Assessing the perceived value of Reflexive Groups for supporting Clergy in the Church of England

Peter Madsen Gubi, PhD, ThD

Professor of Counselling and Spiritual Accompaniment

Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Chester

Parkgate Road

Chester

CH1 4BJ

Email: p.gubi@chester.ac.uk

Affiliation: University of Chester, UK.

Abstract

Little research has been conducted to assess the effectiveness of reflexive groups in supporting clergy. For this research, eight Church of England Bishops' Advisors for Pastoral Care and Counselling were interviewed to ascertain the value of reflexive groups. These data were analysed using a thematic analysis. Two superordinate themes emerged: *Contextual issues* and *Benefits*, along with twenty subordinate themes. An online survey, consisting of questions that came from the Bishops' Advisors data, was then sent to reflexive group participants (*n=64*), to see if their experiences matched those benefits identified by the Bishops' Advisors. The data from 37 participants was statistically analysed. The data from both sets of participants reveal that reflexive groups are perceived as psychologically beneficial to clergy. The research concludes that the implementation of reflexive groups as a way of developing self-awareness and enculturating attitudes towards resilience and self-care is important to foster psychologically- and spiritually- healthy practice.

Keywords

Introduction

The poor psychological health of some clergy is well documented in the literature. It is often brought about by poor boundaries, inadequate self-care, emotional isolation, a lack of privacy for clergy families, and many pulls on clergies' time (e.g. Gubi & Korris, 2015; Hudson, 2015; Miles & Proeschold-Bell, 2013; Jackson-Jordan, 2013; Proeschold-Bell et al., 2011; Charlton et al., 2009; Francis et al., 2005; Francis et al., 2004; Francis et al., 2000). In response to these concerns, and through a desire to offer emotional support through a duty of care, several dioceses within the Church of England, and St Luke's Healthcare for the Clergy, facilitate reflexive groups for clergy, sometimes referred to as Reflective Practice Groups (Gubi & Korris, 2015; Barrett, 2010), Balint-style groups (Travis, 2008), or Clergy Peer-Support Groups (Francis et al., 2013). Each group strives to provide a safe space for clergy to express and explore issues that arise from their work, and, in a Church of England context, is usually facilitated by an external person who is counsellor/psychotherapist trained and experienced in group processes (Gubi & Korris, 2015). A reflexive group is defined as a non-directive, closed group that aims to offer opportunities for reflection on interactions and processes in which reflexivity can take place at a psychological, relational and spiritual level (Gubi, 2011, p. 50). Reflexivity is about "questioning our own attitudes, assumptions, prejudices, and habitual actions, and how congruent our actions are with our espoused values and theories" (Bolton, 2014, p. 7). Reflexive groups "provide both a learning environment where new psychological skills can be picked up, and also model a particular way of attending to people's unique situational needs. This model can

be taken out from the group and used in ministry, particularly in ministry to those unfamiliar with the traditional church and its culture" (Travis, 2008, p. 128-129). Miles & Proeschold-Bell (2013), however, state that there is little research conducted to determine the effectiveness, on mental health, of reflexive-type groups among clergy. This small scale research seeks to address this deficit.

Methodology

The research question that focussed this research was, "in what way(s) [if any], might reflexive groups support and build up the ministry of the Church of England?" The aim was to discover if, and how, reflexive groups support clergy. Ethical approval was gained through the University of Winchester as part of a larger doctoral research project (Gubi, 2016). The research was conducted in two stages using a mixed methods approach. In Stage One, forty-two Bishops' Advisors, identified through the Anglican Association of Advisors in Pastoral Care and Counselling (2015) website, were emailed to ascertain how many of them facilitated reflexive-type groups, or knew of such groups in their dioceses, and to ask if they could be interviewed if they did. These Bishops' Advisors have responsibility for advising on the provision of mental health care and wellbeing for the clergy in their dioceses. Eight Bishops' Advisors (response rate of 19%) responded to indicate that they facilitate (or have facilitated) reflexive-type groups in their dioceses. They were sent a participant information sheet explaining the details of the research. Semi-structured interviews were set up with the eight respondents. These were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed, and based on the following questions:

- Can you tell me something about the reflexive-type group(s) that you

  facilitate, or that run in your diocese?
- What benefits do you think it/they serve(s)?
- Is there anything else you may want to add?

After transcription, the relevant transcript was sent to each Bishop's Advisor, for them to check for accuracy. They were invited to add to, or amend, the data if necessary. Signed informed consent was gained. The data were analysed using a thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2015). Data attributed to Bishops' Advisors are coded with 'BA' and a number (e.g. BA3) to protect anonymity. In Stage Two, an online survey, using the research instrument 'Bristol Online Survey', was sent to 64 reflexive group participants, identified by the Bishops' Advisors of three dioceses, with the permission of each diocese. The online survey was sent by blind-copied email from each diocesan office (to preserve the anonymity of the participants, as the diocesan offices already knew who the participants were). The questions in the online survey were based on the data from the Bishops' Advisors' interviews, and asked participants to agree or disagree with the following statements:

My Reflective Practice Group has enabled me to:

- Feel supported
- Feel less isolated in my ministry
- Gain insight into the way I think
- Gain insight into my way of being in the world
- Gain awareness of how I impact on others
- Respect difference better
- Have a better sense of self-care
- Have a better quality of pastoral encounter with others in my ministry
- Grow theologically
- Interact better with others in my ministry
- Grow as a human being
- Trust others more

- Experience my own vulnerability safely
- Negotiate boundaries better in my ministry

The purpose of the statements was to discover if the reflexive groups' participants experienced the same benefit as the claims that the Bishops' Advisors were making about the value of the groups. The details of the research were explained in the pre-survey information. Consent was gained through submission of the survey. The data attributable to each diocese is coded with a D (for diocese) and a number (1, 2 or 3). Within Diocese 1, the online survey was sent to 29 participants. Participants had two weeks to respond to the survey which took no more than ten minutes to complete. A reminder email was sent out two days before the closure of the survey. This process was repeated across all three dioceses. 16 participants responded in D1, making the final response rate 55.2%. Within D2, the online survey was sent to 8 participants. 7 participants responded (response rate 87.5%). In D3, the online survey was sent to 27 participants. 14 participants responded (response rate 51.8%).

Results of Stage One

The data from the Bishops' Advisors are presented using two superordinate themes: *Contextual Issues* and *Benefits* - with accompanying subordinate themes (See Table 1).

Superordinate Theme 1: Contextual issues

Subordinate theme 1.1: Support

Three of the Bishops' Advisors stated that their rationale for running clergy

groups was that of offering support.

Table 1. Superordinate themes and subordinate themes from the data provided by the Bishops' Advisors.

Super-ordinate Themes	Contextual issues	Benefits
Subordinate themes	Support	Facilitating thinking and gaining insight
	Promotion	Respecting difference
	Facilitation	Self-care
	Voluntary commitment	Pastoral encounter
	Payment	Challenge theology
	More than personality type	Church life
	Feeling safe	Personal and theological development
	Purposeful	Different from other groups
		Countering isolation
		Experiencing vulnerability
		Person to person
		Negotiating boundaries

Subordinate theme 1.2: Promotion

Careful attention was given by some as to how the group was 'promoted' to the diocese. Some felt that it was important that it wasn't seen as a theological group for fear of it becoming too intellectualised, rather than focussed on personal process. BA5 emphasised the importance of the group as being on reflexivity, focusing mainly on the psychological. However, none of the Bishops' Advisors excluded the exploration of personal theology where it related to, or offered insight into, personal process and struggle.

> "How do you offer the space and call it purposeful without restricting it to particular areas of exploration…? But I would never market it as a group for theological reflection because I think that would make its purpose 'out there' as it were, feel different from what it is - but absolutely, I think that

theological reflection can happen. I just wouldn't want people to think it's a full on academic theological group, because it isn't" (BA5).

Subordinate theme 1.3: Facilitation

Some types of group required two facilitators. BA4, on the other hand, facilitated the groups on her own. Several of the facilitators did the work as part their role of Bishop's Advisor for Pastoral Care and Counselling. All participants felt it important that the group is facilitated by a qualified and experienced person who can keep the focus on process.

Subordinate theme 1.4: Voluntary commitment

The fact that attendance at these groups was mostly voluntary was considered important to minimise anti-task behaviour and sabotage. Some Bishops' Advisors felt that some people struggled to prioritise the time and commit to the process.

> "People in the group say, 'I'm sorry, I can't come next time, I've just got to do this', whatever, and you know, in my book I might be feeling privately 'What? You prioritise that over the group?' I think it's not easy for clergy and actually just instilling that culture of making this a priority and sticking to it, has been hard enough with people who have said, 'Yes, I'm interested and I want to come" (BA5).

Subordinate theme 1.5: Payment

Although subsidised by the diocese as part of the Bishops' Advisors' role, it was considered important that the incumbents contributed financially to the process as a way of enabling some form of ownership of the process.

Subordinate theme 1.6: More than personality type

BA4 felt that commitment was more important than personality type. The Bishops' Advisors felt that emotional literacy, psychological-mindedness and readiness to embrace the process are what are important.

> "Well, you'd have to commit to the group to benefit, don't you, and
> that's the other thing… I don't think this is about type, but you have to
> be prepared to be sufficiently open to, and reflective… to have a degree
> of emotional intelligence, and be prepared to examine oneself
> emotionally. I think everybody could benefit. Whether everybody
> would, depends on the commitment they give to the group. The more
> they bring to it, the more they get from it, in a sense. If someone's going
> to come along and not contribute or be very, very defended, well I
> suppose at some point that might be challenged by the group members
> anyway" (BA4).

Subordinate theme 1.7: Feeling safe

BA2 talked about the need to feel safe in the group. BA4 emphasised the importance in being clear about the purpose of the group from the start, and about contracting confidentiality, as ways of helping the group to feel safe-enough to be vulnerable in.

Subordinate theme 1.8: Purposeful

BA4 felt that it was important that the group remained focussed on its purpose. It seemed important that the facilitator's role, and the group's role, is to keep the group purposeful and focussed on the task of exploring psychological and group process. There is arguably a danger that without 'external' facilitation, it could become a social and collusive group.

> "They want to be able to bring, wherever they are, to bring themselves, wherever they are, so they may share the highs and the lows and share some very personal stuff. It's not just a place for a cosy cup of tea really" (BA4).

Superordinate Theme 2: Benefits

Subordinate theme 2.1: Facilitate thinking and gaining insight

BA5 felt that one of the purposes of the group was to facilitate thinking and awareness of personal process in relation to the situations that are encountered. The data revealed something about the shifts (growth) that can occur in sensitively challenging each other in the group (BA7). BA8 felt that the development of self-awareness was an important aspect of the group.

> "We are gradually aiming to help people think, not just about the situation, but what they're bringing to it and what they may be bringing to it that is unconscious, or certainly less conscious for them… What happens is that people gradually begin to reveal, at their pace, parts about themselves, things about their personal history, things about their family history, and links are made between that and the situation that is being discussed" (BA5).

Subordinate theme 2.2: Respecting difference

BA5 felt that learning to respect difference was an important part of the group process. The data revealed that learning to be alongside 'difference' can be a struggle, but also be beneficial.

> "... we had somebody in the group who was from a very evangelical charismatic background, but very keen to learn about himself. Some of the things he described as going on in his church, I know for other clergy was testing - was not easy to hear - but it didn't ever get into discussion of the rightness or wrongness of that, as long as it stayed with the difficulties of it with this particular priest" (BA5).

Subordinate theme 2.3: Self-care

Three of the Bishops' Advisors felt that participation in such groups enabled better self-care. BA4 saw one of the values of the group as being preventative. BA7 saw the value of the groups as being able to step back and examine what is going on in their lives. The data suggest that reflexive groups are a good place to model and internalise useful aspects of time-management, listening to self, and other skills that enable better self-care, as well as being a space to share what is going on within one's own psychological process and life.

Subordinate theme 2.4: Pastoral encounter

Enabling better relational skills was identified as a benefit of reflexive groups (e.g. BA5). It was felt that this would enhance and heighten ability in pastoral encounters. The data revealed the reflexive group as a place in which clergy can learn different ways of interaction which can then be taken out into parish life and pastoral encounter. There is also the sense of the 'group' being behind them

as a form of moral support, which comes from the supportive 'belonging' nature of the group.

> "We have talked about self-insight and so on but also, as we implied that hopefully then has an implication for a kind of praxis, theological praxis as it were, and so I think that they think quite a lot, for example, that they are learning about pastoral interaction and I hope that they feel that they are learning how to do that better for themselves in the ministry" (BA2).

Subordinate theme 2.5: Challenge theology

BA5 felt that sometimes personal theology was challenged and growth could come from that experience. Otherwise, the group was sometimes used to explore personal challenges with theology. Any differences with theology are sensitively facilitated. However, BA7 stated that theology didn't 'happen' much in the groups that he facilitated. BA8 stated that her groups were initially set up to be non-theological. However, as the theological and the psychological are not compartmentalised, both have a place as long as the process doesn't become intellectualised, but stays close to 'feeling' and experiencing.

Subordinate theme 2.6: Church life

BA3 strongly felt that participation in reflexive groups would enhance a Minister's capacity to engage more effectively in Church life. BA6 also saw the value of being part of a reflexive group as enabling better ministry. BA8 felt that participating in reflexive groups enables a better understanding of groups in church life. The data revealed the importance of developing an awareness of self

and others to enable clergy to separate out, and have insight into, the dynamics that can occur in ministry. This also enables a more collegial form of ministry to develop.

> "People are coming with a much more fluid attitude to their ministry, to theology, to all of the different changes that are going on in their lives as a result of being in the group; and also it seems to me that they are vital because you are working all the time with people, and the dynamics of working with people is very, very complex because your congregations and your non-congregations - other people in the parish – there are all sorts of different psychological levels. So, you are quite often dealing with a host of projections which you become the focus of..." (BA3).

Subordinate theme 2.7: Personal and theological development

Personal and theological development were identified as important functions of the group. BA1 spoke about how much he learned about himself and how he operated relationally from his group – and this had enabled him to learn about the relational nature of God. The purpose of the group may not be to develop theological awareness, but for BA1, it has offered useful theological insights and opportunities for theological reflection.

Subordinate theme 2.8: Different from other groups

Because the Church was acknowledged as being a very political organisation, it was felt that reflexive groups offered a space to be as non-political as possible. Care was taken as to the make-up of the groups to avoid external politics

pervading the space. BA6 also emphasised the difference with other Church groups of clergy. The data showed that the non-reflexive groups that are often encountered in the Church of England are not spaces to be vulnerable in, so one benefit is to have a place that is free from the institutional politics. This needs careful managing.

Subordinate theme 2.9: Countering isolation

Several of the Bishops' Advisors recognised the isolation of the clergy and felt that groups were a valuable way of countering isolation. However, BA3 stated that such groups might not necessarily be helpful to clergy who are isolated, because their isolation might possibly be caused by an inability to engage with others – which might cause difficulties for others in the group.

> "Many (not all) clergy do feel isolated in their role, and the group can provide a space where ministry can feel less isolating because it is shared and examined with a group of supportive colleagues" (BA4).

Subordinate theme 2.10: Experiencing vulnerability

BA3 spoke about the need for clergy to experience vulnerability in order to enable them to accompany others in their vulnerability. The personal insight and learning that can come from these groups is useful in parish interactions.

> "Being in a group is a very vulnerable experience, and therefore I think it's really important that people learn that; and they also learn that there are some people with whom they are never going to get on. There are some people with whom it is not safe to be vulnerable, and therefore they learn something about discernment, and hopefully an understanding that there are going to be some parishioners who will never find them to be the right

person and not to expect to be all things to all people... But at the same time, also to learn that because you are vulnerable and you have learned that you can express that vulnerability, and it is very helpful indeed to express it with somebody, to know that you have got to choose the right people. You can't just be sort of letting loose on everybody! So that's discernment I think really." (BA3).

Subordinate theme 2.11: Person to person

BA3 identified the use of groups over the use of journaling in developing reflexivity as the benefit of the human encounter in developing reflexivity was a more profound method.

> "Journaling is valuable, but I think even if they don't go to a group, they need one person as a spiritual accompanier, mentor, pastoral supervisor, whatever you choose, but somebody who is able to listen and reflect back and, because your journal doesn't respond to you the way a person does, so it's not two-way" (BA3).

Subordinate theme 2.12: Negotiating boundaries

BA1 spoke about the usefulness of the groups in his ordination training for teaching him how to negotiate boundaries. BA7, likewise, felt that the teaching of boundaries within the group was advantageous in modelling good boundaries for priest, in not always taking responsibility for others.

> "If I was going to say anything about all this work, it is this wonderful negotiating of boundaries. How important that is in life, let alone in ministry, you know... this whole awareness of constantly having to redraw boundaries and be aware of them and manage them - whether they are permeable boundaries or rigid ones" (BA1).

Results of Stage Two:

The statistical data from the reflexive groups' participants are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Collated statistical data from the online surveys of Diocese 1, 2 and 3.

No.	Statement: *My Reflective Practice Group has enabled me to:*	Diocese 1		Diocese 1		Diocese 2		Diocese 2		Diocese 3		Diocese 3	
		Agree		Disagree		Agree		Disagree		Agree		Disagree	
		%	n=	%	n=	%	n=	%	n=	%	n=	%	n=
1.	Feel supported	93.3	14	6.7	1	100	7	0	0	100	14	0	0
2.	Feel less isolated in my ministry	93.8	15	6.3	1	100	7	0	0	100	14	0	0
3.	Gain insight into the way I think	93.8	15	6.3	1	100	7	0	0	100	14	0	0
4.	Gain insight into my way of being in the world	75	12	25	4	85.7	6	14.3	1	92.9	13	7.1	1
5.	Gain awareness of how I impact on others	87.5	14	12.5	2	85.7	6	14.3	1	100	13	0	0
6.	Respect difference better	87.5	14	12.5	2	28.6	2	71.4	5	92.9	13	7.1	1
7.	Have a better sense of self-care	81.3	13	18.8	3	83.3	5	16.7	1	92.9	13	7.1	1
8.	Have a better quality of pastoral encounter with others in my ministry	81.2	13	18.8	3	57.1	4	42.9	3	92.9	13	7.1	1
9.	Grow theologically	62.5	10	37.5	6	71.4	5	28.6	2	66.7	8	33.3	4
10	Interact better with others in my ministry	75	12	25	4	71.4	5	28.6	2	92.9	13	7.1	1
11.	Grow as a human being	75	12	25	4	100	7	0	0	100	14	0	0
12.	Trust others more	62.5	10	37.5	4	50	3	50	3	71.4	10	28.6	4
13.	Experience my own vulnerability safely	87.5	14	12.5	2	100	7	0	0	100	14	0	0
14.	Negotiate boundaries better in my ministry	68.8	11	31.2	5	71.4	5	28.6	2	84.6	11	15.4	2

Discussion

It is clear from the Stage One data, that the Bishops' Advisors considered the main purpose of the reflexive groups to be that of offering psychological support to clergy. This was identified in the data as: offering support, enabling clergy to feel less isolated, enabling clergy to gain an insight into the way that they think and into the impact of their way of being on others. They stated that the reflexive groups enabled clergy to respect difference better, and to gain a better sense of self-care. Reflexive groups enabled clergy to engage in a better quality of pastoral

encounter with others and to interact better with others in their ministry. The reflexive groups were identified as enabling clergy to grow as human beings, as enabling trust and vulnerability to be experienced safely, and as enabling clergy to negotiate boundaries better. The data from Stage Two reveal that the majority of the reflexive groups' participants from all three of the dioceses also found the reflexive groups beneficial in helping them to: feel supported, feel less isolated, gain insight and awareness, have better self-care, gain personal growth, experience vulnerability safely and negotiate boundaries in ministry better. There is some difference in the data around the ability of reflexive groups to enable difference to be respected better (D1= 87.5% & D3= 92.9%, *but* D2= 28.6%). There is some uncertainty expressed in D2 about the groups' effectiveness in enabling an improved quality of pastoral encounter (D1= 81.2% & D3= 92.9, *but* D2= 57.1%), and yet there is a clear benefit in enabling the interaction with others to be better (D1=75%, D2= 71.4% & D3= 92.9%). There is also uncertainty expressed about the groups' ability to enable trust in others to grow (D1= 62.5 & D3= 71.4%, *but* D2= 50%).

Surprisingly, given the context of the participants being clergy, the data reveal that there is a determined agenda to 'bracket off' the theological, not as a way of excluding the theological (on the assumption that spirituality is already intrinsically present in a group of clergy), but as a way of enabling participants to move from 'head' to 'heart' – from 'intellectual discussion' to 'awareness of personal process'. The avoidance of the theological may also have happened as a way of avoiding 'clashes' of churchmanship, although arguably those of differing churchmanship have much to learn from each other, including learning to respect

difference. The use of mostly non-clergy, and non-diocesan-related facilitators, may arguably have played some part in steering participants away from the spiritual - although their use as facilitators does minimise the likelihood of dual-relationships between facilitators and participants, which is also problematic; and the use of counsellors and psychotherapists to facilitate the groups may have brought in an element of the cultural suspicion of spirituality that pervades much of counselling and psychotherapy (Gubi, 2008). Yet, this bracketing off of the spiritual/theological is counter to Chandler's (2009) research, which identifies 'spiritual dryness' as a primary predictor of emotional exhaustion in clergy. It therefore seems counter-intuitive for reflexive groups not to assist in nurturing 'an ongoing and renewing relationship with God, to maintain life balance, reduce stress and avoid burnout' (p. 284). However, given the non-theological nature of the groups, the data does indicate theological growth (D1= 62.5%, D2= 71.4% & D3= 66.7%).

Limitations

These results indicate the perceived value of reflexive groups to most participants who responded to the survey. However, this cannot be made as a universal claim of their overall effectiveness, as the research is limited to the perceptions of eight Bishops' Advisors who arguably have an interest in validating the groups as they either organise or facilitate them, and the research is also limited to the participants from only three Church of England dioceses, who presumably gained from participating in the reflexive group experience so as to complete the evaluation. However, the data does reflect the views of 37 reflexive

group participants, and eight Bishops' Advisors, so cannot be simply dismissed as biased.

This research is inevitably limited by the parameters of the research. It has focussed on the benefits of reflexive groups, rather than on the limitations of, and hindrance factors found within, such groups. The research has been set within the context of the Church of England. This provided a finite number of Bishops' Advisors to interview, but it may be the case that reflexive groups happen in other denominations - although there is little suggestion of this in the literature. The research is limited by concentrating on Bishops' Advisors for Pastoral Care and Counselling who were members of the Anglican Association for Advisors in Pastoral Care and Counselling. Whilst, again, this set a workable parameter for the research, it emerged that the responsibility for reflexive groups formed part of other diocesan departments, than those for whom the Bishops' Advisors were responsible. These departments were contacted too when they came into awareness, but elicited no response. However, this indicates that reflexive groups are happening more widely in Church of England dioceses than this research has been able to fully capture. The research is limited by the response rate of the Bishops' Advisors (19%), which meant that only eight Bishops' Advisors could be interviewed. However, the research arguably engages a sufficiently representative sample of the people who organise and/or facilitate reflexive groups, and their views have been statistically substantiated through the surveys of 37 participants of reflexive groups. This has enabled the research to gain a picture of established practice in supporting clergy in ministry through the use of reflexive groups, and the benefits of reflexive groups for clergy seems

evident from this small scale research. The limitations of reflexive groups are not the focus of this article, although Miles & Proeschold-Bell (2013) indicate that they can have potential harm for some participants, and that not everyone will benefit from them.

Conclusion

This research reflects all of the benefits of reflexive groups that are demonstrated in previous research (e.g. Gubi and Korris, 2015; Francis, Robbins and Wulff, 2013; Barrett, 2010; Travis, 2008), adds to the number of perceived benefits identified in previous research, and enhances awareness of them. Given that research indicates the impoverished psychological wellbeing of clergy (e.g. Jackson-Jordan, 2013; Proeschold-Bell et al., 2011; Charlton et al., 2009; Chandler, 2009; Francis et al., 2005; Francis et al., 2004; Francis et al., 2000), it seems likely that enabling reflexive groups to run in more dioceses, and in Theological Education Institutions (or seminaries), could help in establishing mechanisms for supporting and improving psychological wellbeing and resilience among some clergy and ordinands, and for this to be engaged with earlier in the formation of ordinands. This would enable clergy to be enculturated into prioritising a more balanced attitude towards self-care and self-reflection, which can then be taken into ordained ministry as psychologically- and spiritually-healthy practice – all of which is beneficial to longer-term survival in ministry, and arguably enables better formation (Gubi, in press), preaching (Long, 2004), self-care (Burton and Burton, 2009), pastoral encounters (Kelly, 2012), missional

leadership (Diocese of Glasgow and Galloway, 2012) and regenerative practice

(Nash 2011).

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