

Yevgenia Lashkova¹, Sveta Berdibayeva², Zhuparkul Beissenova³, Mariya Mun²,
Aida Faizullina², Bulat Serimbetov⁴, Aigul Gizatullina⁵

Received: 23.05.2017
Accepted: 04.08.2017
Published: 29.03.2018

The phenomenon of “disappearances” in the process of supervision in a permanent professional multimodal supervision group

Zjawisko „zniknięć” w procesie superwizji w warunkach stałej multimodalnej
grupy superwizyjnej

¹ Professional League of Psychologists and Specialists of Helping Professions, Almaty, Kazakhstan

² Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

³ Kazakh State Women's Pedagogical University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

⁴ Kazakh University of Economics, Finance and International Trade, Astana, Kazakhstan

⁵ Shakarim State University of Semey, Semey, Kazakhstan

Correspondence: Yevgenia Ivanovna Lashkova, Professional League of Psychologists and Specialists of Helping Professions, Bogenbai Batyr Str. 86/47, office 203, 050010 Almaty, Kazakhstan,
tel.: 87016866324, e-mail: eva_eve@mail.ru

Abstract

The article discusses the phenomenon of “disappearance” in the supervision process. The authors show that the phenomenon of “disappearance” is a result of the peculiarities of the flow of group dynamics at the initial stage of the group's development. The manifestation of all the phenomena of the initial stage of group dynamics is characteristic for a supervision multimodal group. The condition provoking the development of the phenomenon of “disappearance” is the activation of deep layers of the unconscious, typical for situations of group therapy and supervision. The motivational basis of this phenomenon is the avoidance of the narcissistic trauma of the specialist exposing the case to supervision. The article offers examples of how this phenomenon manifests, and discusses its variations. The article draws from the theoretical traditions in psychology such as psychoanalysis, group analysis and professional multimodal model of supervision.

Keywords: disappearance phenomenon, early group dynamics, supervision, multimodal supervision, interpretation of dynamic processes

Streszczenie

Niniejsza praca stanowi omówienie zjawisk określanych mianem „zniknięć” w procesie superwizji. Autorzy wykazują, iż zjawisko to jest wynikiem specyficznych warunków charakterystycznych dla dynamiki grupowej w grupie superwizyjnej na jej wstępnym etapie rozwoju. W multimodalnej grupie superwizyjnej można zaobserwować przejawy wszystkich zjawisk charakterystycznych dla początkowego etapu dynamiki grupowej. Różnorodne zjawiska „zniknięć” wywołane są aktywacją głębokich warstw nieświadomości, typowo zachodzącą w warunkach terapii grupowej oraz superwizji. Podłożem motywacyjnym procesów określanych tą nazwą jest unikanie traumy narcystycznej przez specjalistę zgłaszającego przypadek mający podlegać superwizji. W artykule podano przykłady, w jaki sposób zjawiska „zniknięć” mogą się przejawiać, oraz opisano ich możliwe warianty. Ramy teoretyczne dla niniejszej pracy stanowią takie tradycje w psychologii, jak psychoanaliza, analiza grupowa oraz multimodalny model superwizji.

Słowa kluczowe: zjawisko zniknięcia, wczesna dynamika grupowa, superwizja, superwizja multimodalna, interpretacja procesów dynamicznych

INTRODUCTION

Supervision is a frequently used form of psychologists' support in psychotherapeutic practice, allowing them to focus on their difficulties in working with clients, and to share the responsibility for this work with a more experienced professional (supervisor) (Shchukina, 2011). The main task of supervision is to improve the quality of the specialist's work with the client (Bulyubash, 2003). This goal can be achieved by understanding the disruption in the communication between the psychologist and the client. Supervision provides support to the psychologist in methodological terms, and helps to investigate personal factors that hinder the provision of effective psychological assistance: blind spots, unconscious countertransference experiences, unprocessed problems of the psychologist who, working with a particular client, becomes a barrier to efficiency. It is also an excellent opportunity to correlate the available theoretical knowledge with one's own experience of counselling or psychotherapy (Igumnova, 2015; Madalieva and Igumnova, 2016).

Supervision practice is rooted in the mainstream of major psychotherapeutic modalities, such as psychoanalysis, analytical psychology, gestalt therapy, symbol drama, transactional analysis, etc. (Garankova, 2016). Professional multimodal supervision allows to bring together specialists of different modalities, bringing to the supervisory space all the diversity of their experience, and thereby forming a free pluralistic approach and breadth of professional horizons.

The purpose of this article is to describe the phenomenon of "disappearance," and to reveal the importance of this concept for understanding the dynamics of group processes, research of communication in group therapy and multimodal supervision.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Firstly, it is necessary to clarify some basic concepts employed in the study. It should be briefly explained who is in the supervisory groups, who is the supervisor and who is the supervised, what their roles are, and how their interaction is regulated in such groups.

A permanent multimodal supervision group is an open small group which includes both permanent supervision group members (supervisors, co-supervisors, experts, budding specialists) and new team members joining the group for situational reasons (a one-time request for supervision, getting acquainted with supervision, getting acquainted with a new format of supervision). This format of a supervision group's work results in specific dynamics of group processes' flow:

1. Some members of the group form a stable foundation that helps to build the group's capacity.
2. Inclusion of new members into the group leads to a regression to the initial stage of group dynamics.

"Supervisor" is a psychologist who has received special training in modal group supervision, and received accreditation in the professional community (Professional Psychotherapeutic League, PPL). At the time of the group's work, the supervisor monitors the observance of the ethical principles and rules of the group's work, controls the time, the boundaries of the group, thus ensuring that the productive work of the group addresses the request of the specialist psychologist who provides the case for consideration. The psychologist who provides the case becomes the "co-presenter." The task of the supervisor is to monitor the dynamic processes in the group, to understand and interpret them for the benefit of the work of the group.

The "co-supervisor" is any other member of the group (other accredited supervisors, experts, psychologists of different modalities, young specialists).

"Experts" (appointed by the group) are psychologists who have extensive experience and theoretical knowledge and make a significant contribution to the work of the group.

"Budding specialists" are young psychologists who have no practice (students), or have just started practicing.

The goal of a multimodal supervisory group is to increase the professional level of the group's members. In its work, the group relies on the "six focus model of supervision" of E. Williams (2001) and the method of "group multimodal supervision," presented by Lyakh (2013, 2014).

In form, the group is open, with one leader, except in cases where ethical issues are discussed. The group leader can be an accredited, certified, valid supervisor, a psychologist with great practical experience, a participant of a supervisor-training programme who has mastered the theory and skills of conducting supervision and leading a group, or an experienced member of the group by agreement of all group members (intervisor).

If the group is large, then two circles of participants are formed (an inner and an outer circle). Entrance to any of the circles is free and is determined by the psychologist who provides the case in agreement with the team's lead supervisor. Admission to the group is based on the following rules: voluntariness (contract conclusion, payment once a month, one-time payment is allowed), agreement with the principles and rules of the group's work (observance of the ethics of the professional community, confidentiality and anonymity, responsibility), being an active practitioner at the present time (an exception is made for psychology students participating in order to understand the importance of supervision in the development and establishment of a practicing specialist).

The leader of the group (supervisor) and the participants terminate any actions that could lead to a violation of confidentiality (disabling mobile phones, recording only with the permission of the psychologist providing the case for supervision). Participants are encouraged to ask the client's permission to submit the case for supervisory review. If this permission cannot be obtained (client's departure, remoteness of contact, etc.), the specialist takes measures

to preserve the anonymity of the client. Anonymity and confidentiality are the basic responsibilities of the specialist submitting the case for consideration. In a situation of group supervision, it is shared by all the members of the group. The group closes, with no new members admitted, for the period when a given case is considered.

Multimodal group supervision passes a number of stages, including 1) the articulation of the rules and principles of the group's work, 2) presentation of the participants, 3) selection of the application for supervision, 4) definition of the variant of work adopted and the sequence and time-frame, 5) presentation of the case, 6) the stage of the participants' statements, which ends with the statement of the leading group supervisor, 7) the feedback stage – where the psychologist who submitted the case provides feedback on the statements of other participants, 8) completion, interpretation of group dynamics.

An interpretative hermeneutic approach is applied within the framework of a general qualitative research strategy. The use of the interpretative mode of understanding allows not only to describe the phenomenon, but also to identify the variants of its manifestation and the processes that induce it in the “vertical” of the unconscious.

The identification of this phenomenon is associated with the analysis, generalisation and subsequent interpretation of the material of the group's practical work in group analysis and multimodal supervision. The idea of the existence of the phenomenon of disappearance originated in the process of teaching group analysis. This analysis, which included group therapy and assimilation of theoretical material, produced an understanding that the dynamics of the flow of group processes determines the structure of the group, the internal time of the group and the intrinsic activity of the projections. As a result of teaching group analysis, a need arose not only for the personal experience of interaction in the group and understanding of the work of its own defence mechanisms and characteristic patterns of communication, but also for understanding how the processes of early group dynamics trigger mechanisms for the formation of a group matrix, what each participant's contribution and what the proprietary activity of the projected unconscious material is (multiple transferences), what the main themes of the group are, what the blind spot of the group (repressed, “disappeared” material) is, and how the group copes with the “lack” of this information, how it treats the “disappeared parts.” The emergence of these questions prompted the search for answers and the formation of supporting terminology necessary for understanding and structuring some part of the unconscious group dynamics. Two-year work in a multimodal supervisory group opened the opportunity to analyse this process not only from the point of view of transference, but also from the point of view of countertransference feelings. This angle of view is of particular importance in the interpretation of dynamic processes in a multimodal supervision group, since it allows to

“uncover” the signs of countertransference that have eluded the eye of the specialist psychologist exposing the case. The advantage of multimodal group supervision, as well as group analysis, is associated with the possibility of receiving multiple responses, which, if interpreted on time by the group leader, can find the “disappeared element” and integrate it into the process. The preservation of a professional position during supervision is one of the most difficult tasks for a specialist psychologist. The dynamics of the case submitted for supervision may be so intense that it will lead to a “connection” to the client, and not to the specialist. In such a case, the lack of experience in understanding dynamic processes, and the lack of skills to separate personal dynamics from the dynamics of the case, may negatively affect the participants of the supervisory group. However, the differentiation of these dynamics can contribute to the return of “disappeared” feelings and fantasies. Thus, the idea of the existence of this phenomenon was caused by a notable shortage in terminology and the need to structure and interpret the dynamic processes in the group to facilitate the preservation of personal and professional identity, and also for the purpose of timely interpretation of this phenomenon for the benefit of the group's work.

Morris Nitsun considers disappearance as a traumatic event, which increases the fear of disintegration and threatens the formation of groups. Using the analogy of early childhood development, he considers the disappearance as loss of body, organ or part of the mind. This phenomenon is a result of psychological defences, aimed at diverting attention from the inner life of the group and the individual in the group (Nitsun, 1989).

Following the ideas of Nitsun, we also consider the phenomenon of “disappearance” as a result of defensive behaviour. The chronotypicality, paradoxicality and universality of this phenomenon are generated by the peculiarities of the group dynamics' flow at the initial stage of group development, such as primary narcissistic and regression processes in the group, the predominance of convergent feeling, and a derivative of an emerging group matrix. The phenomenon of disappearance is the result of the search for a “temporary retreat” for Self. This occurs when psychologists are faced with the need to prove themselves in the group, when they provide a case for supervision and/or feedback about the possible causes of the client's problems. This is especially evident among beginning psychotherapists or in complex cases, rich in countertransference feelings and/or complicated by ethical issues. This phenomenon leads to the activation of the deep layers of the unconscious, which is reflected in the work of such archetypes as the “Doppelganger” and the “Holistic Mental Self.”

The narcissistic trauma of the specialist who submits an event for supervision is the motivational basis of the manifestation of the phenomenon of “disappearance.” The situation of the disclosure of the supervising specialist in the supervision group can give rise to feelings of insecurity, expectations of evaluation and the associated shame (Pazhiltsev, 2015). The situation of psychotherapy

and supervision refers to a deep personal intimate level of communication because it is filled with elements that stimulate the emergence of desires, conflicts, and fears of rejection, absorption, and petrification. These situations may give rise to feelings of doubt concerning their own personal and professional competence for the psychologist and supervisor.

The task of a supervision group is to correlate these experiences with the dynamics of the presented case. It requires a certain maturity from the members of the group, as well as the ability to understand their own emotions and experiences.

We offer several variants of the “disappearance” phenomenon manifestations in the supervision process.

The first variant is disappearance as a result of a difficult life situation. Here, it should be noted that if a specialist submits for supervision, they have already faced difficulties in working with the client. At the beginning of the group’s work, all participants are in a state of anxiety, probing the possibilities for communication. Each new case will rearrange the group in a special way (internal and external circle), creating a new environment for the construction of communication within the rules of conducting a professional multimodal supervision group. According to Wilfred Ruprecht Bion, the basic attitude in the group is characterised by the fact that the participants perceive their stay in the group as a threat (Heine, 2009). The phenomenon of “disappearance” in supervision process will be reflected in such psychological phenomena as the impoverishment of the past, childhood loss and ontologisation of the present. In this variant, the first focus of attention is involved, namely information about the client and their processes. This may lead to a violation of synchronic and/or diachronic integrity of the group members, which will contribute to the formation of chronotypical gaps (Vasilevskaya, 2004).

The second variant is the disappearance of a group member. This is the case when one or more members of the group leave it for any reasons. The reasons leading to that kind of “disappearance” can be divided into objective and subjective. Different circumstances beyond a group member’s control, such as illness, death, or some aspects of professional activities are examples of objective reasons. The list of subjective reasons, in general, can be reduced to the appearance of resistance. In the dynamics of the supervision process, the group feels “disappearance” of the participant through their “lack”, or group members fantasise what the missing member could say. In this case, we can talk about competitive dynamics and revitalization of the 5th focus of attention, namely, communication of the specialist with the supervisor.

The third variant is silence considered as disappearance. In this case, the context of the situation will be of particular importance. There are many reasons that lead to the silence. For example, a manifestation of the phenomenon of “socialisation” in the group, when talkative members of the group

are less involved in the discussion. For example, more experienced psychologists can thus push beginners to be more active. It is also work of “resistance,” when a group member feels that they are not accepted, understood, and thus consciously decide to keep silent. Possibly, one of three basic needs is not satisfied.

Such a variant as an evaluation of the reality by a participant and their decision to wait should not be excluded from the list of reasons. Perhaps the dynamics of the group at this particular moment is such that the person does not see any possibility to join it and is waiting for the right moment. Or the events happening in the group do not cause a personal response, and the person expects changes. In this case, if the expectation is delayed and a member of the group remains silent, a kind of a “waiting room” forms, where the whole group suddenly becomes silent, which also points to the existence of resistance, through which the group is protected from the client’s affect or psychotic material.

In addition, it is necessary not to forget that silence of a group member may indicate their unaffectedness. Loss of contact with the emotional experiences can be unconscious and the group member may not be able to explain their silence. The fourth variant is the disappearance of an event. We distinguish two types of disappearances:

1. the disappearance of a topic of a discussion (the topic was actively discussed and unexpectedly slipped/vanished from the group’s focus);
2. an event that happened, but was not discussed (group participants are not given a response).

Particular importance is attached to the disappearance of an event. Since events are universal elements of the subjective picture of life, real human life is woven of events. Therefore, it is important for the supervisor to keep track of the client’s life events around which questions accumulate, to distinguish which events have meaning, and which are ignored, disappear and do not remain in the memory. The disappearance of internal and external events indicates a trauma and is associated with the work of such defence mechanisms as splitting, depreciation and denial.

The fifth variant involves the disappearance of the supervisor’s role. The dynamics triggered by the provided case may be aggressive, destructive, and absorbing to such an extent that the supervisor can lose their professional identity and be captured by the processes occurring within the group. Competitive dynamics can also contribute to the “disappearance” of the supervisor’s role. In such cases, a rival group member or the group itself within the existing transference can invest themselves or a member of the group with the corresponding powers. The dual role of a person who is supervising the group and simultaneously is a member of the group can contribute to the development of resistance on his or her part, and the emergence of countertransference.

The sixth variant is the depressive position considered as the disappearance of illusions. We rely on the position of Britton (2012), who believes that the depressive

position and the oedipal situation will never come to an end; they require processing in each new life situation, at all subsequent stages of development, and each time it enriches the human experience and knowledge. However, the depressive position not only raises awareness of a person, but also destroys the existing inner world, because the integration of new knowledge requires a change in their outlook on the world. Therefore, whenever the supervisee and the group members are in contact with a new understanding of a client, and their own countertransference feelings, they also experience some disillusionment. Even the positive experience gained in the group (maintenance supervision) will take time to integrate new knowledge in the psychological reality of the supervisee. Such experiences can be expressed in regrets that some activity was not properly understood before, or that certain aspects are understood and accepted as painful, that the therapy was in the wrong direction, and in vain. There is a loss of illusions of group and/or supervisor omnipotence. This variant involves the work of the 4th and 6th focuses of attention, when the specialist psychologist, supervisor and co-supervisors are all “here and now.”

The seventh variant is the compensation of a lack. Bion (Grinberg et al., 2007) believed that money is the first element that acquires a symbolic meaning and promotes group development. He considered “money circulation” as a need of the group to accept certain values, i.e. in his view, money was the equivalent that could compensate the loss of one of the participants.

We propose to extend the approach of Bion and consider money as compensation for absence in general: the absence of one of the participants, supervisor, lack of support, lack of stability, the lack of inclusion of direct participants in the work group, etc. In this situation, members of the group may experience ambivalent feelings associated with the payment for supervision, if needs have not been met, and/or they found supervision frustrating. As a result, the members of the group may have a fantasy that someone else paid for supervision, a fantasy of payment being reduced, fantasies about getting any benefits or privileges, and the fantasy of not wanting to pay for supervision, etc. The idea of a lack of compensation is fundamental in all these fantasies. The theme of devaluation, inflation, instability and so on may begin to circulate. This is also the work of the 4th and the 6th focuses of attention, when the specialist psychologist/supervisor and co-supervisors are all “here and now.”

Thus, the manifestations of the “disappearance” phenomenon in the supervision process are complex and multifaceted. This phenomenon has a multilayer structure; the simultaneous presence of several variants of the phenomenon is not excluded under the supervision process. The analysis of the phenomenon allows to evaluate the symptoms and specific patterns of the client’s communication, the dynamics of psychologist–client relations, and thereby improve the quality of psychological work.

CONCLUSION

The article discusses the phenomenon of initial group dynamics and the phenomenon of “disappearance.” It is presented here as a starting point that serves as an impetus for the development of this descriptive concept and its relevance for understanding dynamic processes.

The phenomenon of “disappearance” is not a pathological process by its nature. It is an artefact of group dynamics, formation of a group matrix, which requires research. As it is the result of psychological defences at work, the phenomenon is universal, The phenomenon is inter-subjective, because all participants of the supervision group are its co-authors.

Seven variants of this phenomenon’s manifestation in the group dynamics of the supervisory group have been described. We assume this list not to be exhaustive, and we do not rule out the existence of other interpretations in the understanding and description of this phenomenon. The frequency of the occurrence of these variants will be determined directly by group dynamics.

In addition, the use of an interpretive modus showed that it embraces the concept of the “disappearance” of psychological realities associated with the complex aspects of the manifestations of the unconscious processes in the group. The phenomenon of “disappearances” is a descriptive concept, which represents the different processes that are similar in that they point to the protective forms of communication related to the loss of information, and need a detailed analysis in each case.

Despite the fact that the entire history of this phenomenon is associated with group analysis, material from the work of a given multimodal supervision group is used here. The purpose of the article has been to show that fixing and analysis of the phenomenon of “disappearances” can significantly advance the understanding of what happens in a supervision session based on the multimodal approach.

Conflict of interest

The authors do not report any financial or personal connections with other persons or organisations that might negatively affect the content of this publication and claim rights thereto.

References

- Britton R: Oedipal situation and depressive position. In: Clinical Lectures on Klein and Bion. Kogito-Center, Moscow 2012.
- Bulyubash ID: [Basics of Supervision in Gestalt Therapy]. Institute of Psychotherapy, Moscow 2003.
- Garankova IY: [A Brief History of Supervision Development. Mental Health of Society in the Post-Modern World]. Collection of materials of the forum of specialists of assisting professions with international participation. All-Russian public organization “All-Russian Professional Psychotherapeutic League”, 2016.
- Grinberg L, Sor D, Tabak de Bianchedi E: [Introduction to Bion’s Work: Groups, Cognition, Psychoses, Thinking, Transformation, Psychoanalytic Practice]. Kogito-Center, Moscow 2007.

- Heine M: [Typical Flow of Analytical Groups. Group Psychoanalysis. Theory – Technique – Applications]. Publishing House “VERTE,” Moscow 2009.
- Igumnova OV: [The manifestation of splitting the interpretation of dynamic processes in the multimodal group supervision. An individual in an era of change. The challenges of the present, building the future]. Proceedings of the IV Congress of the Therapists, Psychiatrists, Psychologists and Consultants of the Siberian Federal District 2015.
- Lyakh IV: [Multimodal Group Supervision: The Basis for the Interpretation of Dynamic Processes]. Collected materials of the III Congress of Psychologists, Counsellors of Psychotherapists and Psychiatrists of the Siberian Federal District. Novosibirsk, The Manuscript 2013.
- Lyakh IV: [Multimodal Supervision: Practice for Practitioners. Professionalism of the Professional Assisting Professions: Supervision, Personal Therapy, Theory and Skills]. Materials from the International Forum of Professionals. Novosibirsk, The Manuscript 2014.
- Madalieva ZB, Igumnova OV: [The manifestation of splitting the interpretation of dynamic processes in the multimodal group supervision]. Bull of KNU 2016; 1 (56): 67–71.
- Nitsun M: Early development: linking the individual and the group. Group Analysis 1989; 22: 249–260.
- Pazhiltsev IV: [Group supervision – structuredness or spontaneity, achievement of balance]. Materials of the 11 International Conference on Group Analysis. Saint Petersburg 2015.
- Shchukina YV: [Actual Problems of Supervisory Practice. Theoretical and Applied Aspects of the Center for Emergency Psychological Assistance MGPPU]. Ekon-inform, Moscow 2011.
- Vasilevskaya KN: [Difficult situations: problem of definition and diagnosis]. A person in a difficult situation: Articles I and II of the scientific-practical conference on December 24, 2003 and 8 December 2004.
- Williams A: Visual and Active Supervision: Roles, Focus, Techniques. Saint Petersburg, Rech 2001.