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Supervision Styles that are Perceived and Preferred by Supervisors and Supervisees: Case Studies

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Little research exists concerning whether a supervisor and supervisee's individual preferences for a specific supervision style influences the supervisory process. By treating a supervisory style match as a mediating variable that influences the supervision outcome could open new avenues of theoretical investigation. Such information could be helpful for graduate counselor trainees with little experience with supervision. An enhanced understanding of the entire process could effectively enhance communication during each stage of the supervisory relationship.

Related Research

Many definitions exist for supervision (e.g., a result of factors encompassing one's training and disciplinary focus, an integral part of training, but different from, counseling, teaching, and consulting, though similarities exist (Bernald & Goodyear, 1998; Douce, 1989). One standard definition is that supervision is a formal process based on the relationship between supervisor and supervisee, while the former's role is to help the latter acquire appropriate professional behavior and therapeutic competence gained through, and examination of, the latter's professional activities (Hart, 1982; Loganbill et al. 1982).

Supervisors are expected to provide leadership, mentorship, and directional support toward supervisees (Roberts & Morotti, 2001), but many novice counselors think that supervisors "just tell counselors what to do," regardless of the counselors' individual needs. Many supervisory styles exist while "style" is a preference used by supervisors to help supervisees learn requisite skills and knowledge (Bernard, 1997). The decision whether to use a specific style depends on the supervisee's needs, as well as the context of the supervision experience (Bernard, 1997; Holloway, 1995). For instance, the Adaptive Counseling and Therapy (ACT) model, the emphasis is on both relationship and task behavior, and it provides four supervisory styles: (a) the Technical Director style, (b) the Teaching Mentor style, (c) the Supportive Mentor style, and (d) the Delegating Colleague style (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977).

The Technical Director style provides a high degree of direction with a minimum of support. This means the supervisor primarily provides the supervisee directions on relevant issues, whereas little attention is focused on the supervisee's feelings. For the Teaching Mentor style, supervisors focus on supervisee feelings and case conceptualizations, as well as the supervisee techniques. With the Supportive Mentor style, the supervisor focuses on supervisee feelings, not case conceptualization, and watches supervisee techniques used with clients. The Delegating Colleague style centers on the supervisor expecting his/her supervisee to exhibit an emotional awareness, as well as already possessing adequate counseling skills and techniques. During supervisory sessions, little support or direction is given (Bernard, 1997).

Empirical studies indicate beginning counselors often feel overwhelmed due to preparation for meeting clients, interaction during the sessions, and the desire to impress by displaying adequate skills. Thus, a novice counselor's anxiety could be ameliorated if the supervisory relationship suits his/her needs, while increasing his/her competency (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003).

Bernard and Goodyear (1998) wrote that supervisory roles are multifaceted, and overall, they fall into two categories: 1) supervisors providing support or 2) providing direction (Steward, Breland & Neil, 2001). Supervising novice supervisees demands a high degree of support, while specific counseling skills are demonstrated.

Methodology

The majority of published research regarding supervision is based on surveys, while the data analysis is primarily quantitative (Hart & Nance, 2003). In general, quantitative research has limitations, such as the data not providing a detailed and rich perspective. Thus, in this particular study, a qualitative study was conducted in order to examine supervision style issue from based on richer data.

Participants

Nine individuals participated in the study and all were graduate counselor trainees enrolled at a major Southeastern university. Three female, full time doctoral level students, age ranging from 33 to 69 participated as supervisors. Two majored in community counseling while one majored in rehabilitation. All possessed ample mental health professional experience, and all received supervision during their master's level work. During this study, each supervisor supervised five master's level counselors.

Six supervisees participated (three majored in community counseling, two majored in school counseling, and one majored in student affairs.) Five were female and one was male, with ages ranging from 22 to 45. Five were master's level students enrolled in the counseling skills course, while one was a practicum level student. Each was required to complete ten supervision sessions with their supervisors, with each session lasting 50 minutes.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred through two sources: (1) open-ended interviews with three doctoral level supervisors and six master's level supervisees, and (2) three videotapes of supervision sessions from each supervisor and supervisee dyad.

Interviews

The three supervisors were interviewed face-to-face based on a supervisor interview

protocol developed by the researcher, which occurred at the end of the fifth supervision session, was audio-taped, using a semi-structured interview that lasted 90 minutes. The interviews posed a series of parallel questions concerning what typical supervision session entailed, so that supervisors' and supervisees' perception of supervision style match could be compared, contrasted, and complemented with data from videotaped supervision sessions. An initial set of interview questions were developed after carefully reviewing the existed literature (Hart & Nance, 2003; Ladany, Walker, & Melincoff, 2001; Steward, Breland, & Neil, 2001). These questions were reviewed by two panel experts in the department in which one of the authors was enrolled. Before each interview, the four styles of the ACT model were explained in detail.

In order to recruit supervisee participants, we asked the supervisor participants' help in gaining their supervisees' permission to participate in this study. We randomly selected two supervisees from each supervisor, along with their permission to participate in this study. Interviews were scheduled based on the supervisee participants' convenience, with the interview occurring at the end of their fifth supervision session.

Videotaped Observation

Each supervisor and supervisee had ten videotaped supervision sessions due to each supervisee having 2 clients, with each lasting approximately fifty minutes. Three supervisor/supervisee sessions were randomly selected for the purpose of observation, focusing on the style each supervisor applied to his/her supervision session, the overall supervision effectiveness, and supervisee therapeutic skills progress.

Data Analysis

Audiotaped interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy against original recordings. Each supervisor/supervisee pair yielded 10 to 15 pages of audiotape transcripts, with a mean of 13 pages, with each being written separately to retain the holistic nature of the supervision. Each interview report was labeled based on supervisor and supervisee identity (e.g., Supervisor A, and two supervisees A1, A2). The same principle applied to supervisors B and C. In addition, each interview report was sent to supervisors and supervises for an accuracy check prior to a cross-case analysis.

Multiple sources of evidence and triangulation were employed, and a converging line of inquiry was developed to enhance validity and reliability, as well as to safeguard against researcher bias (Yin, 1984). For example, data from one source (e.g., interview) and perspective (e.g., supervisor) were compared with data from another source (e.g., videotapes) or perspective (e.g., supervisee). Interpretation based on data from several cases is more compelling than that from a single case study (Marshall, & Rossman, 1999).

Three categories were developed for data analysis. *Supervision style preference and*

match referred to the perception of supervision style by supervisors and supervisees at the beginning and end of each supervisory session. *Supervision effectiveness* referred to supervisor and supervisee supervision style match, supervision goals, and expectation similarity. *Therapeutic professional development* referred to how well supervisors' supervision style shaped their supervisees' therapeutic skills, case conceptualization, etc.

Results and Interpretation

Our results, discussed by category, include all data sources:

Supervision Style Preference and Match

The supervision style match is discussed based on the ACT model.

Supervisors and supervisees shared similarities and differences concerning certain supervision styles.

Supervisors Supervision Style Preference

Supervisors adapted their supervision style based on supervisee needs and therapeutic skills. Supervisor A stated:

"I prefer teaching the mentor style of supervision. My supervisees need a lot of direction and support---they always asked for advice.

Supervisor B stated:

"My supervisees just don't have enough confidence in the counseling session. They feel more comfortable when I actually tell them what to do. If you don't give them direction, they would feel lost."

However, supervisor C preferred the supportive mentor style:

"When my supervisees need suggestions, I would express my opinion from a different perspective, but in a way not giving direction."

Supervisee A1 is in her 40s and working on her Master's degree in school counseling:

"I don't have much experience with counseling. This is my first semester with clients and not observing. I'm a little scared to be on my own, and not sure I say the right thing to my clients.

Supervisee A2 is a male in his 30s and working on master's degree in community

counseling:

“I think it’s important to have someone guide me and give me advice. Sometimes I just want to talk to my supervisor and see what she thinks. I feel better when I talk to my supervisor first.”

Supervisee B1 is male, in his early 40s, and working on practicum:

“I always feel anxious when my session is video taped. However, when my supervisor and I watch my tape together, she stops and says, ‘now I would like you take what the client just said and paraphrase or reflect.’ I really like it because it allows me the opportunity to practice, and learn what to say in my future session.”

Supervisee C1 was in her early 20s and majored in school counseling:

“I have this client, who’s older than me, and experiencing marital problems. I don’t know what to say so I asked my supervisor to watch my tape and show me how to address the issues the client brought up in the last session. I feel better knowing my supervisor is there for me and not judging my lack of counseling skill.”

Supervisee C2 was in her early 40s and majored in student affairs: “Although I’ve worked at the career center and counseled students for the last three years, there are a lot of things I don’t know. I like supervision because my supervisor teaches me.”

Taken as a whole, the supervisors and supervisees shared similar views about supervision styles they preferred and why. While explaining their supervision style preference, supervisors appeared more concerned about supervisee needs in order to development their professional skills. Supervisees preferred certain styles for several reasons, i.e., feeling more comfortable, avoiding mistakes, and wanting to appear confident in front of the clients.

Supervision Effectiveness

Style Match

Two supervisors reported they would try to match their supervision style with their supervisees’ unique needs regardless of their (supervisors) own preference. For example, Supervisor A:

“I believe our styles match. I’ll try to convert to more of their direction, as it’s more supportive to what they are choosing to do and what they are comfortable with.

For supervisor B, everything depended on the supervisees’ therapeutic skills,

“It depends on their level. If they go to the right direction, I’m supportive, not directive. However, if a supervisee needs a lot of basic therapeutic direction. I ask the supervisee to practice paraphrase, and reflect what their clients said.”

Overall, five of the six supervisees felt that their supervision style preference matched with their supervisors. The only one not completely matching expressed developing professional skills is more important than anything else.

Supervision Goals/Expectation

All three pair of supervisor/supervisee’ goals were similar. For example, Supervisor A:

“The goal is help the supervisee become more confident so it is more supportive as a supervisor.” Meanwhile, Supervisee A1 said “I was expecting my supervisor to help me understand the case better and helps me improving my counseling skills so I can provide service to the client.”

Therapeutic Professional Development

Therapeutic Skills

All three supervisors believed their supervision style had been effectively shaped by their supervisee’s therapeutic skills. For example, supervisor A stated that she believes her style brings a sense of humor to the session and helps to eliminate supervisee anxiety. All six supervisee reported the supervision sessions helped shaped their therapeutic skills. Supervisee B2 declared, “I feel very comfortable paraphrasing or reflecting what my clients said, and that is very important.”

Case Conceptualization

All three supervisors agreed that their supervisees’ case conceptualization ability had improved, partly due to the supervision sessions. Supervisor B reported, “I always spend a great portion of time watching my supervisees’ session tape and discussing the case, so I definitely feel their case conceptualization has improved a lot.” Her supervisee (B2) confirmed that statement and said “Sometimes I don’t know if I have the right idea about what’s going on in my session, and my supervisors always watches my tape and discusses it with me, and provides me different perspective in terms of case conceptualization, and I really like that kind of guidance.”

Conclusions and Hypotheses

My data suggests that the supervisors shared similar views regarding the complex purpose of supervision style preference. The study results showed supervisee’s therapeutic skills and counseling experiences are the primary factors attributed to the

supervision style preference. In addition, supervisors believe supervision style should be flexible, realizing there is a need to adapt their supervision style as soon as their supervisee is ready. They believe that the goal of supervision is not just to help supervisees' shape their therapeutic skills, but most importantly, it helps protect the clients. For most of the supervisees, they looked for more direction from their supervisors so they could feel better prepared when counseling their clients. In this study, supervisors tried to meet their supervisees' needs and expectations through the development of a matching supervision style that supervisees preferred.

The study further showed supervisors were more likely to provide guidance when the supervisee was struggling for help, but when supervisees were not asking for direction, supervisors were more likely to show support only. Thus, it can be concluded that a supervision style match helps alleviate supervisees' negative feelings, hence, contributing to a better supervision outcome.

Our data is clear on one point: During the supervision, the client's welfare was the primary concern for both supervisee and supervisors. The supervisor prepared the supervisee to provide the best assistance to their clients by giving good counseling advice, demonstrating counseling skills, and providing clear opportunities for supervisees to learn coping mechanisms used with difficulties associated with counseling. Indeed, this study also revealed supervisees' therapeutic skills and case conceptualization improved with more supervision sessions.

Limitations of the Data

Although our findings are intriguing, they are also limited in at least two ways. First, data drawn from only nine cases at one graduate counselor training program are suggestive rather than conclusive. The supervisors and supervisees in this study were all volunteers, and dedicated to their supervision session. I have no basis for generalizations about graduate counselor trainees at other counselor programs of other institutions. Second, this study only lasted ten sessions. Hearing more stories from other supervisors, supervisees, and sampling more supervision sessions over a longer period, would certainly increase understanding regarding how supervisee needs affected how their supervisors selected certain supervision styles. Furthermore, how a supervisory style match affects supervisory relationships, as well as general supervision outcomes, i.e. reducing supervisee anxiety.

Implications and Recommendations

The study of supervisor and supervisee supervision style preferences and matches indicated several implications for counselor graduate training programs. Supervision experience can be very complicated and can cause great frustration for both supervisor and supervisee if it is not conducted sensitively and carefully. In mental health clinical training, student supervisors could learn about flexible strategies for supervision style in

response to supervisees' needs. An important component of such learning would be the supervisor's self-awareness regarding the adjustment of his/her supervision style based on the developmental progress of their supervisees. In other words, supervisors should observe their supervisees' progress and adjust their original supervision in order to have the maximum supervision outcome. In addition, supervisors and supervisees' supervision style preference might change due to the nature of supervision sessions. A curriculum focusing on this literature, highlighting the efficacy of the style preference in predicting the supervision effectiveness could be offered to counseling supervision students.

Further study might evaluate the participants' preference of supervision style twice; one at the beginning of the session, and the other one at the end of the session, rather than assessing only once.

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