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# What happens in group supervision? Exploring current practice in Australia

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Academic Paper

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## Abstract

This article presents qualitative findings from a study of seven group coaching supervisors and 57 coaches participating in those groups. The purpose of the research was to further explore why people seek group supervision, what benefits they derive, and how group supervision works. Supervisors and coaches recognised the role of the supervisor in bringing together the right mix of coaches, in establishing and maintaining a clear working agreement, managing a clear process, and role modelling appropriate behaviours. A possible discrepancy in perspective between supervisors and coaches was observed, specifically the extent to which all participants adopt a systemic perspective.

## Keywords

Coaching, coaching supervision, group supervision, systemic coaching, systemic supervision,

## Article history

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## Introduction

Coaching supervision as a specialist practice, with its own rationale and research base, emerged around 2006 (Armstrong & Geddes, 2009; Hawkins & Turner, 2017; Hodge, 2016). Early models had their roots in counselling, psychotherapy and social work (Grant, 2012; Gray, 2007; Gray & Jackson, 2011; Passmore & McGoldrick, 2009, Tkach & DiGirolamo, 2017), origins that may have deterred some coaches from early adoption (Lawrence & Whyte, 2014; Moyes, 2009; Passmore & McGoldrick, 2009). A global survey conducted by Hawkins & Turner (2017) suggests that the number of coaches receiving supervision jumped from 44% in 2006 to 92% in 2014, in the UK, and to 83% of coaches globally. Whilst the authors of the paper acknowledge some methodological biases in sampling protocols, the results suggest significant growth, an increase that appears to have been driven both by intrinsic factors, such as the coach's commitment to good practice and professional development (Hawkins & Turner, 2017), and extrinsic factors including accreditation requirements and client expectations. Whilst becoming more popular there is as yet little evidence for its effectiveness (Bachkirova, Jackson & Clutterbuck, 2011; Tkach & DiGirolamo, 2017; Turner & Palmer, 2019) though it will be hard to demonstrate clear links between supervision and coach effectiveness when so many other factors are at play (Bachkirova et al., 2011). It should be noted

that the same holds true for coaching itself and indeed leadership development and education more generally. Much of the literature so far has focussed on individual supervision. In most books published on coaching supervision to date, group supervision has either merited a chapter (e.g. Bachkirova et al., 2011) or else not been mentioned at all. Anecdotal evidence, at least in Australia, suggests group supervision is at least as popular now as is individual supervision, and so it seems sensible to allocate a significant proportion of future research efforts to group supervision. The purpose of this research is to build on the handful of papers that have been published to date on group supervision, to further explore why people seek group supervision, what benefits they derive from group supervision, and how group supervision works. Findings from the research are then considered with reference to current thinking on systemic practice and some thoughts on the direction of future research are proffered.

## **The purpose of supervision**

Many coaches ask - what is the purpose of supervision (Lawrence & Whyte, 2014)? In most texts three main functions are cited, similar functions albeit described using different terminologies. Hawkins & Smith (2006), for example, list the following three functions:

1. Developmental – development of the coach’s skills, knowledge and capacity.
2. Resourcing – attending to the emotions of supervisees, so they don’t allow themselves to be affected by the emotions of their coachees.
3. Qualitative – ensuring the supervisee’s work is of a required standard.

These three functions are derived from functions of counselling supervision (Proctor, 1986) and the world of social work (Kadushin, 1976). It will be interesting to see how this perspective evolves over time as coaching supervision assumes its own identity, and to see if the functions of individual supervision align with, or diverge from, the functions of group supervision. The relevance of the resourcing domain to organisational coaches is already being questioned (e.g. Lawrence & Whyte, 2014; Moyes, 2009) and some authors suggest that the qualitative function has no place in an unregulated industry in which supervisors have no formal responsibility for the ability of supervisees (Armstrong & Geddes, 2009).

## **From clinical to systemic**

It seems likely that the rationale for coaching supervision will continue to diverge from its clinical origins, a process that is already underway. Supervising coaches working in an organisational context is different to supervising counsellors (Carroll, 2006). The organisational coach is often obliged to work with stakeholders other than the coachee and to manage boundaries between those relationships. Coach, coachee, and supervisor are all, in effect, part of a complex adaptive system, such that linear, cause and effect thinking on the part of the supervisor may be detrimental (Bachkirova et al., 2011; Cavanagh, 2013). The supervisor must therefore be cognisant of these different components of the organisational system (Gray & Jackson, 2011) and adopt a systemic approach (Hawkins & Smith, 2006). Bachkirova, Willis & Stevens (2005) go so far as to argue that there is a greater need for supervision in organisational coaching than in counselling because of these additional complexities. Various models have emerged in service of encouraging the supervisor, and thereby the coach, to consider factors outside the immediate relationship between coach and coachee. The most popular of these is the seven-eyed model (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2011; Hawkins & Shohet, 2012), the use of which encourages the supervisor to consider how much attention to focus on seven different ‘modes’, including the wider organisational context. There are other similar models, for example the three worlds/four territories model (Munro Turner, 2011), and the systemic frameworks of Carroll (2006) and Koortzen & Odendaal, (2016). The seven conversations model (Clutterbuck, 2011) is intended to expand the coach’s awareness of the dynamics of the system defined in terms of conversations and relationships, and Gray’s (2007) systemic model of coaching supervision defines four important aspects of the supervisor-

supervisee relationship, positioning them within the boundaries of organisational and social contexts and ethical frameworks.

## **Group supervision**

Few studies have been conducted thus far on group supervision in a coaching context. Three studies are detailed here. Butwell (2006) studied an internal supervision group of eight internal coaches meeting for half a day, on a quarterly basis, over 14 months. Participants reported enjoying the sessions, in particular the opportunity to discuss challenging assignments. Armstrong and Geddes (2009) documented early work at a coach training organisation at which alumni attended monthly supervision evenings. Attendance was 'flexible' (Clutterbuck, Whitaker & Lucas, 2016), in that participants didn't necessarily work with the same supervisor or fellow coaches each time they attended. Participants reported high satisfaction levels with supervision, appreciating the opportunity to engage with others in a reflective space in service of their learning. The authors identified several areas to improve their process including: improving the training provided to supervisors; limiting group numbers; and on occasion dividing groups according to levels of experience and training. Robson (2016) studied an internal group supervision programme, spending time with supervisors and interviewing coaches. Participants said they valued the practical approach to learning and the opportunity to share live issues with fellow coaches. The coaches looked to their supervisors to facilitate and manage the process and help the group decide what issues to share among the group. Clutterbuck et al. (2016), Hawkins & Shohet (2012) and Thornton (2016) all suggest that group supervision has both advantages and disadvantages compared to individual supervision. Advantages include lower cost, access to a supportive group environment, normalisation, and a sense of community. Group supervision provides access to a diversity of reflections, feedback and input, and the opportunity to experience others' coaching styles. The obvious drawback of group supervision is that less time is spent attending to the individual coach's needs. The group process is also subject to group dynamics, which may prove to be a positive learning experience or an unhelpful distraction.

## **Practice Models**

Coaching supervision is a relatively new and emerging practice. Coach supervisors may enter this space with different experiences, backgrounds and philosophies. Clinical and systemic perspectives have been referred to already. Lawton-Smith (2011) refers also to scientific-management and human resources frames, and to specific systemic lenses such as power and politics, and cultural norms. There also exist multiple processes for group supervision. Moral & Lamy (2016) suggest there are around 100 different group supervision processes in use, examples of which include those detailed by Adshead-Grant, Hathaway, Aspey and Turner (2019), Clutterbuck et al. (2016), Hawkins & Shohet (2012), Pinder (2011) and Thornton (2016). In this context, at a time when hard evidence is unlikely to help us discern between these different alternatives, Jackson & Bachkirova (2019) suggest that the effective supervisor defines their own personal practitioner model. The PPP framework stands for philosophy, purpose and process. By philosophy is meant those ideas, concepts and models that best resonate for the individual supervisor, their values, or those 'lenses through which we see the world' (Jackson & Bachkirova, 2019). The supervisor's purpose is defined by the nature of their commitment to the work they do, or what the 'supervisor aims to achieve with and for the client system, or wider stakeholders' (Jackson & Bachkirova, 2019). The third P is Process, as part of which the supervisor might decide, for example, which of the 100 processes currently out there and in use, are most congruent to their philosophy and purpose (Jackson & Bachkirova, 2019; Turner & Palmer, 2019). Thinking through the 3Ps would appear to be a useful exercise for both individual supervision and group supervision separately, given that these processes are quite different. The group supervisor will, for example, be encouraged to have specific perspectives on group dynamics and group process.

Overall, little evidence exists as to what takes place in group supervision. Two of the three studies reviewed looked at internal group supervision programmes and Pinder (2011) suggests that this is the usual context for group supervision. In Australia anecdotal evidence suggests that this is not always the case, that many external coaches are looking to participate in group supervision with other external coaches, with whom they may have no other relationship. We know that some groups operate within the boundaries of organisations and some have open membership. We know some groups are big and some are small. We know that some groups have fixed membership and others are flexible. And we know that some groups work together face-to-face and others virtually. We don't know what happens within these groups beyond the content of the three papers so far published, nor what the impact might be of some of these different variables. The purpose of this paper is to seek to understand what happens in group supervision by talking to different supervisors and people being supervised from different groups. By doing so we hoped to find both commonalities and areas of apparent difference that may guide others in designing future research.

## Method

### Sample

Fifty-seven coaches undertaking supervision were interviewed, as were the seven supervisors who led the 16 different groups in which these coaches participated (table 1). All seven supervisors had received formal training in coach supervision from various bodies, including a coach training school, a coaching supervision association, the psychology department of an Australian university, and other social work and psychology institutions. Thirteen groups were open, meaning that members paid to undertake supervision of their own volition. Three groups were internal, meaning that attendance was either mandated or otherwise encouraged, and supervision was paid for by the organisation. Twelve groups met face-to-face, and four engaged in supervision by video conference. Fifteen groups had fixed membership, meaning that the same coaches attended each session. One group was run within an organisation in which 15 – 20 people turned up for supervision on a quarterly basis and were then assigned to groups of about five people on the day with efforts made to ensure people didn't end up with the same supervisor every time.

**Table 1: Participant profile**

Supervisor	Number of Supervisees	Participation rate	Number of Groups	Range years coaching	Average years coaching	Group type	Medium	Membership
1	23	96%	5	3 - 16	7.7	Open	Face-to-face	Fixed
2	4	67%	1	8 – 16	11.7	Open	Face-to-face	Fixed
3	4	80%	1	3 – 12	6.8	Open	Face-to-face	Fixed
4	10	44%	4	2 – 15	6.7	Open	Virtual	Fixed
5	3	75%	1	2 – 8	3.2	Internal	Face-to-face	Flexible
6	8	42%	2	2 - 28	14.0	Open/ Internal	Face-to-face	Fixed
7	5	55%	2	5 - 10	6.2	Open/ Internal	Face-to-face	Fixed
	<b>57</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>2 - 28</b>	<b>8.4</b>			

### Process

Initial contact with participants was through the supervisors. One supervisor approached the author asking if he was interested in conducting research with her supervisees. The author then contacted five more supervisors, through the Australasian Community for Coaching Supervision (ACCS) who

he knew were running supervision groups. Four of those supervisors agreed to participate. One of those four supervisors then recommended two more supervisors. The seven supervisors asked available supervisees if they would be prepared to participate. A total of 90 supervisees were invited to participate and 57 agreed (63%).

Separate semi-structured interview schedules were designed for supervisors and coaches/supervisees (Appendices 1 and 2). Anticipating some difference in approach between the different supervisors, questions for supervisors were structured around the 3Ps (Jackson & Bachkirova, 2019) with the intention of enabling clear insight as to the nature of those differences. Three supervisor interviews were conducted face-to-face and four were conducted by telephone and were between 35 and 55 minutes long. All the coach interviews were conducted by telephone and were between 20 and 35 minutes long.

Interview transcripts were coded three times (Neumann, 2014). In the first coding, one researcher identified initial themes, recording those themes on an excel spreadsheet using extracted text. Two researchers then worked together to condense those initial themes, and to review those themes in service of identifying key concepts. In the third coding phase the data was reviewed once more, guided by major themes and concepts and specific quotes were identified from the data illustrating each theme.

## Results

### Supervisors

#### Philosophy

The seven supervisors named 22 models or theories between them. Of these 22 models and theories 5 were explicitly systemic, including Hawkins 7-eyed model (six mentions), family systems theories (two mentions), complex adaptive systems theory, the Coaching Supervision Academy (CSA) full spectrum model, and Wilber's integral model. Of the remaining 17 mentions, narrative was mentioned four times, and strengths based, mindfulness, psychodynamic, existentialism, gestalt, attachment theory, role theory, CBC, person-centred, solutions focussed, action learning theory were all mentioned once or twice each. When asked to define systemic, the supervisors talked generally about the need to pay attention to the individual in their wider context and to consider multiple aspects of the individual's life.

#### Purpose

The supervisors all positioned supervision as a reflective space enabling learning. For example:

*To provide an environment in which coaches can reflect together and learn together on aspects of their practice*

The resourcing and qualitative functions of supervision showed up in some statements and not others. For example:

*It's a place for the coach to reflect and to learn and receive support.*

*Ensuring the coach is serving the client in the most effective way and is able to look at self in relationship to client. Reflecting on what's working and not.*

When asked who supervision was in service of, two supervisors said supervision is in service of the coach and the person being coached. Five supervisors said that supervision is in service of the

organisation in which the coaches operate and/or the wider system. The supervisors all said that supervision has a role to play in all three functions; developmental, resourcing and qualitative. Some supervisors were careful to detail how the qualitative function works. For example:

*The evaluative aspect is subjective in our world where supervision is not mandated. They come of their own free will and bring what they want to bring. In counselling you need to take a more proactive role in the evaluative space.*

## Practice

The seven supervisors described quite similar processes. Sessions generally start with a check-in after which supervisees are invited to name an issue they would like to bring to the group. The supervisor and the group then decide on which issues to cover in the session, usually choosing two or three, which the group then discuss among themselves, with the supervisor managing the process. Variations around this structure include meditative practice, use of cards to select issues to discuss, identifying themes from issues presented rather than working with specific cases, and the supervisor building in teaching time, or encouraging participants to share their models or other learning experiences. The supervisors said that they tended to work with five to six people over 90 – 120 minutes, and that they convened every four to six weeks, in one case quarterly.

All supervisors said it was their role to establish a safe, reflective space in which people trust each other sufficiently to speak openly. The supervisors said they achieved this by:

1. Ensuring people understood what group supervision was before admitting them to a group, thereafter managing the membership of the group on an ongoing basis.
2. Establishing a clear working agreement at the start of the programme and holding the group to account to that agreement, reviewing it on a regular basis. Working agreements always emphasises the importance of confidentiality.
3. Managing a clear process consistent with the working agreement, ensuring for example, that people stick to time and don't become entrenched in one issue.
4. Role modelling a way of being that includes listening with respect, withholding judgment, refraining from offering advice, and offering challenge.

## Supervisees

### Why go to supervision?

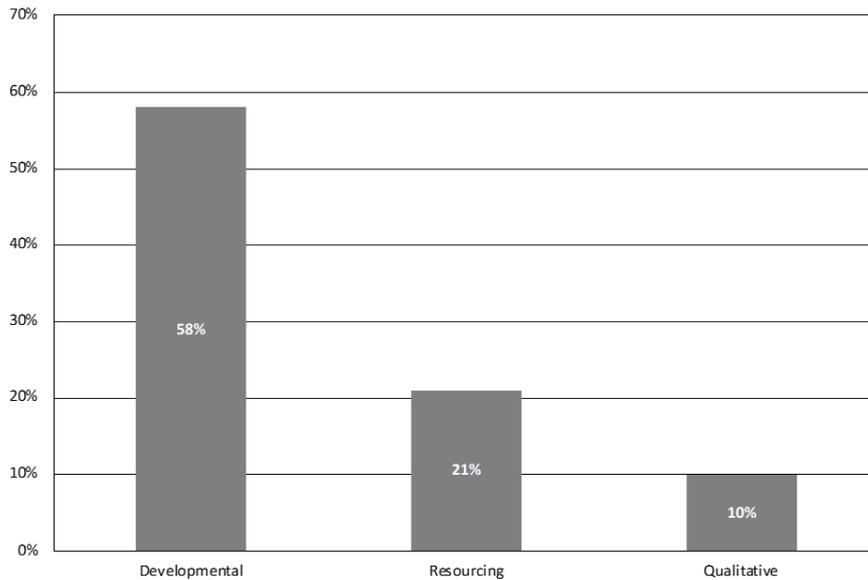
When asked why they sought out supervision, some participants referred to a general belief that all coaches should undertake supervision, some said that attendance was mandatory, and some talked about having been supervised as part of a coach training programme and wanting to continue the process. The other three themes aligned closely with the developmental, resourcing and qualitative functions (figure 1). When the developmental function was cited, the majority of respondents specifically mentioned an expectation to learn from others.

*An open place to learn. A judgment free environment where people are trying to learn together.*

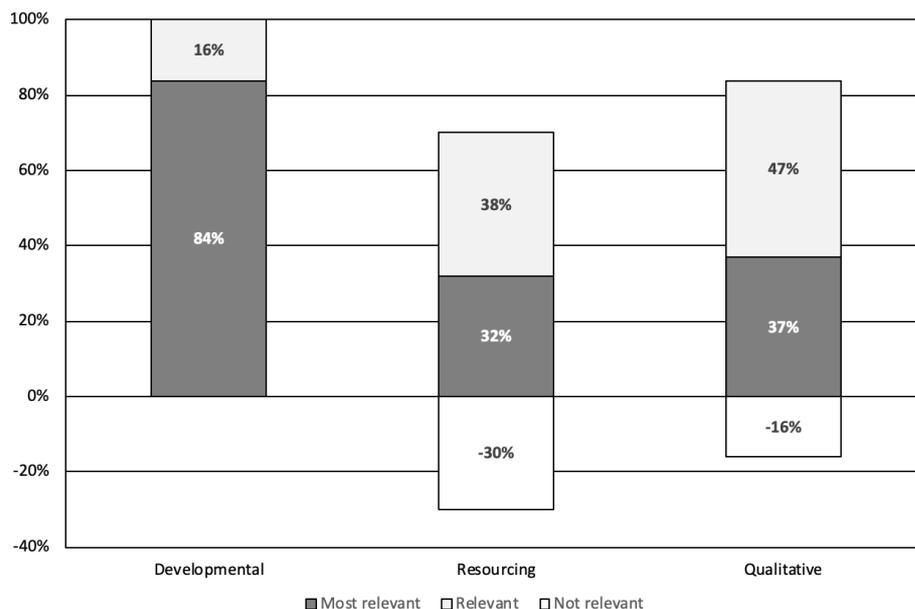
Toward the end of the interview coaches were asked directly which of the three classic functions resonated with them. Every participant said group supervision was developmental, and 84% named it as the most important function or one of the most important functions (figure 2). Seventy percent of participants said the resourcing function was important to them, and 32% named it as the most important function or one of the most important functions. Thirty percent said it wasn't important, and that if they needed emotional support, they got that support elsewhere. For example:

*If I have an issue, I'm unlikely to wait. I had a mental health issue, a suicide, and I took it to my individual supervisor immediately*

**Figure 1: The three supervision functions – open ended question**



**Figure 2: The three supervision functions – closed question**



Eighty-four percent of participants said the qualitative function was important to them, and 37% named it as the most important function or one of the most important functions. Sixteen percent said it wasn't important. Many participants found it difficult to differentiate between the developmental and qualitative functions, on the basis that if they became a better coach as an outcome of supervision, this would improve the quality of their services.

*Quality is a function of continuing to build your skills*

Some supervisees questioned what quality meant in a coaching context:

*Who defines quality? My view is that it is the client who defines quality. There is a risk that different groups have different views on what quality is. I'm always wary when a group starts to define quality*

Several coaches said they looked to the supervisor to assess their performance and help them to address gaps.

*Being able to check off with someone – this is what I'm doing. Is it right?*

### **Why group supervision?**

Compared to individual supervision, people said:

- Individual supervision is more personalised, insightful, deeper and intense
- Group supervision provides community
- Group supervision provides access to multiple perspectives
- Group supervision provides an opportunity to learn about group dynamics

Compared to peer supervision, people said:

- Peer supervision tends to be more like mentoring
- If everyone in the peer group is relatively inexperienced, it can be like the 'blind leading the blind'
- Peer supervision tends to be less structured, less focussed, and less effective

Some people pointed out that peer supervision could be more effective if the group agreed processes and structures between them, and a process for ensuring they held themselves accountable to those commitments.

### **Who is coaching supervision in service of?**

The vast majority of coaches said that supervision was in service of their own learning, and thereby their coachees. Some people emphasised the coach as primary audience, some emphasised the coachee.

*Me, then my coachees as secondary.*

*The coachee and hopefully the coach grows.*

A minority of supervisees named other stakeholders (figure 3).

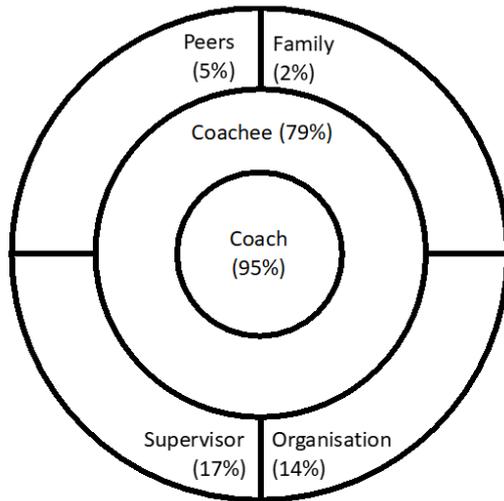
*Me and my professional growth. Peers. People you're coaching and the client you're dealing with. Everyone benefits.*

*The coach, the client, the industry, the organisation.*

*The coach, the client, the supervisor, the broader community, the world, the universe.*

*Everyone that the ripple reaches. Me. Others in the room. The supervisor. Ripples out to my family, my coachees. It's far reaching.*

**Figure 3: Who is supervision in service of?**



### **What is the impact of group supervision?**

Asked to describe the impact of supervision on their practice, three themes emerged.

**Skills and knowledge:** Nineteen percent of coaches talked about having learned new skills, tools and techniques.

**Awareness:** More people (56%) spoke about having become more self-aware, more aware of the system in which they were operating, more reflective and more thoughtful.

*It's deepened my understanding of what I bring to the table and expanded my repertoire of coaching. It's not skill. – you can go to a conference and get skills. Why did you take that approach? Why are you having the challenges you're having?*

*I'm much better at analysing the system in which my coach operates, and so I ask better questions, better approaches than in the past.*

*It's the only external space I can reflect. In the moment reflecting on 'is this effective'? Any space I can verbalise improves my quality of thinking. It broadens my perspective on available options and helps me understand what I'm challenged by and whether that's common/uncommon.*

**Confidence:** Forty-two percent talked about feeling more confident and courageous, more willing to explore issues they may not otherwise have broached, and more willing to challenge.

*I worry and stress over a client sometimes. It's so good to have follow coaches to talk about it. It's usually very assuring. Often the coachee is fine and it's all in my head. Grounds you. I'm more confident and I coach myself. I carry the group around with me. What would so and so say? Imaginary friends!*

*Made it more diverse, more courageous, less worried about what others might think, whether I'm liked or not.*

## Issues

Supervisees were asked what kind of issues they, and others in their group, brought to supervision. Some people talked in general terms about challenging coachees and getting stuck. Five specific themes were:

The coachee and their circumstances:

*Working with someone very un-self-aware who didn't know what they wanted to do.*

The nature of the coach's intervention:

*Where I felt I couldn't get breakthrough with the coachee. Am I missing something? What else can I do? What have you learned that I haven't? Building up the kitbag.*

The coach's relationship with the coachee:

*A client where there was some transference and counter-transference and the role I played in that.*

Coach self-awareness:

*Am I being the best coach I can be for this client? To what extent am I bringing my own judgment and tendency into the session.*

External factors:

*High level politics, corporate sabotage. Lots around disruptive forces, when the business is down-sizing, divesting, going downhill.*

These themes are all components of the seven-eyed model (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2011). Participant's answers were attributed to each of the seven components. Sixty-seven percent of issues related to the client and their circumstances, 95% related to the nature of the coach's intervention, 18% related to the relationship between coach and client, 49% related to the coach's experience of self, and 40% referred to external factors as determined by the immediate needs of the assignment e.g. an obligation to meet with another stakeholder.

Almost without exception people spoke about areas that needed to be addressed in order to solve a difficult challenge. Only two participants referred to assignments that were going well, one of whom said that she nevertheless prioritised challenging assignments:

*I try and take each of my coaching clients to coaching supervision at least once, even if things are going well. Though the ones I draw on most are where I think things aren't going well, where I need help.*

A sixth theme, mentioned by 26% of coaches, was commercial issues relating to their practice. On the other hand, three people said their group specifically did not address such issues because those issues were not in scope.

## The role of group supervisor

Themes emerging were similar to the themes emerging from the supervisor's description of their practice.



*Managing the group dynamic, making sure the group is growing together and that we're not missing the real discussion – an important point.*

*Holds the crucible – a holding space for us. At the same time on the dance floor and the balcony – 'what just happened in that conversation?' something we might not otherwise have noticed from the dance floor.*

The supervisor role models challenging, providing feedback and intervening when necessary.

*The capacity to hold the group together and engage each individual and be tough and tender; challenging and enquiring.*

Teaching: Fewer people (11%) described the role of the supervisor in terms of mentoring, identifying individual supervisee's development needs and/or providing some assessment of the supervisee's practice and psychological state.

*Someone to make sure my practice is appropriate and that I'm at an optimal level psychologically.*

Qualifications: Effective supervisors were said to be variously encouraging, humble, self-aware, patient, grounded, compassionate, intuitive and funny, all qualities consistent with the capacity to create a learning environment. Supervisors were also expected to be knowledgeable and experienced, qualified, and able to role model effective coaching.

### **Process enablers**

In describing factors that enabled and inhibited the functioning of an effective supervision group, all of the issues mentioned above were mentioned again. Participants named three other factors besides.

Time: Coaches talked about how trust and safety develop over time.

*People need to be open-minded and to understand why someone would see something differently. It took us six or seven meetings for those strong bonds to develop. We talked about being able to challenge each other.*

Diversity: Participants talked about the benefits of diversity, including culture and gender:

*In our virtual groups they are often international. I like those, helps broaden my thinking. When you have all Australian groups, issues tend to be more– tends to skirt superficially. In our group we have UK, US and Canadian. Much more enriching. They ask questions I'd never thought of.*

*I didn't get a lot out of it in the first year. Partly me not putting much in, but also the balance of the group. It was only male. We definitely needed the female perspective on lots of stuff.*

With reference to coach experience some people valued diversity, others felt that equivalent levels of experience were more appropriate than diversity of experience:

*Members of the group tend to be at a comparable stage. Wouldn't be as effective with people just out into coaching.*

*Years of experience? I don't know. Cases can be so interesting and general. Diversity of experience within the group makes it very interesting in our fast-changing world.*

Group composition: Independent of the supervisor's efforts to encourage the right behaviours, it is important to choose the right people:

*She picked the group carefully – people who would respect each other. Some people – no – not good listeners or more interested in what they would get out of us as a group.*

Non-attendance or partial attendance disrupts the experience for some participants:

*People who are reluctant to participate is an inhibitor. People who don't show up without letting you know. It demonstrates a lack of commitment and respect.*

Other participants were less concerned:

*It doesn't matter as long as we have a quorum. It doesn't bother me as long as we have three, enough to make it useful.*

## Technology

Of those who attended supervision via the internet, most spoke enthusiastically about the experience. The internet enables coaches working in isolated locations to enjoy the benefits of supervision and provides access to a culturally diverse community of coaches. Disadvantages include the inevitable distraction when the technology is unreliable and some coach's lack of familiarity with the etiquette required for the process to be effective.

## Membership and logistics

There was broad agreement between coaches as to ideal group size, with answers ranging from three to eight people, with most people saying four to six. Below three to four people in a group, the group loses diversity of perspective and becomes more intense. With more than six people in a group, not everyone will get sufficient opportunity to participate.

People said that the ideal length of a session is somewhere between 60 minutes and 180 minutes, depending on group size, with most people saying 90 to 120 minutes. Below 90 minutes not everyone has sufficient opportunity to participate, above 90 to 120 minutes is either too tiring for people, or else it isn't pragmatic in terms of demands on people's time.

The ideal time between sessions is three to twelve weeks, depending on how much coaching people are engaged in, with most people saying four to six weeks. Below three to four weeks people don't have enough issues to cover. Above six weeks the group loses momentum.

# Discussion

In this section the original purpose of the research is reviewed, and some apparent inconsistencies between supervisor intent and coach experience explored.

The original purpose of this research was to further explore why people seek group supervision, what benefits they derive from the process, and how the process works. The results suggest that the supervisors and coaches in this study are generally aligned around an intention to create a safe psychological space in which a group of coaches can learn from each other. Both supervisors and coaches recognised the role of the supervisor in bringing together the right mix of coaches, establishing a clear working agreement at the start of a programme and holding the group to account to that agreement, managing a clear process, and role modelling appropriate behaviours. Those behaviours include listening with respect, withholding judgment, refraining from offering advice, and offering challenge.

These findings are not surprising considered alongside the broader literature. Establishing working agreements and providing a structure for the group to work within have been previously identified as being important (Butwell, 2006; Moral, 2011). Both individual and group supervisors are responsible for facilitating the creation of a reflective space (Armstrong & Geddes, 2009; Bassot, 2013; Butwell, 2006; Carroll, 2009; Grant, 2012; Jackson & Bachkirova, 2019; Moyes, 2009; Passmore & McGoldrick, 2009). In both individual and group domains this requires explaining the process to participants, framing the importance of listening, a non-judgmental attitude and active participation (Butwell, 2006; Carroll, 2010; Sheppard, 2017). Creating this space in a group context requires of the supervisor the ability to work with group dynamics, a capacity highlighted by most of the participants in this study. This aspect of group supervision offers opportunities for explicit or vicarious learning on the part of those coaches seeking to enhance their own capacity to work with group systems.

All of the coaches in this study attended supervision to become more effective at meeting the needs of their individual clients. Every coach interviewed said that coaching supervision is developmental, and most said that the primary benefit of attending group supervision is the opportunity to learn from others, leveraging the opportunity to access multiple perspectives. However, coaches do not all come to group supervision with the same needs. Some differed in terms of scope. For example, some valued being able to discuss commercial issues (Clutterbuck et al., 2016), others didn't want commercial issues to be discussed. Coaches also differed in terms of their preferred process. Some wanted their supervisors to play the role of peer, while others wanted their supervisors to evaluate their practice or act as mentor (Gray, 2007). Some wanted to work in groups with mixed levels of experience, some preferred to work with coaches with similar experience. Some were happy to discuss just two or three issues in a session, others wanted everyone to have an opportunity to raise an issue. Some appreciated the supervisor bringing new theories and models to a session, others preferred to focus exclusively on learning from each other. Some welcomed the opportunity to work one-on-one with their supervisor if no one else showed up, some preferred the session be cancelled. Some liked to work with the same groups over time, others were happy to be flexible. These examples highlight both the importance of the supervisor being able to articulate their preferred process and the importance of contracting.

## **Coaching supervision as systemic**

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the results is the possible discrepancy between supervisor intent and the experience of supervision as reported by the coaches. Five of the seven supervisors said that supervision is in service of the organisation in which coaches operate. By contrast coaches referred primarily to the needs of coach and client, with only 14% of coaches saying that supervision is in service of the wider organisation. When considered through the seven-eye lens (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2011), issues discussed in coaching supervision sessions appeared to focus most strongly on the coach, the client and the interventions deployed by the coach to help the client. Forty percent of issues also related to the wider context, though such issues were often considered only in service of helping the client to be successful in service of individual goals. Based on the results of this study, three possible reasons are proffered to account for this possible discrepancy.

First, just because the supervisors in this study are cognisant of a systemic approach doesn't mean that they see it as their role to impose a systemic perspective on coaches. For example, one supervisor said that she adopted an explicitly systemic approach 'when contracted to do so.' In other words, acknowledging the systemic perspective in itself doesn't necessarily imply agreement with those who suggest that the coaching supervisor's most important role is to help coaches work more systemically (Bachkirova et al., 2011; Hawkins 2011; Hawkins & Schwenk, 2011) regardless of their expressed need. Hawkins (2017) names the balance to be achieved between a Rogerian approach 'the need to start where your client is' and Sheldon Kopp's assertion that it is vital to 'be

where your client ain't'. Coaching supervisors may find it useful to consider where their practice sits with regard to this balance.

Second, and related to the first point, it is unclear from the results of this study the extent to which supervisors and coaches contracted explicitly as to the purpose of group supervision in terms of who coaching supervision is in service of. According to Hawkins (2011):

*The systemic supervisor needs to be clear right from the beginning of the contracting with the supervisee that the work is a joint enterprise in service of the individual and organisational clients, the relationship between them, the wider stakeholder system and the coaching profession.*

Again, we don't have sufficient understanding from the results of this study to determine the extent to which the supervisors in this study would subscribe to this view. The question for coach supervisors remains however, as to the nature of their practice and their strategy for contracting with potential supervisees.

Third, models such as the seven-eyed model are in a sense atheoretical. They encourage the supervisor to pay attention to what may be happening outside the immediacy of the coach-coachee relationship, but don't provide a theoretical lens through which to hypothesise how the overall system is functioning. Hawkins (2011) suggests that coach supervisors need to be trained in systemic thinking and should develop their own knowledge base and theoretical perspective. It may be the case therefore that some of the supervisors in this study succeeded in directing coaches to pay attention to aspects of the environment outside the coaching relationship, without offering the theoretical means by which to explore those domains in any great depth. The challenge to coach supervisors generally is to familiarise themselves with various systems theories and be clear as to the role played by this knowledge in their practice model.

## **Revisiting purpose**

Most coaches in this study went to supervision in service of their own development. Resourcing and qualitative functions were apparently less important and/or the boundaries between functions were not clear to people. For example, several coaches questioned the extent to which the developmental and qualitative functions could be separated in that they saw quality assurance as an outcome of development. Given the focus on development, the developmental function itself may be becoming too broad to be useful. For coaches in this study, for example, development was less about the acquisition of new skills and more about becoming more aware of self and system. Moyes (2009) highlights a particular aspect of the developmental function, namely the capacity of the supervisor to facilitate transformational shifts in perspective. De Haan (2017) proposes a hierarchy of self-doubt for coaches; existential, relational and instrumental. Kemp (2008) writes about the importance of the coach developing deeper self-awareness, and a better understanding as to how coach and coachee psychological systems impact each other. Armstrong and Geddes (2009) distinguish between enhancing professional knowledge (learning), self-awareness (insight) and consideration of influences from the whole system (outsight), a taxonomy that reflects well the responses of coaches in this study. Revisiting the purpose of supervision may be useful not only in terms of reviewing traditional perspectives, but also in better reflecting who supervision is in service of, and further considering the different roles of individual and group supervision. Framing the purpose of supervision with reference to development, resourcing and quality assurance may lend itself to an overly individualistic perspective. Future, more systemic, articulations of purpose may usefully be more explicit as to the purpose of supervision as it applies to the wider organisational system. Similarly, group supervision, with its focus on dialogue and collective learning, and the opportunities it offers for observing the dynamics of the group itself, may merit its own statement of purpose.

## Future research

Perhaps the most interesting outcome of this study has been a possible discrepancy, in some cases, between supervisor intent and the experience of coaches. In this aspect, the methodology of this study is somewhat limited in its capacity to understand what takes place in group supervision to that level of detail. It has been useful and insightful to compare and contrast the perspectives of different individuals in the group system, but it offers no direct insight into the functioning of the group-as-system. The precise intentions of these group supervisors remain somewhat unclear, as does the process through which those intentions converged with the needs of participants to become a social system with emergent outcomes. To further understand the extent to which group supervision conversations are systemic will require:

- A more detailed probing into the coaching supervision practice models of supervisors
- An exploration of participant coaching practice models
- A particular focus on initial and ongoing contracting processes
- The opportunity to directly observe processes of convergence and emergence

At a more holistic level, it will also require an ongoing dialogue at the community level as to what we mean by 'systemic' and which theories can help further our collective thinking and practice in this space. Allowing for the existence of different supervision practice models, it may also be useful to compare and contrast different approaches to facilitating the emergence of a more systemic perspective among coaches. Is it most effective, for example, to explicitly frame a systemic perspective, or else trust a process that creates an environment that in theory ought to facilitate such development (Lawrence, 2018)? A useful and broad frame of enquiry is unlikely to be so binary and is likely to explore the significance of context.

Future research will not of course assume that the findings of this study are representative of group supervision more generally. Tkach & DiGirolano (2017) note that most coaching supervision research studies are confined to specific geographic areas. From a systemic perspective we might expect group supervision to emerge in different geographies in different forms. The supervisors in this study know each other, and some interact on a regular basis through the Australasian Community for Coaching Supervision (ACCS). Four of the supervisors attended coach supervision training delivered by the same training organisation and two supervisors were trained in coach supervision at a different organisation by one of the other supervisors. This study is, therefore, unlikely to be representative of the philosophies and processes of the group supervision community as a whole. Further research is needed then to understand diversity of practice, and to understand how the global community is evolving. The 3P framework (Jackson & Bachkirova, 2019) may be a useful frame through which to explore this diversity.

The systemic lens may also lead us to think about the use of technology differently. The coaches in this study who participated in supervision mediated by the internet said that those sessions were beneficial. In particular, it enabled them to work with coaches from different geographic locations, further enabling them access to diversity of perspective. From a systemic perspective however, to what extent is the virtual medium more or less impactful in terms of the group being able to notice and work with group-as-system?

Looking to the coaching supervision community as a system directs us to explore beyond the practice of group supervision itself. How do the needs of the various stakeholders in the broader system impact on the evolution of philosophy, purpose and process? What are coaching supervisors currently taught at which different coach supervision institutions, and why? How do the different helping communities, each with its own interest in supervision, impact upon each other's thinking? In other words, for those who advocate a systemic perspective, how might we best take our own advice in seeking to understand the role and function of coaching supervision, and group supervision specifically, through a systemic lens?

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## About the authors

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## Appendix 1: Questions to supervisors

### Philosophy

1. What models, theories, frameworks inform your group supervision practice?
2. What's the difference between coaching and coaching supervision?
3. What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of group supervision vs. individual supervision and peer supervision?
4. What does 'systemic' mean?
5. What core principles do you subscribe to as a group coach supervisor?

### Purpose

1. What is the purpose of group supervision?
2. Who is supervision in service of?
3. Which of the following three possible values of supervision are important? Developmental, Emotional support, Quality assurance.
4. What sort of issues come up in group supervision?

### Process

1. What happens in a typical group supervision session?
2. How long does a session go on for? How often do you hold sessions? How many coaches do you have in a group?
3. What factors enable an effective supervision process?
4. What factors inhibit the supervision process?

## Appendix 2: Questions to coaches

Do you remember, why did you originally join this coaching supervision group?

1. What has the experience of coaching supervision been like, compared to your original expectations?
2. Who is coaching supervision in service of?
3. What impact has supervision had on your coaching practice?
4. How would you describe the role of a coaching supervisor?
5. What happens in a typical session?
6. What kinds of issues have you personally taken to supervision?
7. What issues have others in your group brought to supervision?
8. What are some of the enablers of effective group supervision?
9. What are some of the inhibitors?
10. Do your coachees and/or clients know you engage in supervision? If so – what do you tell them about coaching supervision?
11. Have you engaged in supervision outside this group? If – yes – compare and contrast.
12. What is the ideal number of people in a coaching supervision group?
13. What is the ideal duration?
14. What is the ideal time between sessions?

15. Which of the following three possible values of supervision matter to you? Developmental, Emotional support, Quality assurance.