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Harmonic Inquiry: A Supervision Technique for Developing Selves-Awareness

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Competence in counseling includes awareness of self and attitudes during the counseling process (American Counseling Association, 2005). Therefore, cultivating counselor self-awareness is a critical aspect of clinical supervision. The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) described best practices for supervision, which stated that supervisors should use “interventions that address a range of supervision foci, including counseling performance skills, cognitive counseling skills, case conceptualization, self-awareness, and professional behaviors” (ACES, 2011). Promoting self-awareness in supervision often calls for creative approaches that go beyond basic problem solving in an effort to engage supervisees in a more self-reflective practice. By inviting supervisees to self-reflect and focus inwardly on their clinical experiences, the supervision process itself has the potential to create a more lasting “second-order change,” or change in the change process (Fraser & Solovey, 2007). This type of enduring change can create ripple effects, transforming the counselor as well as affecting other counselor-client relationships.

Researchers have demonstrated a variety of techniques that may be helpful to stimulate counselor self-awareness during supervision, such as play therapy (Rubin & Gil, 2008), expressive arts (Bratton, Ceballos, & Sheely, 2008), sandtray (Stark, Frels, & Garza, 2011), and the use of analogies (Suthakaran, 2011). In addition, Counselman and Abernethy (2011) demonstrated the importance of monitoring and examining supervisor reactions during the supervision process as a critical component of self-awareness. In the current article, the authors wish to add to the body of literature that promotes self-

awareness in supervision by presenting one technique, called harmonic inquiry, for increasing supervisee awareness of multiple perspectives (referred to as “selves-awareness”) in the counseling process. Through the process of exploring perspectives of multiple selves during supervision, the harmonic inquiry technique has the potential to impact the course of subsequent counselor-client sessions.

Introduction to Harmonic Inquiry

A simple metaphor is helpful to illustrate the idea behind harmonic inquiry as a supervision technique. In music, three or more notes that appear to be far from each other on a scale can be brought together in such a way to create a new sound called a chord, which is both pleasing and harmonious to hear. Likewise, the process of harmonic inquiry begins by calling into question one’s beliefs from different perspectives. Through this supervision technique, the value of the original perspective is preserved, yet it is harmonized with a different, seemingly polarized perspective to create a new approach, experience, and sound.

Harmonic inquiry can be adapted and used to help counselors who may be feeling stuck, or out of balance, in their work with a client. It can be useful when the clinical work with a particular client begins to feel stagnant or redundant. The supervision technique described presents one method of creating a shift in counselor perspective that will open up new possibilities for experiencing the client and the process of therapy. Thus, this technique supports the development of self-awareness in order to benefit both counselor and client. A shift in perspective creates a subsequent shift in the movement of therapy due to the counselor’s development of a more congruent, harmonic integration of multiple perspectives and experiences of the client.

Rationale for Selves-Awareness

One must consider: When trying to increase self-awareness, which self are we asking to be more aware? Central to this supervision technique is the premise that more than one self exists in each of us at all times. Yet, one of the selves may become more dominant, thereby overpowering the valuable perspectives of the other selves. Thus, through harmonic inquiry, counselors are not only increasing their *self*-awareness, but their *selves*-awareness. Therefore, true self-awareness means becoming more aware of the way in which the selves are trying to be in harmony with each other. Conceptually, supervisors might also consider which of the counselor’s selves is showing up for supervision today – the self that is burned out and unmotivated or the self that is passionate and energetic? Harmonizing the perspectives of these multiple selves may result in a more engaged, resilient, and intuitive counselor.

Through the harmonic inquiry technique, selves-awareness is achieved by guiding counselors through an activity that allows different perspectives of their clinical work to become accessible to them. Feeling “stuck” with a client often coincides with overattachment to a single, narrow view that limits the counselor’s range of movement, causing one to feel out of balance. Furthermore, in this rigid and fixed perspective, a counselor is more likely to practice an “either/or” limited way of thinking. Harmonic inquiry promotes a “both/and” clinical approach, by creating a more integrated and

congruent experience for the counselor. In order for this technique to be most effective, it is useful for counselors to first gain greater awareness about their multiple selves or various parts of themselves, particularly when they feel that their clinical work is not going well with a client.

Theoretical Influences

Several theoretical models informed the development of the harmonic inquiry supervision technique: Internal Family Systems (Schwartz, 1995), Voice Dialogue (Stone & Stone, 1989), and The Work (Katie, 2002). Internal Family Systems suggests that the self is made up of a variety of unique and often opposing parts. When one tries to get an extreme part of the self to change, one must first identify the opposing part. Often the initial part that one seeks to change is also protecting an opposing part. By becoming more aware of the various parts of the self, a more “harmonious internal family whose members work and play together with respect and cooperation, and trust the leadership of the Self” may result (Schwartz, 1995, p. 230).

Similarly, Voice Dialogue asserts that the ego is influenced by a variety of “subpersonalities” that have the ability to take over its executive functioning (Stone & Stone, 1989). While in this position of control over the ego, the combination of subpersonalities “perceives the world in which we live, processes this information, and then directs our lives” (Stone & Stone, 1989, p. 21). Over time, by expanding awareness of the different voices or selves, the aware ego is able to develop a real choice regarding what actions (or inactions) it wishes to take. Voice Dialogue emphasizes the importance of remaining non-judgmental, and of being open and interested in each unique voice or sub-personality.

Finally, in the book titled *Loving What Is*, Katie (2002) described a clinical process called inquiry that asks people to question the truth of the subjective thoughts that influence their actions. To summarize, people have a constant flow of thoughts in their minds. Katie stated that one’s acceptance of a single thought, treating it as though it were true, will impact one’s behavior. Through inquiry, people develop the ability to recognize a thought as being true or not true. A basic tenet of Katie’s theory is that unquestioned thoughts may cause suffering, yet through the process of inquiry people can experience freedom from those thoughts. The process of self-reflective inquiry is derived from Katie’s ideas and applied to the supervision process using the harmonic inquiry technique.

The harmonic inquiry supervision technique is influenced by these three theories and takes them one step further. When used as part of the supervision process, harmonic inquiry emphasizes counselors’ thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and sensations that arise when they are in the presence of a client. This technique is less focused on meanings and interpretations of the client and more focused on the personal experience of the counselor while working with a particular client they are struggling with. The supervisor provides a guiding voice, facilitating the process of inquiry with the counselor.

Activity Description

While many supervisors have a short amount of time with their supervisees, perhaps just an hour a week, it is important to emphasize that only 30-45 minutes are

needed to use this technique effectively. The process of continued information-sharing about the client is time-consuming and, in a sense, represents one of the counselor's selves' way of seeking validation for why they are experiencing what they are experiencing with the client. Therefore, client content is not the focus of this technique. Instead, the supervisor guides the counselor through an exercise to identify the self that is producing the observations and to identify the strengths and limitations of that particular self. One major benefit of this technique is that the counselor does not need to understand or adopt the theoretical basis of harmonic inquiry or acknowledge having multiple selves. For the purposes of the activity, the selves are referred to as different perspectives or lenses for viewing the client.

It may be helpful to prepare counselors for what may be perceived as a nontraditional supervision approach. Some counselors may be more comfortable with a problem-solving approach to their work with clients. However, this supervision activity facilitates a different experience, with a focus on *looking in* at the counselor's beliefs rather than *looking out* at the information about the client. The both/and perspective of simultaneous contradictions is embraced as opposed to the either/or paradigm of linear cause and effect. Ultimately, the counselor's willingness to embrace a multifaceted approach to the client models for the client how to experience oneself in a more multidimensional way. Thus, a second-order change (Fraser & Solovey, 2007) may be achieved.

For this supervision activity, there are several characteristics that the supervisor should model to be most effective.

Nonjudgment. The supervisor should approach this exercise and the counselor with a nonjudgmental attitude. The intent is for the counselor to experience full freedom to express how they are feeling and what they are thinking when they encounter the client. Invite the counselor to be *accepting* of his/her experience – the good, the bad, the ugly – and allow it to enter the conversation.

Curiosity. The supervisor should embody a sense of curiosity and encourage this in the counselor. A sense of curiosity about the counselor's reactions, feelings, thoughts, and experiences in relationship with the client is helpful to the process.

Playfulness. The supervisor should encourage counselors to not take themselves so seriously. By modeling a sense of playfulness with one's ideas, thoughts, and feelings toward a client, the counselor will experience greater freedom to be more expressive and fully participate in the exercise.

Focus on Process. It is less important to gather information about the client case, background, or recall the content of a particular session. Rather, it is most effective for the supervisor to help the counselor focus on her or his experience while in session with the client.

To begin the harmonic inquiry activity, counselors are asked to identify a thought that is currently influencing them during the counseling session. It is likely that this thought is simultaneously influencing how they are able to be present with the particular client. This thought can be conceptualized as one of the counselors' "selves" that is having the thought. Counselors are then led through the process of identifying an alternative thought, opening them up to the perspective of a different self.

Activity Instructions

The following five questions represent the process of internal perspective-taking. After each question, additional instructions are provided for the supervisor to help the counselor answer the questions. These questions may be adapted according to the supervisor's own style or the unique case presented.

1. *How would you like your client to be different than she or he is right now?*

The supervisor should identify the counselor's thought as a lens or perspective. The supervisor may elicit the thought by inviting the use of should/shouldn't statements.

2. *When you have that thought, how does it affect you?*

While asking this question, the supervisor helps the counselor identify thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and sensations experienced while in the presence of the client.

3. *If you could not have the thought (repeat the thought), how else might you experience your client?*

The supervisor helps the counselor clearly identify the new thought or perspective about the client.

4. *Now with this new thought or perspective, how would you be with your client?*

It is important to recognize that for many counselors, this newly identified thought about the client creates a new experience. The counselor may realize that completely different or opposing feelings about the client arise based on this new perspective. Yet, moving completely over to adopt the new perspective may feel inauthentic to the counselor.

5. *If you were free to move between or harmonize these perspectives, how would you be with your client?*

The supervisor validates both perspectives presented by the counselor, recognizing the value of both positions and identifying the good intent behind the original perspective.

As counselors consider how the perspective of this "new self" helps them to experience the client differently, the supervisor should validate both selves and the intent behind their thoughts and actions, communicating that neither self is right or wrong. By identifying both selves, which have always been there, counselors are able to experience more awareness of their selves in relationship to the client. During the final step of the process, counselors should be encouraged to consider how they would like to use both of these selves in a more satisfying and harmonious way with the client. The final step also helps counselors to feel validated in their conflicted feelings, while also providing freedom to choose the stance that feels most comfortable, useful, and authentic moving forward.

The primary goal of this activity is not for counselors to gain a new and improved perspective to replace the old faulty one. Rather, the goal is to blend the perspectives of the two selves into a more diverse and inclusive "selves-awareness" that allows for a greater range of approaches, a broader presence, and more empathic ways of responding to the client.

Potential Adaptations

The harmonic inquiry activity may be used in both individual and group supervision formats. However, due to the time needed to devote to the inquiry process, it is likely that in a group format only one supervisee would move through the activity in a single supervision session. Still, other supervision group members may contribute and

benefit vicariously even if they are not presenting a client from their own caseload (Lawson, Hein, & Stuart, 2010). While having only one counselor as the focus of the activity, additional supervisees within the group can provide feedback, similar to a reflecting team (Attridge, 2007; Chang, 2010; Lowe & Guy, 1996; Prest, Darden, & Keller, 1990), having experienced and witnessed the activity. Recent research has demonstrated advantages of having peers present during supervision, such as the availability of additional perspectives and insights as well as the peers' ability to provide further support and feedback (Lawson, Hein, & Getz, 2009; Lawson, Hein, & Stuart, 2009).

The use of a recorded client session would further enhance the supervision process; however, it is not necessary or required for this technique. Harmonic inquiry is not limited to a specific counselor-client encounter. Rather, it is often useful for counselors who are experiencing in a more general way the sense of "stuckness" that can occur in the therapeutic process.

Case Example

The following dialogue presents an abbreviated example of how the harmonic inquiry technique was used in a supervision session between the co-author, G. D., and his supervisee, Betsy:

G. D.: I'd like to invite you to try an exercise with me. I hear you saying that you feel "stuck" with your client, Ava. I wonder if you are having a thought about how she should be different than she is right now?

Betsy: Well, I'd really like for her to stop being so negative. She comes in week after week and everything is just so negative! It's like she can't even enjoy the positive moments in life because she is hung up on finding and talking about the negative aspects. I want her to relax and enjoy life and the people around her.

G. D.: So when you see this client, it's almost like you are looking at her through a lens that is influenced by this thought of, "She needs to stop being so negative."

Betsy: Okay. Yeah, I think that's true.

G. D.: I wonder if we could just sort of play with the effects of that thought. How is it that you experience yourself in session with her, as you are influenced by this thought... that she needs to stop being so negative? How does it affect how you are in relationship with her?

Betsy: Well, I notice it's hard to control my facial expressions. Like it's hard to even smile when everything is so negative with her. Before it was like we were making progress, but now she's just as negative as she was before, and I feel like we are back where we started.

G. D.: So when you believe that she shouldn't be so negative, you believe that therapy isn't going anywhere. And it's hard to hide what you're thinking and feeling.

Betsy: (nodding)

G. D.: What are the feelings you have towards her when she is "being negative"?

Betsy: A cross between sad and frustrated. And I feel like I'm failing her. It's her last year of high school and our goal was that she would have a hold on these things before she went to college. So I feel like I've let her down that we haven't gotten past this.

G. D.: So you end up feeling like therapy is failing and you are no longer able to help her.

Betsy: Yes, and I feel myself wanting to take on this cheerleader role with her. Yet I don't feel like I'm coming across that way. I don't think I come across as very positive in the way I try to work with her.

G. D.: So you don't like the way you are coming across to her, in fact maybe you are sounding less-than-positive in your approach to working with her. You mentioned earlier that your intent is for your client to relax and enjoy life and those around her. I wonder if, under the influence of this thought that she shouldn't be so negative, if you are able to feel relaxed and enjoy your time with her? (*parallel process occurring...*)

Betsy: No, I'm not.

G. D.: And you fear that if she doesn't stop being so negative, that she will never enjoy life or feel relaxed. You want these good things for her.

Betsy: Yes.

G. D.: If you couldn't even have the thought, she shouldn't be so negative, what other thought or perspective might you have?

Betsy: It's hard to even imagine not having that thought.

G. D.: That's okay. Take your time. Just being able to really consider what it would be like to be with her, and not have that thought... Where would you be?

Betsy: I think... I would feel empathy. And sadness. I would think, there's this great big world out here and you can't even experience it, because you're holding so tight to the idea that everything is negative and everyone is against me. (*Betsy tightens fists and shakes them as she is talking*).

G. D.: What was that thing you did just then with your hands?

Betsy: That's like what she does. She clings so tightly to her negativity. It's like a security... it's a learned thing from her mom.

G. D.: So there would be some empathy about how tightly she holds onto it, and about the world she's missing by holding so tightly to her negativity? Is that right?

Betsy: Yes.

G. D.: So if we remain curious about this empathy and this different perspective with your client, where might that empathy take you? How might you be different with her?

Betsy: I think I might feel calmer. And my body language might be more inviting than this (*makes clenched fists again and shakes them*). (*Betsy laughing*.)

G. D.: Stop being negative so I can relax! (*G. D. being playful, laughing*).

Betsy: Yes!!

G. D.: So I just want to check this out with you. So it would feel better to you...you'd be more relaxed, you'd enjoy her more, if you were free from the thought, "she shouldn't be so negative."

Betsy: I'd really love that. And not just to get the stress off of me, but also to serve her better... in a way that feels more natural for me.

G. D.: I don't want you to get the message that you've been doing something wrong, or thinking something wrong. There's something valid and valuable in that thought you were having about "she shouldn't be so negative." I wonder if we could bring that part in... not in a way that it is dominant, but in a way that it could be more helpful or useful.

Betsy: (*long pause*) I would be... inviting the hopeful.

G. D.: Wow – that sounds like a nice step. It's in between "being negative" and "being positive." And actually, if you expected her to move fully over to "being positive," that would be the other extreme and perhaps not realistic for her.

(The remainder of the conversation concludes with what it might mean for the client to begin noticing or acknowledging hopefulness in her life and how the counselor might assist the client in this growth.)

Reflections From the Authors

In this example, I (G. D.) was really happy to see Betsy experience a shift – she visibly relaxed and experienced more self-harmony, feeling more balanced. A supervisory context had been created for her so she could tell the truth about feeling frustrated or angry with her client. The supervisory process facilitated the emergence of a different part of herself. Our process in supervision required creating a safe and validating place for the angry part of Betsy to be heard and accepted. Then Betsy was able to relax with that part of herself. Just beneath the surface of what may appear to be a power struggle, Betsy’s original intentions for the client were truly good-hearted. Those original intentions needed to be heard and validated in order for Betsy to feel acceptance of both parts of herself.

While the above example represents a dialogue between one supervisor and one counselor, harmonic inquiry can be used effectively in a group supervision format as well. I (L. F.) have used this technique in my supervision groups, which included five or six master’s-level counselors in training, and have had experiences similar to the example described above. There are two things that I have found to be intriguing about the use of this technique. The first is the powerful realization that the details of the counseling case are almost always irrelevant—of utmost importance are what supervisees are experiencing in relationship with their client, and the process of self-awareness that unfolds as a result of becoming aware of the perspectives of different selves. In a group supervision environment, the urges of fellow supervisees to “problem-solve” the case being presented may be difficult, but not impossible, to redirect. The second thing I have noticed is that there are often opportunities to explore countertransference issues with the supervisee. These opportunities present themselves readily while using this technique; however, pursuing that path is also not relevant to this technique. Instead, supervisees are guided through a process of exploring other perspectives that allows them to experience their client differently, through using a lens that was always there but had been previously overtaken by another lens that was less useful or therapeutic in its current form. As a supervisor, there is a great deal of satisfaction in seeing counselors experience a shift when they become more balanced and congruent in their experience of the client.

Measuring Progress

To further reinforce the gains in selves-awareness from the perspective shift, the supervisor should follow-up with the counselor in the next meeting to discuss what has changed in the work together. The counselor may notice changes with the specific client that was presented in supervision, or the changes may be more generalized to other areas of the counselor’s work or personal life. This is often the case with a newly broadened sense of selves-awareness.

In a follow-up supervision session in the above example, Betsy shared that she noticed being more relaxed with her client during their next counseling session. In

particular, her body language had changed. In previous sessions, Betsy reported that she had been anxiously touching her face and bouncing her leg when working with the client. But in the session following supervision, Betsy's body energy was calm and serene allowing her physical body language to align with her inner state. She also reported experiencing a sense of calmness in other areas of her work; for example, while doing an intense hour-long intake. The counselor reported that she was "better able to maintain her own balance." As a supervisor, G. D. helped Betsy integrate these changes by reflecting that, when Betsy is in a balanced state, her clients are in turn more relaxed. By becoming more aware of her different "selves" in her work with the client, Betsy changed her way of being in her work in a general manner.

Conclusion

Harmonic inquiry offers a useful approach to creating second-order change in the therapeutic work with a particular client or challenging case. To further solidify the relevance and usefulness of the harmonic inquiry technique, studies providing evidence of measurable client change or positive change in the client-counselor relationship would be helpful. Currently, specific progress can only be directly measured by evidence of the counselor's altered perspective, presence, and experience of the client in future sessions.

Harmonic inquiry is a unique supervision technique that may yield a variety of useful outcomes. Most importantly, harmonic inquiry facilitates a change in the counselor's selves-awareness that can in turn benefit the therapeutic process. Just as three different notes on the musical scale can create a beautifully satisfying sound, harmonic inquiry encourages a greater appreciation of a variety of perspectives that may be utilized together for a more congruent clinical approach. The process of looking inward rather than looking outward can lead to lasting change that will benefit the therapeutic process.

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