played an instrumental role in inspiring practices vigilant of how power dynamics play out in therapy. But Foucault’s writing is not all cautionary. In addition to describing power’s repressive dimension, he pointed to its constitutive aspect.

In effect, “selves” are constituted through discourse, an observation that highlights the social dimension of being and speaks to the generative potential of group reflective processes.

A second key theorist whose ideas underlie the practices we will explore is the Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, 1986). Like Foucault, Bakhtin was intensely interested in the relationship between language, culture, and meaning, but he approached the topic from a different angle. Whereas Foucault focused on broad social discourses, Bakhtin trained his attention more microscopically, and showed how each word comes “pre-used” in the sense that it has already been employed by innumerable others for countless purposes. Thus the connotations of the word are colored by those various previous usages. The word is only “half ours” was how Bakhtin put it (1986), and we make it ours in the way we mark it with our individual “spin”, as it were.

Another aspect of Bakhtin’s view of language is that we are always in dialogue. When we speak, we pitch our slant on things to a listener or reader, and the meaning that emerges is a product of how it is taken up.

Shotter (2009) describes how this extends far beyond word definitions, touching on our very personhood: “my appearance in the human world as another person of worth depends on your responsiveness to my expression” (p. 21). Bakhtin therefore provides insight into the infinite shades of meaning available through the spoken word, and he captures the ongoing transformation of meaning that occurs as two
or more people engage in responsive verbal interchanges. As we will discuss below, these ideas have contributed to reflective practices associated with the generation of multiple meanings.

The next sections outline two related approaches to reflective group supervision we have developed as modifications of practices of live therapy with observers. The theorists described above, among others, hover in the background of both the therapy and supervisions. In each case, we will start with the therapy approach, followed by the mode of supervision we have adapted from it. We will start with Michael White, although he developed his reflective therapy more recently than Tom Andersen, because we believe his practices more explicitly focus on acknowledgment, whereas Andersen’s is particularly strong on generativity. That said, we find that in their own ways, both traditions of reflective group supervision are well suited to the purposes of acknowledgment and generativity.

White’s Outsider Witnessing

In the late 1980’s, the Australian family therapist Michael White had become interested in practices that would move therapy beyond the context of the therapist/client tradition. Having delved into ideas of Foucault, Bakhtin, Derrida and others, he and David Epston (White, 2007, White & Epston, 1990) had become intensely interested in ideas such as acknowledging local knowledge rather than erudite knowledge, and constructing contexts for the enhancement of the development of identity through community interactions. With these as contexts, White took an interest in what were then revolutionary practices designed to level hierarchy between therapists, observing groups of therapists, and clients. White explored reflecting team practices as they were being developed in Milan and at the Ackerman Clinic in New York in the early 1980’s, but he was particularly taken by the work that Tom Andersen was doing in Norway, and met with Karl Tomm and Andersen in the late 1980’s.
White was drawn to Andersen’s commitment to levelling hierarchy and enhancing transparency by inviting therapist groups observing sessions to share their thoughts and impressions directly with clients. At the same time, White became concerned about the risks of reflecting team conversations inadvertently reproducing various cultural or professional discourses with negative repercussions for clients. Interestingly, his concerns extended to issuing praise or congratulations to clients because these are after all expressions of normative judgment, albeit well-intentioned ones (White, 1995).

Around this time, White became aware of the work of the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1986), who had developed practices of what she called “definitional ceremonies” while working within the elderly Jewish community in Venice California. Myerhoff had discovered the transformational and healing aspects of performing aspects of one’s life in front of a group of individuals who were in a position to resonate with these life events. This performance led the participants to feel visible and valued. This fit well for White in terms of his wish to privilege the knowledge of the community and to avoid the problems of therapists directly or inadvertently reproducing norms and standards through their reflections.

Out of this combination of influences, White began to develop group reflective practices congruent with the various other creative ways of working that he and Epston were innovating. They had found that the children in families who had found success in dealing with problems would typically express an interest in sharing their local knowledge by acting as consultants to other children and families. Out of this developed practices wherein young clients participated in ceremonies that acknowledged the successes of other children.

With the influence of Andersen’s reflecting teams and Myerhoff’s definitional ceremony practices, White developed a formalized process for integrating the
reflections of “outsider witnesses”—persons recruited from the community or groups of therapists acting as behind-the-mirror teams—into live therapy sessions. These practices evolved from the original article on outsider witness practices (1995), through a revision of the practices (White, 1999), to a chapter in White’s sole-authored book (White, 2007).

White increasingly formalized the structure of outsider witness practices to better avoid hazards he commonly experienced when witnesses want to praise, help, evaluate, or otherwise impose cultural standards. White found it useful to carefully prepare witnesses for the process by outlining for them what they would not be required to do. These included the idea that

“...these retellings are not about giving affirmations, offering congratulatory responses, pointing out positives, focusing on strengths and resources, making moral judgements or evaluating people’s lives against cultural norms (whether these judgements and evaluations are positive or negative), interpreting the lives of others and formulating hypotheses, delivering interventions with the intention of resolving people’s problems, giving advice or presenting moral stories or homilies, reframing the events of people’s lives, imposing alternative stories about people’s lives, trying to help people with their predicaments, and dilemmas, or expressing worry for the lives of others. Further, outsider witness responses are not so much about empathy and sympathy but about resonance—outsider witness responses that are most effective are those that re-present what people give value to in a way that is highly resonant to those people.” (White 2007, pp. 197-198)

As you might imagine, having all these ways of engaging taken off the table can leave participants—especially those new to the process—feeling stripped of any of their usual
skills, and it can be helpful to provide support as they formulate their reflections. For this reason the process has evolved so that the therapist working with the client(s) assumes the responsibility for systematically interviewing the outsider witnesses, in contrast to earlier iterations where group members interviewed each other.

The format of these Outsider Witness groups generally involves four phases. In the first part the therapist interviews a client or clients. In White’s case this interview is characterized by narrative practices.

The second phase involves bringing in the outsider witnesses, who, having observed the first interview, are interviewed around four basic questions. These involve first asking the outsider witness to report on specific statements or descriptions that caught their attention, and especially specific words or statements that seem related to what is important to the client. The second question invites the witness to describe, if possible, an image (a picture, poem, song, etc.) that came to mind as the member bore witness to the client(s) engaged in the expression of what they valued or cherish. The third question invites the witness to contextualize their response to the client(s) by situating it in their own life and experiences. White calls this “resonance”, (White, 2007 p. 192) as it identifies ways in which the witness resonates with the experiences or intentions of the client.

The fourth area of questioning invites the witness to speculate on what they take away from the experience—what they might do, think, or feel differently following the meeting on account of hearing the client(s) and responding to these questions.

Following these interviews with each of the outsider witnesses, in the third phase of the outsider witness session, the therapist then re-interviews the clients about what they heard: what they were drawn to, what they resonated with, what images presented by the witnesses most caught their attention, and how they
might carry all this forward. Often, this is followed by a fourth phase, convening of all the participants for a further discussion.

Outsider Witnessing takes acknowledgment of the client to levels we have not seen with any other practices. It creates a venue for a roomful of professionals to park their “clinical” selves and vocabularies, and to reflect from the heart on how they have been moved in witnessing clients as they engage with the challenges of their lives. And the echoes of this kind of deeply respectful ritual go further: White (2007) described how these group practices have been helpful, not only to the clients, but also to the witnesses in ways that eclipse the traditional therapy setting. This has been our experience as well.

Over time, outsider witnessing has provided structures for additional reflective practices beyond therapy per se. White (2003) and Denborough (2006) have utilized this framework in their involvement with larger communities when invited to assist groups that have experienced traumas ranging from earthquakes and tsunamis to political oppression and genocide. In the next section we will outline how one of us (JH) has adapted outsider witnessing to group supervision, borrowing from and adapting the practices to fit the supervisory context.

Reflective Listening in Group Supervision

Hibel and polanco (2010) developed a way of using White’s ideas in group supervision, aimed at providing both structure and leadership to these conversations, enabling group members to become better known to themselves and each other, while developing skills in identifying and articulating their resonance in response to the sharing of clients. This takes place through a three-phase process, involving specific kinds of questions posed to the group by the supervisor. These phases and types of questioning share many of the ideas found in Outsider Witnessing. A key difference is that the reflections occur without the client present, and are focused on the experiences of
the supervisees as a function of what they heard in witnessing the clients. In this sense the prime purpose of the practices is counsellor personal and professional development rather than the acknowledgment of a client associated with live outsider witnessing.

**Phase One: Therapy Session**

This phase is most often done in live supervision with a team of supervisees and a supervisor behind the mirror, though it can also be done with a video or audio recorded review. In general, the more directly the team experiences the actual therapy event, the more powerfully the team can respond to what they hear and see. Prior to the observation or discussion of the therapy session, the supervisor provides some structure and offers descriptions of what the team members can expect. These expectations draw heavily from White’s (2007) injunctions described above. The team members know they will not be expected to help the therapist or the client by proposing resolutions to problems or interpreting clients’ actions. Instead, they are informed they only need to listen and watch carefully as the session unfolds, and that later they will be invited to reflect on the ways in which they connect with the client in terms of their own life experiences. They are encouraged to write down specific words they hear from the client that catch their attention as the therapist engages in, or plays back a recording of the therapy session. The team members are discouraged from talking with each other during this phase.

**Phase Two: Reflection**

The reflection phase begins after the session has ended and the clients have left. This phase draws from Outsider Witness practices, but also differs in a number of ways. In Outsider Witness practices, the conversations maintain a consistent focus on the client at the center of the conversation, and the client observes and later responds the reflections of the outsider witnesses. In the practice described here, the focus is on the experiences
and meanings of the supervisees in response to
what they have heard from the client, and the
client is not present for these reflections.

The reflection phase invites the
members of the team to reflect on what they
heard in specific ways. Different from a
tradition that imagines that an observed event
is a “fact” that can be described accurately and
objectively, this kind of reflection is consistent
with a range of ideas found in the works of
Bateson, Bakhtin, Derrida, Wittgenstein and
others, that suggests that the meaning of an
event is determined through language and
interpretation, We assume that the individual
selects out, from all the information that is
available, particular aspects that capture their
attention—a selection influenced in no small
part by the observer in addition to the event
itself. The “reality” brought to the foreground
in this process is always a function of this
witnessing and interpreting process. The
observing individual, in the context of others,
generates a meaning of an event through their
own experience expressed through language.

By observing and selecting from all that could
have been heard, supervisees share their
personal resonance, and in this sense are joined
with the client who is observed.

With this in mind, the supervisor
engages each team member in a conversation
about what they observed during the session,
asking four categories of inquiry, each which
may contain a number of questions depending
on the flow of the conversation. The first
category is called “Tuning in” and asks for a
“clear description of what was said by the
person seeking consultation, that captured the
attention” (Hibel & polanco, 2010, p. 56) of the
supervisee. This becomes a report on what the
group member specifically selected from all that
was said. It is typical that each supervisee
interviewed will report on very different words
and ideas as having been at the center of the
client’s account.

The second category of question is
called “Intentions”. In this part of the
conversation, the supervisor asks the
supervisee to reflect on “the relationship between what was selected to be heard and the listener’s own experiences, aspirations, or life triumphs” (Hibel & Polanco, 2010, p. 56).

During this part of the conversation the supervisee is invited to consider what accounts for them having selected these expressions. These explorations usually include the supervisee’s life experiences, and what has been important to them in terms of their own intentions, values, belief and hopes.

White (2007) brought forward the idea that individuals can determine their own actions by introducing the distinction of “intentional states” (p. 103), to be contrasted with “internal states” (p. 101). The notion of action being an expression of internal states presumes that peoples’ deeds are determined by inner characteristics such as traits, needs, or dispositions that can be measured, assessed and evaluated. The concept of intentional states frames a view of people as guided by principles, values, dreams, and the like. These are not seen as immutable characteristics of the person, and the concept therefore provides a view of individuals fitting their actions with their intentions. In the practices described here, the supervisor deliberately invites supervisees to reflect on intentional states, to keep the focus on the clients acting from values in the face of challenges, rather than understanding them as acting out pathologies or deficits. This same view is applied to all colleagues in the room, which of course includes the supervisees themselves as they share reflections.

The third category of question is called “Consequences”. In this part of the conversation the supervisor and supervisee explore “...the ways in which this listening might have shaped the direction of the therapy consultation interview and the effects for the person seeking consultation (Hibel & Polanco, 2010, p.56).”, had the supervisee been the therapist. This conversation invites the supervisee to speculate on what questions or avenues of exploration they might have pursued with the clients based on what they selected to be heard, keeping clients intentions,
values, beliefs and hopes at the center of the speculation.

The fourth category of questioning is called “Action”. These questions consist of an “exploration of the effects of this process on the further development of the practices of the therapist as a professional and in their larger life. (Hibel & polanco, 2101, p.56).” In this final part of the conversation, the discoveries the supervisee has made, the meaning that this has for them, and the ways in which this might influence their practice are expanded beyond the therapy and supervision context. Typically, as part of these conversations, recollections of people, usually family members, teachers or other significant persons in the supervisee’s life, will arise. The possibilities for re-connecting, acknowledging or revisiting the contributions of these people is raised. The overarching question asked is “What might you take away from this conversation, and what might you do, that you might not have if we had not had this conversation?

Each member of the supervision team is offered the opportunity to participate in a conversation like this, with the team members and the therapist in attendance. After the last supervisee is interviewed, the therapist and the supervision team are invited by the supervisor to share their thoughts on the overall process in phase three.

**Phase Three: Sharing**

This phase usually begins with the supervisor asking the therapist, who has been listening to all these conversations between the supervisor and the other team members, to recount what captured their attention. Typically the therapist reports that the team members have become much more richly known to them, and that they have seen possibilities and intentions in the clients that they hadn’t seen before. There is usually discussion about which of the ideas shared resonate most strongly for the therapist and team members generally provide inquiries about why this might be so. The team members and the supervisor report
Supervisees and therapists have been universally enthusiastic about participating in this practice, and it has been rewarding as a supervisor as well. The major disadvantage to the practice is that the teams ask to do this with each client, and there is never time enough to do that, and also take care of all the other practicum requirements.

When asked about what they like about this practice, supervisees talk about the degree to which they feel that their own life experiences, values, dreams and hopes are of value as therapists. Often these aspects of the therapist are looked at in terms of “counter-transference” or “issues” that the therapist needs to “work through” in order to be an effective therapist. Instead, we feel there is much that is useful to supervisees in tapping personal experience, We do recommend however that therapists be clear about their own ideas about how life should be lived, so that they do not impose their own cultural discourses on others. For the therapist or supervisee to be aware of their own resonance
with the client should not be confused with believing that the therapist or supervisee “knows just how the client feels”. In practice, these awarenesses are shaped into potential questions to be explored.

The above caveat aside, we do find there is something very valuable in the exercise of reflecting on what links one’s own experience to another. We see richness in the team members’ identification of intentions that resonate with their clients, and the discovery that their own beliefs and experiences of triumph over adversity can provide them with ways of connecting with clients that would not be available if they were bracketed out.

Beyond these individual experiences, another benefit of these practices occurs at a wider level as the team as a group re-experiences itself. Since members each have had an opportunity to share their hopes, dreams and values, and to hear the same from each other, they tend to develop a richer mutual understanding. This shows in expressions of closeness between members that was not present before.

An apparent consequence of this carefully structured sharing is a shift in the culture of the group away from mutual critique or the competitive quest for what “should” have been done. Instead, members come to see themselves as part of a collective with a vast stock of ideas, perceptions, experiences and questions, all of which have the potential to be useful. Supervisees report a sense of relief at not being so frightened that they will be discovered by their colleagues or the supervisor to be inadequate or “wrong”, leading to a newfound sense of safety in the group.

In White’s Outsider Witness practices, clients have the opportunity to be heard by witnesses and to hear the reflections of witnesses in ways that differ from traditional practices of critique, applause, or direction; each of which carry an implication that the observer is evaluating the client according to some standard. Rather the client hears and
experiences the specifics of their lives that were 
noticed by the witness, and the resonances and 
beliefs that the witness experienced. The 
supervisory practice described here is designed 
to accomplish similar ends for the supervisees 
who share their work. We find this exercise to 
be powerfully acknowledging of each team 
member in very similar ways, acknowledging 
their values and purposes, and allowing them to 
feel more closely joined with their colleagues 
and their clients.

Interestingly, although these 
conversations are not explicitly focused on the 
identification of multiple avenues for practice, 
they are also highly generative. The diversity of 
lived experience in the room gives birth to a 
plurality of perspectives. The focus shifts to an 
examination of the possibilities that most 
resonate for the therapist, and away from the 
more familiar supervisory scenario where 
supervisees struggle to find the one “right” 
approach to their clients’ dilemmas.

Also, having heard from colleagues 
about the many ways clients’ intentions can be 
understood, each member comes away with an 
 experiential understanding that lives are multi-
storied. This view contrasts with dominant 
views of “the self” and engenders ideas about 
clients and their problems that are less likely to 
be unitary or totalizing. The result is a 
cornucopia of ideas for clients, who are no 
longer seen as having only one set of attributes. 
Often, supervisees who are part of a group in 
which clients’ lives become so richly 
understood, report that they now “get” social 
constructionism in ways that they had not 
previously.

In keeping with the impulse to avoid 
totalizing pronouncements, the supervisor plays 
an active role in ensuring that reflections are 
couched in tentative terms—a reminder that 
these possibilities are possibilities only, and that 
the client always remains at the center of the 
actual therapy. Achieving this tone demands a 
careful use of language. A key distinction is 
between pronouncements framed as “insights”
or directives, which are discouraged, versus sharing couched more in the form of inquiry and featuring questions, options, and possibilities.

Having shared one tradition of reflective group supervision fashioned on Michael White’s work that accomplishes acknowledgment and generativity, we turn now to the work of Tom Andersen. Andersen originated the “reflecting team”, an approach we see as leaning towards generativity in the way it encourages and celebrates multiplicity. Following the exploration of Andersen’s therapeutic work, we will present an approach to reflective group supervision that borrows from both Andersen and White in an explicit attempt to address the dual objectives of acknowledgment and generativity.

**Andersen’s Reflecting Team**

The Norwegian psychiatrist and family therapist Tom Andersen coined the term “reflecting team” in a seminal article (1987) that described a novel practice for conducting a session with a group of observing therapists that deviated in many significant ways from his experience training in strategic family therapy (Selvini-Palazolli et al., 1980). Although he offered some general guidelines for the practices he introduced, Andersen expressed reservations that his approach would be taken up in a cookbook manner and he preferred to speak of reflecting *processes* (Andersen, 1991; Anderson, 2007)—a concern that we share. His work is not procedure-bound and touches on many aspects of human expression and response, a small few of which we will explore here. For us, Andersen embodies a spirit of relating; the aspect we want most to highlight here is its embrace of multiplicity (Chang, 2012). The reflecting process as he adapted it cautions against constrictions of meaning, aiming instead to open up possibilities rendered invisible in the struggle of day to day existence. There are clearly echoes here of White’s work, just as there are strands of Andersen’s ideas in narrative therapy—both outsider witness groups and reflecting teams share what
Wittgenstein (1953) would call a “family resemblance” in their finely tuned sensitivity to language and ethics. We will start by providing an overview of Andersen’s practice as it is used in live sessions with clients before describing variations of reflecting processes that we employ for supervision.

Andersen adopted the reflecting team as a variation on the conversation between a team of observing therapists and a family in session, an exchange which typically involved a team behind a one-way glass privately discussing the family and then introducing a single intervention via an emissary who joined the family and primary therapist in the consulting room. Among Andersen’s modifications were the following: 1. The observing team does not talk among itself, saving discussion for the reflection phase; 2. Instead of prescribing a single intervention, the team members all share their thoughts and impressions with the clients; 3. Team members do not talk directly to the clients but reflect among themselves, referring to the clients in the third person, speaking of what they saw and heard, thought, felt and imagined, while clients observe and listen; 4. Clients are interviewed following the reflections and invited to process the experience—identify what they found “interesting” (1987, p. 420), what was not helpful to them, and so on.

In discouraging pre-reflection discussion, Andersen (1992) was interested in preserving the plurality of views available; he believed “there are as many versions of a situation as there are persons to understand it” (p. 61). He wanted to avoid the convergence on a single congealed meaning that often happens under the influence of a trainer or senior practitioner. Rather than argue with clients’ views, he wanted to extend or add to them, and suggested phrases such as “in addition to what [they] saw…” (1992, p. 51) in order to convey the both/and (versus either/or) tone he encouraged. He celebrated multiplicity, and was suspicious of groupthink that turns clinical brainstorming into a sort of detective game to
determine the purported “truth” of a client’s situation.

In Andersen’s work, reflecting is an exquisitely delicate practice imbued with a reverential quality reminiscent of Buber’s (1923/1971) writing on the “I and Thou” relationship. He suggested reflections be offered in a tentative manner, ever aware that some points of view will hit the mark and others will not, and mindful of power differentials that might attach undue weight to a professional’s observations. He also encouraged the use of “daily language” (1992, p. 58), and the sharing of personal responses to erode the dividing line created when therapists maintain purportedly objective and neutral stances, couching observations in professional jargon. This last point is of course central to White’s outsider witnessing process.

The practice of not talking directly to the clients is one of the more unusual features of the reflecting team, and one that we find trainees new to the practices have a lot of discomfort with—after all, it is typically considered “rude” to talk about someone in their presence. Like White’s work, the convention is intended to provide clients with a witnessing stance—Andersen referred to this as a “meta-position”. Andersen was intrigued by Bakhtin’s (1984) ideas about inner dialogue (Paré & Lysack, 2006), and he saw this guideline as protecting private space for clients to process what they were hearing. This is something difficult to do when caught up in the polite social dance of conveying to an earnest stranger (i.e. the reflecting team member), either verbally or nonverbally, that their ideas are interesting or helpful.

Andersen’s reflecting practices bear various similarities to White’s in the careful attention to the ethics of meaning-making, and the deliberate way in which team members are invited to respond from their whole beings, as opposed to speaking from constricted “clinical” identities. The articulation of personal resonance described above in relation to White’s work is also evident in Andersen’s
Reflecting team work, but Andersen’s approach is less tightly structured and allows for a broader range of responses. The complementary features of the two approaches have led one of us (DP) to develop group supervision practices that draw on each in order to accomplish the dual aims of acknowledgment and generativity (Paré, 2009; Paré et. al., 2004).

Combining acknowledgment and generativity in reflective group supervision

Like the adoption of Outsider Witnessing described above, this combined Outsider Witnessing/Reflecting Team approach differs somewhat from the practices it was inspired by. The key distinction to bear in mind is that White’s and Andersen’s practices were originally developed for live sessions with reflections being of primary service to clients. In these adapted practices, the process is structured for the benefit of the supervisee sharing their work. The process is outlined below, broken down by the stages that unfold sequentially.

Phase One: Sharing Practice

Group supervision time is divided up to provide windows for participants to consult with the group, either by sharing a segment of a video-recorded segment and discussing it, or providing a capsule summary of their work with a particular client. In situations where a participant (a “sharing counsellor” for brevity’s sake here) feels a greater need to address a general, personal concern related to their work—for instance, a prevailing self doubt, or difficulties accessing hopefulness when meeting clients faced with multiple challenges—they may explore this topic rather than present a particular “case” per se.

Typically one person in the group interviews the sharing counsellor. This might be the supervisor, which provides a chance to model interviewing skills, or it could be another group member, which creates the opportunity for practice. Questions are aimed at ensuring the group has a rich picture of the work, eliciting descriptions of the client’s presentation.
and situation, and also evoking an account of how the sharing counsellor is responding to their client(s), what they are struggling with, what they would like from the group, and so on. When the sharing counsellor is well prepared and verbally effusive, the interviewer’s role is fairly minimal.

We limit the interviewer role to one person so that the sharing counsellor is not fielding questions that come from a variety of perspectives at once, which can be challenging to respond to, and fragments the unfolding story. At the end of this sequence—typically about 15 or 20 minutes but adjustable depending on the time available—other participants are invited to ask questions for clarification, or to satisfy their curiosity on some key point, but not to pursue some particular hypothesis or to open discussion to the group. This completes the first phase.

**Phase Two: Reflections in Two Rounds**

The reflections are broken into two rounds—the first focused on acknowledgment of the sharing counsellor and the second on generation of multiple perspectives. In practice, the lines between these rounds are somewhat blurred. We discourage reflections that feel forced or insincere, and as a result, some participants may contribute to one of the rounds and not the other, depending on where their inspiration lies. As in the White and Andersen traditions applied to live sessions, reflectors talk to each other. This provides the sharing counsellor with space to critically evaluate what is useful and what is not, possibly to scribble notes to be consulted later.

**Front End Reflections**

Front end reflections feature acknowledgment, focused on the sharing counsellor’s practice. This sometimes involves noticing and expressing curiosity about the evolution of, or a breakthrough, in their work, providing an audience to their ongoing professional development. But as in outsider witness work with clients, acknowledgment need not come in the identification of “preferred developments”, and may instead foreground a view of the sharing counsellor's
attempting to be helpful to clients dealing with challenges. This sort of reflection is similar to the identification of “intentional states” described in relation to Outsider Witnessing practices. To be witnessed in the performance of one’s values in the face of challenges is itself acknowledgment. Examples of first round reflections include:

I noticed that Celia seemed to adopt a nonjudgmental attitude with her client, despite the potential for some frustration. This seems different than that “impatience” she’s spoken of before, and I wonder what it says about how her practice is evolving. (curiousity about a preferred development)

I’m finding myself feeling a mix of emotions right now after hearing Nathan’s description of his client’s occasionally unkind treatment of his partner since the illness. So much going on, and I can imagine myself feeling overwhelmed in Nathan’s role. I’m noticing how he seems intent on staying open to his client despite his own misgivings about some of his client’s actions. (acknowledging sharing counsellor’s intentions)

The acknowledging tone of this first round creates a climate of support and respect, opening the sharing counsellor to the additional input to follow. Following this round the reflections shift to the generation of multiplicity, and are typically focused on the (absent) client in much the same way as they would be in a live session. The options open to reflectors at this point are diverse; what they have in common is the intention to provide a variety of perspectives that may be useful to the sharing counsellor in their continuing work with the client(s) in question. This might include a reflection acknowledging the client similar to the sorts of reflections arising from the outsider witnessing process. Other reflections might take a number of forms: an expression hopefulness anchored in something heard, noticing clients’ preferred developments, disclosing a personal response, sharing an account of having worked with a roughly similar situation, and so on.

As with Outsider Witnessing, notice the tentativeness of wording in the (necessarily condensed) sample reflections below, which is mirrored in nonverbals as well. The intention is not to debate what is “really going on” but to generate a range of possibilities, leaving it to
the sharing counsellor to discern what will be useful to them in their work.

Listening to Agnes’ (client) story, I was struck by her tenacity. It seems she’s drawn on this often when things are looking particularly dark. I was imagining a conversation with Agnes about the history of tenacity in her life, and wondering if there are other family members who share that history.

I was thinking about how Sofia (client) stood up to her boss, despite the risk of being fired. Seems like there was something important enough for her to take that risk I wonder if Sofia would see it that way, and if so, what she’d name as those values, and whether she could point to other areas of her life where she upholds them.

Garth’s story brought up memories of my Uncle Colin, who faced a similar set of challenges in his life, but seemed often to use his circumstances as evidence that the world is a wicked place, a shtick that would inevitably drag him deeper into discouragement and bitterness. I wonder what Garth could tell Colin about a different way forward?

It’s hard to recreate the shape and tone of group reflections here because much of the richness arises from unrehearsed exchanges that unfold as team members respond to each other—a feature of Andersen’s work reminiscent of Bakhtin’s writings on meaning and dialogue (Hoffman, 2007). It is not uncommon for team members to prepare themselves to share one particular reflection, but to put it aside once they hear from a colleague, whose sharing sets off reverberations that give rise to additional reflections not anticipated until that very moment. A reflection of this sort might begin with “as I listen to you I’m reminded of....” or some other phrase linking one reflection with another. This is about being responsive to team members and open to being touched and moved not just by the account of the client, but by whatever may come up in the discussion which follows.

There are various options regarding the supervisor’s role during reflections. In one variation, the supervisor does not reflect, but takes on the role of facilitator. This could include helping a reflector articulate their thoughts clearly, as in You said you were “moved” by what you heard; could you say a little more about what that means for you? Or the supervisor might help a participant situate
their reflection in their own lived experience—a practice which guards against reflections taking on a disembodied, neutral quality: Is there anything about your own personal experience with [the challenge faced by the client] that would help us understand how you’re responding? Note again the similarity here to White’s work and the notion of resonance. The facilitative role is especially useful with supervisees newer to the processes; it is a way of helping them to find ways of speaking that are counter to the definitive and neutral style typical of many dominant traditions.

Alternately, the supervisor can join in the reflections. Approached this way, the supervisor’s role is not different from other group members in most respects. At the same time the supervisor may exercise the option to draw out colleagues’ reflections or invite them to elaborate on their comments to address safety concerns—the safety of a client regarding abuse or violence, or the safety of a sharing counsellor in terms of how the reflections may be impacting them. In our experience, when we adapt this role, we often speak more than others in groups new to, or reticent about, the reflection process. In other situations, it might not be evident to an observer who in the room has the supervisory role.

In this hybridized approach to reflective group supervision, the initial acknowledgment of sharers in their practice sets off conversations whose final destinations are never certain, but whose supportive and tentative tone creates an inviting container for connection and exploration. It is that fertile creativity that stands out: a typical image is of the sharing counsellor scribbling feverishly as the team reflects, gathering up ideas to complement their own.

This leaning toward the generation of possibilities reflects the context in which we most often use the approach—with counsellors in private practice. Unlike the students immersed in self-exploration who engage in the Outsider Witness-informed practices described
earlier, these practitioners are faced with the pragmatic challenge of their next session, and are hungry for options. As options appear, so do unanticipated learnings. The diversity of reflections grounded in colleagues’ experience and responsive to the words of the sharer provides a sampling of therapeutic avenues which, as Andersen (1987) would say, are helpful because they are different but not too different from the sharer’s intentions. The conversations are a comforting reminder that there are always ways forward—for counsellors, of course, and also for the people who consult them.

**Concluding Thoughts**

One feature that distinguishes reflective approaches from other types of supervision is the rigorous attention to the form and content of the utterances exchanged. Reflective group supervision is itself a disciplined practice, in most respects indistinguishable from therapeutic conversation, but of course for the absence of the client. Given the relative dearth of opportunities for practitioners to share their work in formal settings (Paré, 2011; Paré & Thériault, 2010), the processes outlined here offer a rich additional venue for refining practice through the ritualized exchange of group reflection.

A third theorist key philosopher work informs our approaches to reflective supervision will be helpful as we offer some concluding thoughts. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) showed how meaning is not merely transmitted in speech, but performed. In other words, talk is action, and action with palpable consequences (Strong & Paré, 2004). This observation accounts for our preoccupation with the ethics of supervisory exchanges. Supervision is a venue for far more than “sharing ideas”; it is a space where identities are actively constructed through talk. This construction has huge potential for the “storying of professional development” (Winslade et. al. 2000), particularly during the initial training phase of one’s career, a time of acute professional uncertainty (Orlinsky &
Choosing how that storying unfolds calls for ethical intentionality.

In her tribute to Tom Andersen after his untimely death, Harlene Anderson (2007) acknowledged his “distinction of therapy as a philosophy of ethics” (p. 411). We see supervision in similar terms. We employ reflective supervision as a medium for using talk to characterize both clients and supervisees in ways that run counter to more dominant forms of speech focused on deviance or deficit. As Gergen (2005) says, “When we can alter the ways in which language is used, develop new forms of talking, or shift the context of usage…..we can appreciate deep-seated grounds of resistance” (p. 22). Reflective supervision practices self-consciously deviate from more conventional modes of talk to accomplish highly particular aims, sharing that same passionate spirit of resistance.

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