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Multiple Relationships in Counseling Supervision

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Abstract

Multiple relationships in counseling supervision is a complex issue that involves role conflicts, power differentials, and various ethical considerations. These relationships, however, are not always controversial and can prove beneficial if a counseling supervisor is aware of the power differential in the relationship with a supervisee. This is a dynamic topic that asks counselors to consider how this relationship may ultimately impact clients. The future trend of this topic is one that will be decided by counseling professionals. This paper explores how multiple relationships have been addressed by counseling supervisors, ethical concerns and benefits of multiple relationships, and future trends regarding this supervisory issue in the counseling profession.

The words “counseling supervision” speak to counseling and supervision; however, the multiple relationships, or dual relationships, that can exist between a supervisor-supervisee present a different set of dynamics than the therapist-client relationship (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). A dual relationship represents a scenario where a professional assumes “two roles simultaneously or sequentially with a person seeking help” (Pearson & Piazza, 1997, p. 90). For the purposes of this paper, the term multiple relationships will be used. The issue of multiple relationships in counseling supervision is a topic that is multi-layered and discussed throughout the literature (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Even with “significant discourse” on this topic, issues of resolution, ethical considerations (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009), and role conflicts linger,

which may ultimately impact the “ethical treatment of clients” (Tromski-Klingshirn & Davis, 2007, p. 294). Bernard and Goodyear (2009) noted the significance of this issue when they stated, “multiple relationships represent the broadest category of ethical challenges for the supervisor” (p. 64). This paper explores two areas of multiple relationships in counseling supervision: how multiple relationships have been addressed by counseling supervisors and future trends regarding this supervisory issue.

Multiple Relationships Addressed by Counseling Supervisors

Addressing multiple relationships within the supervisor-supervisee relationship proves to be quite different in comparison to addressing the issue within the therapist-client relationship. Ethical standards within the mental health field greatly discourage and caution therapists from engaging in multiple relationships with their clients (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). The issue of multiple relationships between supervisors and supervisees, however, tends to be more complex. It seems to be the consensus that many supervisors have more than one relationship with their supervisees, and it is thought that this situation may be unavoidable (Gottlieb, Robinson, & Younggren, 2007). Boundary crossings have been distinguished from boundary violations in an effort to more clearly define ethical components of multiple relationships (Gutheil & Simon, 2002). Research on multiple relationships and how these relationships have been handled by counseling supervisors has primarily focused on deciphering when multiple relationships become troublesome or develop into boundary violations (Gottlieb et al., 2007). Pearson and Piazza (1997) noted that these relationships are classified by the behavior rather than the development of the relationship. Pearson and Piazza developed five categories into which multiple relationships can be labeled: circumstantial or coincidental relationships, structured multiple professional roles, shifts in professional roles, personal and professional role conflicts, and the predatory professional relationship. All of the circumstances that can result in multiple relationships are likely to fall into one of these five categories, whether they are social, professional, therapeutic, or intimate relationships.

Circumstantial or Coincidental Relationships

These types of multiple relationships are inevitable at times due to coincidence or unexpected circumstance. For example, a professor’s friend may enroll in a counseling program. The professor may find that he/she is supervising this friend during the practicum/internship experience. The duality of this relationship is inevitable. Pearson and Piazza (1997) explained that there can be uncertainty about “which relationship is in effect at the time” (p. 92). The recommendation is that communication becomes a priority to address any confusion about this type of relationship.

Structured Multiple Professional Roles

These relationships are considered to be an integral part of the professional role and are prominent in counselor education and supervision. These roles are complementary and not thought to be a source of conflict or contention. The issue arises with the power differential. A situation may arise when a supervisor may take advantage of a supervisee knowing that a supervisee may agree with the supervisor solely due to the

power differential. Pearson and Piazza (1997) recommended open communication and awareness “of the roles, boundaries, and power dynamics involved in the situation to minimize the potential for harm” (p. 93).

Shifts in Professional Roles

These relationships are impacted when there is a “change or shift in organizational structure” (Pearson & Piazza, 1997, p. 94). A dual role exists in this case when two individuals are on the same relationship level. For example, a former student who becomes peers with a professor due to being hired by a university or a client becomes a coworker. An issue arises in this relationship when either party denies a power differential exists due to a preexisting relationship. A recommendation by Pearson and Piazza (1997) is to resolve issues within these roles by seeking a neutral party to discuss potential or existing conflicts.

Personal and Professional Role Conflicts

A multiple relationship can occur when there is a preexisting professional relationship that is followed by a personal relationship or personal relationship followed by a professional relationship. The dynamics that may exist in these types of relationships can be sexual, social, or with peers. These dynamics can create blurred personal and professional roles. What is crucial in addressing these issues is that the professional be forthcoming about various roles, limitations, and issues.

The Predatory Professional Relationships

In this type of relationship, a professional concerns him or herself solely with his/her needs and intentionally seduces or exploits others through means (e.g., financial or sexual). Pearson and Piazza (1997) noted that this type of professional would need to be confronted and either rehabilitated or removed from the counseling profession.

Addressing Multiple Relationships

Counseling supervisors have addressed the issue of multiple relationships simply by discussing the matter with their supervisees. A study was conducted among psychologists regarding this issue, and the majority of the participants reported having conversations with their supervisees pertaining to multiple relationships, particularly concerning social and collegial interactions (Lamb, Catanzaro, & Moorman, 2004). A multiple relationship issue that most all counseling supervisors are in agreement with is conducting therapy with supervisees. It is agreed that supervisors should not act as therapists for their supervisees (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Counseling supervisors have addressed this issue by not taking on a therapist role for their supervisees, as well as by making it clear from the onset of supervision that supervisees may be referred for therapy if supervisors deem it necessary.

Two overarching categories that multiple relationships can be placed under are sexual or non-sexual. Within sexual multiple relationships, the factors to be considered are: sexual attraction, sexual harassment, consensual but hidden sexual relationships, and intimate committed relationships (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). With the many different factors of sexual relationships between supervisors and supervisees, it is clear that

counseling supervisors have handled this type of relationship in various ways, as some have expressed their sexual attraction and engaged in sexual relationships with supervisees. Bartell and Rubin (1990) gave their opinion on the matter by saying that, “sexual involvement may further a human relationship, but it does so at the expense of the professional relationship” (p. 466). Overall, it seems as though the majority of supervisors are in agreement with this statement and address the issue by refraining from sexual relationships with their supervisees.

Many share the opinion that multiple relationships between supervisors and supervisees are virtually inevitable, and that they can in fact be rewarding relationships (Pearson & Piazza, 1997). Multiple relationships can prove to be a very challenging supervisory issue for counseling supervisors. Counseling supervisors must ask and answer the appropriate questions when considering multiple relationships to ensure that boundaries are not being violated, such as, “Would it compromise the primary supervision relationship?” (Gottlieb et al., 2007). It has been found that supervisees favor most the supervisors with whom they feel they have made a positive personal connection (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). There must be balance within the supervisory relationship. In order to do this, effective counseling supervisors have addressed the issue by creating relationships with their supervisees that feel equally personal and professional (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009).

Multiple Relationships and Ethical Concerns

Counseling supervisors, including those in private practice, agencies, schools, and other institutions, sustain an added level of liability when they take on the role of clinical supervision (Wheeler & Bertram, 2012). The ethical obligations of counseling supervisors are made clear in the *American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2014), and upholding these ethical codes within the supervisor-supervisee relationship is crucial. Counseling supervisors are legally responsible for the clinical actions of their supervisees, and this must be considered in regard to having multiple relationships in supervision. While having a collegial relationship with supervisees may encourage an open exchange of ideas, an overly friendly relationship may cause confusion (Wheeler & Bertram, 2012). It is important that the nature of the relationship is not misunderstood as there are certain situations in which counseling supervisors are required to give very specific and nonnegotiable instructions to their supervisees that must be followed (Wheeler & Bertram, 2012).

Supervisors are cautioned by the *ACA Code of Ethics* to abstain from any type of nonprofessional interaction with supervisees that may compromise the supervisory relationship (Wheeler & Bertram, 2012). Standard F.3.a. states,

Counseling supervisors clearly define and maintain ethical professional, personal, and social relationships with their supervisees. Supervisors consider the risks and benefits of extending current supervisory relationships in any form beyond conventional parameters. In extending these boundaries, supervisors take appropriate professional precautions to ensure that judgment is not impaired and that no harm occurs. (ACA, 2014)

Sexual or romantic interactions or relationships with current supervisees are prohibited (Standard F.3.b.). An ethical violation of this type may cause the client to be the ultimate victim, as the effectiveness of supervision will be compromised (Wheeler & Bertram,

2012). The 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* also prohibits supervisors from condoning or subjecting supervisees to sexual harassment (Standard F.3.c). Additionally, counseling supervisors are warned to refrain from supervising friends, family members, or “individuals with whom they have an inability to remain objective” (Standard F.3.d.). There are many legal and ethical considerations that accompany multiple relationships in counseling supervision. The ultimate guiding principle is to safeguard against circumstances that could impair the supervisor-supervisee relationship (Wheeler & Bertram, 2012).

Benefits of Multiple Relationships in Supervision

While there are many ethical concerns with multiple relationships in supervision, certain circumstances may warrant multiple relationships that can be potentially beneficial (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Within the 2005 *ACA Code of Ethics*, Standard F.3.e states,

Counseling supervisors are aware of the power differential in their relationships with supervisees. If they believe a nonprofessional relationship with a supervisee may be potentially beneficial to the supervisee, they take precautions similar to counselors working with clients. Examples of potentially beneficial interactions or relationships include attending a formal ceremony, hospital visits, providing support in a stressful event, or mutual membership in a professional association, organization, or community. (ACA, 2005)

This standard was removed in the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics*, but it serves as an example of situations that may create valuable multiple relationships between supervisors and supervisees. Multiple relationships have the possibility of creating rapport and trust in the supervisory relationship (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Creating multiple relationships that allow the opportunity for supervisors and supervisees to be human, genuine, and self-disclosing can provide supervisees a safe atmosphere to learn, make mistakes, and ultimately become better therapists (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009).

Direction and Trend of Multiple Relationships

The discussion of the direction or trend of multiple relationships in supervision is similar to how Peterson (1993) described the challenges and situations in “supervisory relationships” as “the murky pool of ambiguity” (as cited in Bernard & Goodyear, 2009, p. 63). There is clarity in the literature in regard to themes and areas of change within this issue. These points include the transition from the term “dual relationships” to the term “multiple relationships,” the propensity towards a power differential within multiple relationships, the importance of taking a proactive approach in the discussions of this issue, supervisor self-awareness, and ethical considerations (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Overall, however, the next steps to address trends in multiple relationships are ambiguous.

This presents a unique opportunity for individuals in this field, especially those who are currently serving in this role or who will be future counselor supervisors, to identify the direction in which this issue may emerge. There are several areas that

encompass multiple relationships where the application of Bloom's Taxonomy could initiate a discussion on the direction of this issue. These areas include supervisor self-awareness, instruments to evaluate this issue, opportunities for continued dialogue, and the impact of multiple relationships on clients (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009; Tromski-Klingshirn & Davis, 2007). The last competency of Bloom's Taxonomy asks for evaluation, recommendation, and critique of these areas (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009).

Throughout the literature, there is a call for continued counselor supervisor self-awareness regarding multiple relationships (Pearson & Piazza, 1997; Tromski-Klingshirn & Davis, 2007). This includes evaluation of supervisors' perceptions and interpretations of their role as a supervisor that "might impact on how they perform their role with the trainees" (Min, 2012, p. 170). Tromski-Klingshirn and Davis (2007) presented two questions in their study that encapsulate the level of awareness that supervisors in this role will need to continue to ask themselves: "What are the possible benefits and disadvantages or detriments of supervisors serving in both a clinical and an administrative capacity with the same supervisees? Under what circumstances would these benefits and detriments be evident?" (p. 297).

One avenue that could assist counselor supervisors in evaluation and awareness of multiple relationships is through the use of instruments, such as inventories, efficacy scales, and questionnaires (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Bernard and Goodyear (2009) noted that research regarding supervision "instrument development" was inadequate. These findings indicate that there is a need for the development of tools to evaluate multiple relationships.

The research also points to the need for continuous discussion in regards to several areas that encompass multiple relationships (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009; Tromski-Klingshirn & Davis, 2007). These issues include supervisor competence concerning this issue, ethical considerations, and impact on the treatment of clients. As Tromski-Klingshirn and Davis (2007) noted, "Any role conflict that arises from the dual role of clinical supervisor as administrative supervisor has the potential to inadvertently affect the ethical treatment of clients" (p. 294). Many times professionals in this field have good intentions but are limited in their awareness of the possibility of "serious ethical considerations" (Pearson & Piazza, 1997, p. 92). The research indicates that discussions around the origins of these relationships prove beneficial.

Conclusion

The topic of multiple relationships in counseling supervision is dynamic. This presents a challenge for supervisors to continue the discussion about this complex facet in counseling supervision (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Pearson and Piazza (1997) noted that these relationships are not about the development of the relationship but about the behavior. Many questions surrounding ethical considerations and role conflicts continue to surface in the supervisory setting. Counselor supervisors have to remain ever vigilant about their role in multiple relationships due to the ethical and legal ramifications that may occur. However, some multiple relationships prove beneficial, for example, in the cases of providing support during a stressful event or mutual membership in a professional association. Trends regarding this topic highlight the need for continued discussions about this topic and counselors' awareness of their role in a multiple

relationship. Further research could focus on the observation of the domino effect of multiple relationships as it filters from the supervisor to the client. With a paucity of research on the trends of this issue, an opportunity for further investigation is warranted.

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