

## The role of live supervision in the systemic psychotherapy training: a qualitative research

Alessia Cuccurullo\*, Federica Visone\*

\*Collegio Europeo di Scienze Psicosociali ECOPSYS

### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of live supervision on the professional skills of young systemic psychotherapists.

The Ecopsys Institute of systemic psychotherapy training considers the live supervision an essential experience of the training process.

Each student joins the therapeutic session with the supervisor supported by the training group following behind the mirror (Loriedo C., 1989) through a closed-circuit audiovisual system, and then draws up a report, a tool for reflection on clinical thinking and acting.

To investigate some aspects of the live supervision experience, a sample of 35 reports have been collected and analyzed with the T-Lab qualitative software, describing the emotional features of the first live consultation by students enrolled to different years and training groups. The textual analysis made it possible to point up the theoretical and clinical peculiarities of the Ecopsys Institute supervision model, focused on the emergence of emotional dimensions experienced by the supervisor-trainee dyad during live supervision.

### RIASSUNTO

Sono descritti e commentati i dati preliminari della ricerca che ha indagato il ruolo della supervisione diretta per la formazione e la crescita professionale dei giovani terapeuti.

La Scuola di Specializzazione Ecopsys considera imprescindibile la partecipazione attiva alle sedute terapeutiche dei propri allievi, parte integrante del modello formativo. L'allievo, che entra in seduta col didatta, supportato dal gruppo di formazione che segue dietro lo specchio (Loriedo C., 1989) attraverso un sistema audiovisivo a circuito chiuso, redige poi un resoconto, strumento di riflessione sul pensare e l'agire clinico.

Dei resoconti clinici raccolti negli anni ne sono qui analizzati 35, con il software qualitativo T-Lab, che descrivono l'ingresso in prima seduta degli allievi appartenenti a differenti anni e gruppi di formazione. L'analisi testuale ha consentito di sottolineare gli aspetti teorici e tecnici del modello terapeutico di Ecopsys e in particolare ha permesso l'emergere di quelle dimensioni emotive che accompagnano i giovani terapeuti agli esordi della professione.

### KEYWORDS

Psychotherapy training, clinical experience, supervision, clinical report, therapeutic model.

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**PAROLE CHIAVE**

Formazione in psicoterapia, esperienza clinica, supervisione, resoconto clinico, modello terapeutico.

**Introduction**

This paper describes a qualitative research carried on to explore the role of live supervision during the training in systemic psychotherapy.

Since 1989, training in psychotherapy in Italy has been ruled by a national law, which entitles both public and private institutions to conduct a 4-year training course. The rationale of this choice descends from the idea that the clinical skills of psychiatrists and psychologists need a specific training as psychotherapist. This represents the educational context in which they can acquire theoretical knowledge and fundamental practical-clinical skills.

Obviously, the theoretical and clinical orientation of the training (systemic-relational, cognitive, psychodynamic, Gestalts, etc.) stems from the choice of the future therapist, the orientation of his thought, his previous experiences as well as personal, cultural, and professional biography.

Systemic training aims to prepare trainees for their professional practice according to the epistemology of complexity. However, there are different ways to convey systemic concepts which, transferred into clinical practice, favor the construction of the systemic vision as a professional knowledge (Viaro, 2006).

Three educational factors cannot be lacking in systemic psychotherapy training: the theoretical learning, the personal practice, which can include a personal therapy, and the supervision experience within a training group (Nelson et al., 2007; Vetere & Sheehan, 2017)

First, an effective training must be founded on a full theoretical learning. In fact, to "*make your own*" the model, it is essential to know and deepen the theoretical framework of the model itself developing a personal attitude towards these constructs.

Specifically, systemic-relational therapy is rooted on the seminal work of pioneering therapists and researchers, which investigated the hypothesis of an intimate connection between the individual suffering and the family relationships.

The symptoms are described as a relational pattern; it does not belong to the single person but to the family as a whole system. Therefore, the family relationships area crucial matrix of meanings to understand psychopathological phenomena and to manage the psychotherapeutic settings (Fruggeri L. et al., 2020).

Another crucial aspect of systemic psychotherapy training is the experience with the training group (Lowe et al., 2008). The group is a fundamental learning laboratory by which it is possible to observe relational patterns like those of families.

Hence, training is not a self-referential process but takes place within this relational workroom. The group becomes a ubiquitous "*think tank*" to develop ideas, explore communication patterns, record the change processes of relational systems, and recognize the nuances of the emotional atmosphere.

This kind of guided clinical education is an essential starting point to professional development because the student, moving from an observation position becomes, gradually, "*part of*" the therapeutic system, learning techniques

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and strategies. Andolfi underlines that the discussion with the training group expands the students' point of view, becoming a "safe space" in which they can share anxiety and fears connected to the "first time". This system constituted by the supervisor, the co-therapist student, and the training group behind the mirror, give shape to a "thinking group", a sort of collective mind at the service of therapy (Andolfi, 2021).

In addition to theoretical learning, a large part of psychotherapy training is devoted to the personal practice. It represents an essential dimension to improve the trainees' therapeutic skills. Simultaneously, the systemic therapist have to pay attention to a self-reflective level and to a cooperative level: as Giuliani (2019) writes, training is also learning to never be alone. The personal practice is divided into different activities. First, it is required to carry out a practical internship under the guidance of an expert psychotherapist tutor, which takes place in public or private institutions. This experience allows the student to observe, firsthand in a protected setting, the clinical practice of an expert colleague. Many students choose to carry out their internships in Mental Health Departments, Psychiatric Services, Maternal and Child Units or in public or private Family Psychotherapy Centers.

During the internship, the students meet patients with their families and conduct clinical interviews that can be discussed with their training group and with the supervisor during the training days.

This clinical experience is supported by indirect supervision in which the students describe the clinical case to the supervisor and addresses their impasses. The indirect supervision allows the student to resolve any "deadlocks" moments when the therapy is ineffective, and there is a high risk of dropout. In this experience, the supervisor, the therapist, the group and indirectly the "client" (the person, family or couple who are being followed in therapy and discussed in the supervision) constitute the main actors. Particular attention is dedicated to the person of the therapist who must be able to integrate personal-family aspects of his development with professional skills (Andolfi M., 2021).

The indirect supervision integrates with the live supervision (Anderson et al., 1995;Montalvo & Storm, 1997; Champe et al., 2003; Florencia et al., 2019; Castronova et al., 2020).It consists in participating to the therapy session together with a supervisor as a co-therapist. The supervisor stimulates the trainee to ask questions, comment and intervene during the session under his guidance. After the session, the student discusses with the supervisor and with the training group. The return from the therapy room into the supervision group focus everyone's attention to the student's experience: in particular,the discussion is on how he felt in the relationship with the family, what efforts and obstacles he had to face, what emotions the session had generated. So, how Giuliani (2019) underlines, the group, in turn, will experience itself in a respectful and non-prevaricating position of help and listening.

All these activities help the students to approach and refine their clinical skills, to accept suffering and recognize different versions of reality. The aim is to get the fine art of the therapeutic relationship, through self-knowledge and the achievement of a clear and stable identity (Bogliolo C., Bacherini A. M., 2015).

The research context

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The Ecopsys Institute of systemic psychotherapy is a private institution of training in psychotherapy. The course in Systemic Psychotherapy is oriented by models that credit the matrix of personal identity in the connection between the subjective experience and the relational contexts.

The basic theoretical orientation relies on the contributions of Gregory Bateson (1977), the Bowenian theory (1980), the contextual model of Boszormenyi-Nagy (1988), the symbolic-experiential model of Whitaker (1984) and the structural model of Minuchin (1977). According to Di Caprio (2020), in the Ecopsys Institute, the systemic training aims to provide the future therapist “*Knowledge, Care, Understanding and Clinical Framework*”.

The training program is divided into:

- ❖ A first biennium dedicated to learning the key concepts of the systemic-relational model, deepening the aspects related to clinical and relational diagnosis, the relational observation of the systems’ life cycle in contexts, the introduction to systemic-relational therapy through live and indirect supervision.
- ❖ The second biennium during which the theoretical and clinical skills of the systemic-relational model are consolidated with their clinical use. The last two years, therefore, are dedicated to the clinical practice with the individuals, the couple, and the family.

The supervision experience.

According to Gritti (2015), the supervision in family therapy is a multidimensional, isomorphic, recursive process devoted to a shared decision-making about a clinical issue. Indirect supervision is requested by the student. It concerns the clinical cases faced in their own private office or during the internship. The case is discussed with the training group and the supervisor as a source of self-reflection and enrichment for the student presenting the case. This work provides him with useful suggestions to deepen some aspects of the clinical record, to monitor the therapeutic process and the quality of the therapeutic relationship.

Live supervision, on the other hand, provides the students with the opportunity to join the sessions in co-therapy with a supervisor. It consents them to assume, simultaneously, a role of a “participant observer” in a privileged position and, at the same time, a therapist, just like the supervisor. The experience of live supervision is based on the relationship of trust between the supervisor teacher and the student. “*A relationship that encourages trainees to become increasingly invested and involved in the learning process is an essential training objective. Such a relationship permits their preferred interpersonal and conceptual style to become apparent, allowing the supervisor access to important aspects of the trainee*” (Liddle H. A., 1988).

Live supervision is an essential training tool because the student directly experiences the clinical setting. In fact, during the clinical interview it is possible to observe and experience the communicative and relational modalities of the couple or family, the emotional climate present in the session, the therapeutic techniques, and the dynamics of the therapeutic system (Andersen T., 1989; Mason, 2010).

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Indirect and live supervision are focused in the border area between the family problems and the therapist's subjectivity, who learns the empathic "as if" position, i.e., putting himself in someone's shoes without any massive identification with their suffering. Sharing this path with the supervisor and the training group help the student to get, over time, an inner balance between emotional participation and therapeutic neutrality (Wong, 1997; Roustang F., 2004; Stephanie et al., 2015).

According to the Ecopsys training course, the live supervision starts from the second half of the second year of training. This choice stems from the necessity to consolidate, as a primary goal, the systemic-relational theoretical orientation as a fundamental basis on which add the following clinical experience.

Live supervision does not only concern the time of the clinical session. It is a much broader experience that also includes several phases:

- The pre-session: The therapeutic team discuss preliminary information about the therapeutic request. With the information collected during the phone call or through the sender, the team formulates some initial hypotheses guiding the work of the therapists during the interview.
- The session: The supervisor and the student conduct the session with the family or the couple while the training group observes the interview in an adjacent room. The session is always videotaped (with the informed consent of the patients).
- The post-session: At the end of the session, the supervisor, and the student meet with the training group to work together sharing reflections and hypotheses useful for the next sessions.

The role of the training group is as important as that of the supervisor. It represents an emotional container for the student, supports him in the experience and provides him the possibility of having a "third eye" of observation with which he can compare (Hoffman L., 1990; Sheenan, 2017).

Following each session, the student writes a clinical report with the description of the main episodes of the session, his emotional resonances, and his working hypotheses about the therapeutic process. This report helps to assess thoughts, to open further reflections and to focalize the crucial moments of the sessions during the therapeutic process. This practice seems to activate a recursive loop in which the memory of the therapeutic experience reverberates on the clinical work, which, in turn, contributes to enrichment and redefinition of therapeutic practice, in a self-generating process (Bruni F., De Filippi P.G., 2005).

Students are required to send their own clinical reports to the supervisor and to the training group.

This study explores, by mean of text analysis, the clinical reports of the first live supervision of some Ecopsys students.

### Aims

To evaluate, by means of a qualitative research, the role of live supervision for the development of professional skills as well as self-awareness during a four-year training course in systemic psychotherapy. Specifically, to

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explore some features of the “*supervisor-trainee-training group*” system which can be inferred by a text analysis of the trainees’ clinical reports after their first live supervision.

## Methods and instruments

35 narrative reports have been collected and analyzed. These reports, fulfilled from students of different years of training, describe the first live supervision during the training courses.

To collect these reports, an email was sent to 232 Ecopsys students. They were asked to participate in the ongoing study by sending the report of the first live therapy session they had attended during their training. Of these 232 people, 35 (15%) replied to the email by sending their reports.

The sample is composed by 34 women and 1 man; 15 are current students (second, third and fourth year) and 20 are therapists, former Ecopsys students. 6 of them participated in direct supervision during their second year of training, 21 students were involved during the third year and 8 students during the fourth year of the course.

Of the 35 reports collected, 13 concern a couple therapy and 22 family therapies.

The qualitative analysis has been performed using T-Lab software. This software “*is an all-in-one set of linguistic, statistical and graphical tools for text analysis*” (Lancia, 2020). Thanks to T-lab is possible to get content analysis and text mining. The first step of the research has been the building of our textual corpus with this software. After collecting the reports, T-Lab software operated a content analysis using two functions: Dictionary Building and Key Words Selection. So, during the importation phase, T-LAB makes a corpus segmentation into *elementary contexts* in order to help user exploration and, above all, to make analyses that require the co-occurrences computation (2021).

This process created a text dictionary, analyzed using a bottom-up approach, with Co-occurrence analysis (or co-word analysis). This type of analysis identifies and quantifies the associations between two or more keywords simultaneously present in the same elementary contexts.

In particular, the co-occurrence analysis was carried out between the following tools:

- Word Associations, to check out co-occurrence relationships and to determine the local meaning of selected words.
- Comparisons between Word Pairs, to compare sets of elementary contexts in which the elements of a pair of keywords are presents.
- Co-Word Analysis, to find and map co-occurrence relationship within and between sets of keywords.
- Sequence and Network, to represent and explore our text as a network. This kind of analysis is realized in T-Lab using a type of MDS (Sammon's method) in order to represent the relationships among the lexical units or among the thematic nuclei (2021). In particular, MDS is a set of data analysis techniques that allow to analyze similarity matrices in order to provide a visual representation of the relationships among the data within a space. The input tables are constituted by square matrices,

which contain proximity values (dissimilarities) derived from the calculation of an association index.

The results obtained, like those of the correspondence analysis, allow to interpret both the relationships between the "*objects*" and the dimensions that organize the space in which they are represented. The degree of correspondence between the distances among points, implied by the MDS map, and the matrix input is measured (inversely) by a Stress function. The lesser the stress value, the greater the goodness of the obtained adjustment (2021).

## Results and conclusions

Our analysis highlighted some essential points on the role of live supervision in developing clinical competencies. Each clinical report has been characterized from these elements:

- The clinical case presentation.
- An attention to presence/absence of training group.
- A focus on therapist's emotive dimensions.
- The role of co-therapy, in particular working with an expert supervisor.

The more frequent lemma has been "*to join*" (Tab.1), referred to the first time in the room of therapy. We can understand that this is a turning point in the training course of students, so this word emphasizes the importance of this event. The words strictly associated with this one are "*co-therapist*", "*supervisor*", "*to get comfortable*", "*setting*", "*family*", "*me*" and "*videotape*". We can divide these words into two semantic "*frames*":

1. The "*space*" frame ("*to get comfortable*", "*setting*", "*videotape*") includes the setup of a comfortable space for the therapeutic session: this is always a concern for the student.
2. The "*people*" frame ("*supervisor*", "*co-therapist*", "*me*", "*family*") refers to the main protagonists of the sessions.

Many other words relate to "*to join*"; these refer to the emotions of this first experience and to technical devices of the clinical session.

Starting from these elements, our analysis highlighted the following results, connected to the use of specific t-lab instruments:

The Word Associations instrument elicited two dimensions related to the experience of the first live supervision. The first one refers to relations and the second one to emotions:

- 1) We named "*security network*" four groups of co-occurrences emerged with this analysis. The central words of this network are "*supervisor*", "*group*", "*to reassure*", and "*difficulty*". Each word co-occurred with the others and with many other words, all referred to the need of a relational support to share emotions and fears. Surely, this is not a shocking evidence, considering the interpersonal context of this experience.

Nevertheless, this dimension emphasizes the reassuring presence of a supervisor as well as the training group with a supportive function. (Tab. 2).

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- 2) The other two groups of co-occurrences were named “*emotive atmosphere*”. They refer to the words “*emotions*” and “*to fail*”. These keywords indicate the central role of the feelings experienced during the student’s first live supervision (Tab. 3).

We suppose that these two dimensions are the basic aspects of the student’s experience as emerged from their reports. Emotions and relations are both part of their formative process, the bricks of their professional growth.

Focusing on the students’ feelings, we compared the “*to join*” and “*anxiety*” words, using the Comparisons between Word Pairs. This analysis underlines the relevance of the “*supervisor*” presence in the therapy room. “*Supervisor*”, in fact, has been the most associated word in connection with the analyzed pair, followed by “*family*”, “*to narrate*” and “*start*”. Supervisor and students share the same therapy and get personally involved, accepting thoughts, sensations, intuitions of the other, exchanging and comparing them with their own, to form a therapeutic we (Andolfi M., 2015).

According to B. Mason (2010): “*the supervisor, just like a therapist, is not a vehicle that only has one gear-curiosity. Thus, the trainee supervisors are encouraged to be, both, curious with the supervisee, and have ideas and suggestions that they may share with them, about six aspects: the clients and the issues they present; the clients' relationship with help; the therapeutic relationship; the self of the therapist; the supervisory relationship; the self of the supervisor*”.

The importance of the supervisor’s role emerged also comparing “*supervisor*” and “*anxiety*” words (Tab. 4). In this case, the more associated lemma was “*to ask*” pointing out that the possibility to ask questions to the supervisor has a kind of “*anxiolytic effect*” for the students.

In addition, the Co-Word Analysis let us to link “*to narrate*” word with “*group*” and to connect both with the word “*formation*”. This appears as an interesting link, because the presence of the training group enriches the individual skills by sharing the narration of the experience.

At last, Sequence and Network analysis (Tab. 5) was useful to have a total description of our text. The resulting diagram, get with the Sammon Method (stress 0.1114), underlines the collocation of these words in our text (the words are indicated in a growing order): “*supervisor*”, “*to ask*”, “*start*”, “*to join*”, “*anxiety*”, “*difficulty*”, “*fear*”, “*emotions*”, “*group*”, “*appease*”, “*training*”, “*evaluation*”. This method, as De Lillo et al (2007) underlines, give only a dimensional position of items, without clarifying their positioning coordinates. Therefore, an interpretation of keywords position was necessary.

This explorative analysis emphasizes the role of emotions and the meaning of a comfortable network in a significant training experience. These features seem to be essential to build a professional self for the future psychotherapists as well as to favor a pleasing initial approach to clinical settings.

This first textual analysis made it possible to highlight the prominent role of live supervision during the systemic training. In our opinion, this study may be useful not only to deepen the multidimensional aspects of live supervision, but also to improve the structure for the training process.

Limitations of the study



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This study, lasted from May to November 2020, is the first step of a wider qualitative research about training in psychotherapy. Further objectives will be pursued by increasing our sample and other data analyzes.

The analyzes and results obtained so far represent only a sketch towards the aim of defining the advantages and highlighting the elements necessary to make the live supervision an enriching training experience.

This research has some limitations including:

- The unfeasibility of tracing a difference between male and female therapists (the presence of only one man in the sample of 35 does not allow comparison).
- the absence of the age of the students in the data sample: this data could affect how the student takes part in the live supervision experience.
- the presence of psychologists and psychiatrists in the sample was not analyzed: how does the different education of the future therapist influence the clinical experience of live supervision?
- the absence of data about the supervisor: there are differences connected to his gender or his professional role?

The next step of our research could be to explore the features emerged from these preliminary results. Surely, these results may be enriched by increasing our textual corpus with many other clinical reports.

Finally, a more deepen analysis using other T-Lab tools could be a future step of this research. In particular, the Cluster analysis could be useful for our objectives. This analysis aims to identify groups of keywords in the same cluster and between two or more clusters, unifying them in a unique corpus.

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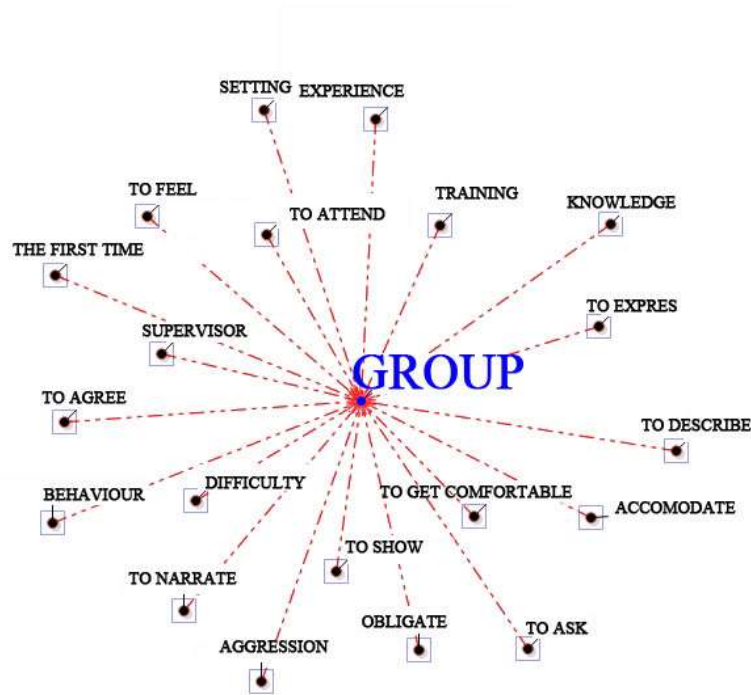
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## Appendix

Tab.1 – “To Join” word.



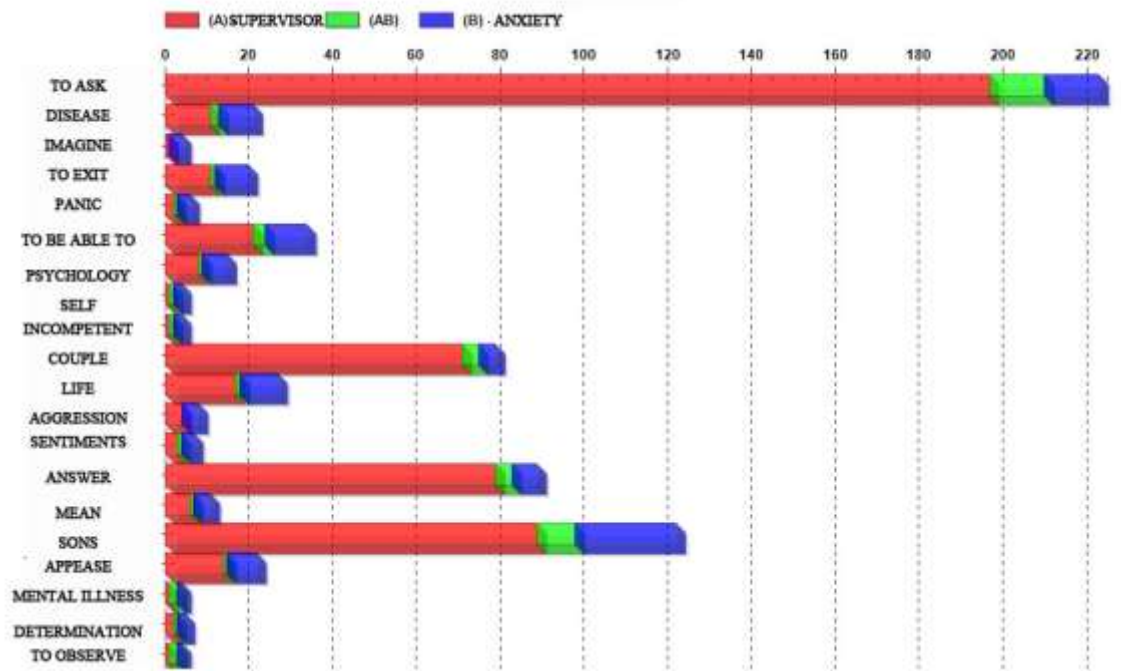
Tab. 2 – “Group” word



Tab.3 – “Emotions” word



Tab. 4 – Comparison between “supervisor” and “anxiety” words



Tab. 5 - Sequence and Network analysis

