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Article 40

Counseling Students' Experience of the Supervisory Relationship

Paper based on a program presented at the 2009 Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) Conference, October 15, 2009, San Diego, California

Yaser Madani, Nathalie Kees, Laurie Carlson, and John Littrell

Madani, Yaser, is a clinical counselor at Rocky Mountain Medical & Health Care, Inc. He is a Board Certified Professional Counselor and a life-time member with the American Psychotherapy Association. His research interests include counselor education and supervision and brief counseling.

Kees, Nathalie, is an Associate Professor at Colorado State University, in the Counseling and Career Development Program. Dr. Kees is an experienced counselor educator and teaches courses in counseling, diversity, and educational psychology. Her research interest also includes spirituality.

Carlson, Laurie, is an Associate Professor at Colorado State University, in the school counseling program. Dr. Carlson teaches school counseling, testing and assessment, and practicum courses. She is the co-author of the book *Critical Incidents in Counseling Children*.

Littrell, John, is a Professor and program chair at Colorado State University, in the Counseling and Career Development Program. Dr. Littrell is the author of the book *Brief Counseling in Action*. He teaches practicum, qualitative research, and brief counseling courses.

Introduction

Studying the relationship between supervisors and their counseling students provides a rich contextual framework that can be used to get a better understanding of a student's experiences during supervision. The supervisory relationship is characterized as mutually enriching, where the unconscious of both the supervisor and supervisee interact (Driver & Martin, 2005). Ratliff, Wampler, and Morris (2000) have characterized the interactional pattern that is seen between supervisors and their trainees as negotiation and collaboration, in which the trainees struggle to present themselves as competent and cooperative.

Supervision experience includes the supervisee's level of satisfaction. Supervisee satisfaction has been defined as supervisee's perception for the general quality of the supervision experience as it relates to his or her motivational and practical needs

(Ladany, Lehrman-Waterman, & Molinaro, 1999). "Heavy emphasis on evaluation," avoidant or indirect communication, and emphasizing shortcomings contributed to the worst supervision experiences by family therapy trainees (Anderson, Schlossberg, and Rigazio-DiGilio (2000). Similarly, presence of a facilitative relationship that showed sensitivity towards the needs of counselors-in-training was perceived as a positive supervision experience (Hutt, Scott, & King, 1983).

Efstation and Patton (1990) have observed that there is often a discrepancy between perceptions of supervisors and trainees about what goes into a supervisory relationship. For example, while many students seem to perceive their rapport with their supervisors as very important, many supervisors place their attention on the trainees' relationship with their clients. Similarly, Worthington (2006) reported a shift from focus on the supervisee's thoughts, feelings, and activities to supervisory relationship as the students advance from being a beginning counselor to the internship level.

Purpose of Study

One of the objectives of this phenomenological study was to understand and discover the evaluative nature of supervisory relationships. The results from this qualitative study provide important practical information about the relational aspects that can be used to better address the educational as well as emotional needs of trainees during supervision.

Interview Questions

To ensure the validity of the method and questions, a pilot survey was conducted to help refine and produce the questions used for interviews of this study. Interview questions that more directly related to the topic of supervisory relationship were: What is your general understanding of evaluation in the context of your supervisory relationship? What thoughts or feelings come up as you reflect on your supervisory relationship? Share some examples of things your supervisors said or did that impacted you either positively or negatively. What thoughts or feelings came up? What meanings did that have for you?

Method

A phenomenological approach in qualitative research was used for this study. A qualitative approach enabled the research author to more subjectively understand the meaning of the students' experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) in the supervisory relationship, by entering their field of perception (Hoshmand, 2005). More particularly, a phenomenological study was used to discover the "meaning of the lived experiences" for a number of individuals (Creswell, 1998). The interviews conducted for this research study were in-depth, semi-structured, and open-ended.

Participants

Participants included 20 graduate counseling students who had experienced practicum, internship, or both. The interviewees came from three universities located in the Rocky Mountain region. Six of these students had completed practicum or were doing their internship. Fourteen students were at different stages of their practicum experience.

The majority of these students identified themselves as white Caucasian. There were 16 females and 4 males in the sample population.

Procedures

In order to comply with ethical and IRB guidelines, and to reassure participants that their confidentiality was protected during and after interviews, an approved informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. The consent form included a brief description about the study as well as the participant's right to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time.

Following the collection of information through in-depth, open-ended interviews, data was analyzed using the steps set forth by Moustakas (1994):

1. Researcher reads all the verbatim transcriptions and other forms of documents carefully.
2. Significant, non-repetitive statements are then extracted from original descriptions.
3. Meanings are formulated from significant statements. This is done by thoroughly reading, and reflecting upon original significant statements in context.
4. Formulated meanings are clustered into common themes that have emerged from all of the participants' descriptions.
5. A comprehensive narrative description of the phenomenon is written which integrates the results of the analysis. This narrative is a "description of the meanings and essences of the experience" (p. 122) that is a fair representation of the group as a whole.

Verification

Creswell (1998) suggested that because of the detailed thick descriptions, the closeness to participants, and the extensive time required to analyze information in a qualitative research, such study often has an added value and strength. For such studies, he also recommended the use of the term verification over validity. Some of the steps that were taken by the research author to ensure trustworthiness of the findings included bracketing (separating) personal assumptions and instead relying on the statements from participants to increase understanding, and use of non-directional and open-ended questions, in order to avoid guiding responses.

Results and Discussions

The findings of this research study included two thematic categories. The thematic category of *general understanding of evaluation* yielded the two sub-themes of *purpose of evaluation* and *methods of evaluation*, while the category of *student's thoughts and feelings* resulted in the two themes of *being evaluated* and *the supervisory relationship*.

Interestingly, there were frequent references to various aspects of the supervisory relationship, even when the question was asking about the experience of being evaluated. This can be an indication that the two themes of evaluation and supervisory relationship are strongly interrelated. Another finding was that the theme of being evaluated seemed to create more intense, usually more negative feelings than did the theme of supervisory

relationship. For example, one of the student's statements read, "I think that it was very nerve-wracking in the beginning, especially knowing that there was someone evaluating you behind the glass."

Several students offered very useful information that indicated a high frequency of instances when the students feel strongly hesitant to be open with their supervisors. For example, one student said, "I'm not going to show her when I screw up." The significant level of inhibition on part of the supervisees was almost always accompanied by an acute level of evaluative anxiety, especially when the supervisor's reactions were not consistent or predictable. Interestingly, only a few students indicated having confidence in trusting their supervisors to have the skills and ability to share and convey negative or corrective feedback in such a way that would minimize the experience of associated negative emotions.

Quality of Supervisory Relationship

Different qualities and characteristics about supervisors and their relationship to supervisees were important in increasing or decreasing the level of evaluation anxiety supervisees experienced. For example, when the supervisees perceived their supervisors as being supportive, present, warm, open, honest, and strengths-oriented, "it really increased [their] comfort to be honest." The metaphor of a "womb" was used by a supervisee who said, "being in this very supportive womb that there's going to be growth within this womb, and that you are going to be so nourished and so safe and warm inside of it... nourishment, support, and warmth."

Supervisees who perceived the relationship with their supervisors as hierarchical, generally used negative expressions to describe their supervision experience. The metaphor of a "one-way street" was used to emphasize the importance of rapport building in the supervisory relationship.

Sharing of Self-Disclosure

Many of the supervisees expressed their appreciation for the value of a continual level of self-disclosure by the supervisors for improving the supervisory relationship. For example, it was said that, "disclosing with each other more about where we are coming from, where our ideas are coming from or even our mental state that day... helps to build relationship," enhance the relationship, and increase understanding. Likewise, supervisors were perceived by supervisees as "making the effort to be honest" and "to connect" when they took initiative to self-disclose. According to the students interviewed, an effective way to increase the trust in the supervisory relationship is through an uncomplicated sharing of self-disclosure, and by a mutual effort to get to know one another better on both a personal as well as professional level. For example, some of those interviewed affirmed that through disclosures, they came to learn that they shared similar personal or professional interests, backgrounds, outlooks about life, or even personal characteristics.

Summary

Reciprocity in the supervisory relationship creates a mutually enriching opportunity that allows both the supervisee and the supervisor to learn. In such a relationship, the supervisor is seen as providing knowledge, support, and encouragement

that serves to promote professional development and personal growth for the supervisee. This finding confirms the proposition by Steward (1998) that supervision involves both a component of teaching and a component of learning. This information adds to the importance of the working alliance as a unit of reciprocal influence. This study indicated that thinking about the experience of being evaluated by supervisors tends to bring about a lot of negative emotions for supervisees. The authors of a more recent study (Cheon, Blumer, Shih, Murphy, & Sato, 2009) also agree that the working alliance is highly predictive of supervisee level of satisfaction. Again, the importance of having open discussions between the supervisors and supervisees about their similarities and differences is emphasized. According to the current study, students benefited significantly more from the supervisory relationship when there was a continued opportunity for appropriate mutual self-disclosure.

Implications

The results from this study provide information that is useful for counselor educators as well as for counselors-in-training. For those in supervisory roles, it further highlights the importance of adopting a relational approach that is sensitive, flexible, and open to the needs of individual students. For counselors-in-training, the study provides a psycho-educational resource that affirms or otherwise normalizes many of their feelings, both positive and negative, that they experience in working with supervisors. Counseling students are encouraged to recognize themselves as important contributors in a mutually enriching professional relationship. Counseling students need to be aware of the impact their understanding of different themes and characteristics, such as evaluation, has on the supervisory relationship. Both supervisors and supervisees need to focus on keeping the communication between them open. To achieve this goal, efforts should be focused towards establishing trust, safety, and support, which was shown to be possible through the use of appropriate and ongoing self-disclosure.

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