

Supervisor-supervisee relationship and alliance

Veronika Basa¹

Abstract

The supervisory relationship is perceived to be the foundation for the work that will occur in supervision. As supervision is different from therapy, the supervision alliance is considered to be one of the elements that make up the supervisory relationship. Historically, the supervisory alliance has increasingly emerged as an essential variable in the conceptualization and conduct of the supervision experience and has been embraced as the very heart and soul of supervision.

This article, through a short review of the supervision research that has emerged over the past 50 years, addresses the two alliance perspectives that dominate supervision theory, practice, and research; the effects of certain variables on the supervisory alliance and relationship; and the implications an effective supervisory working alliance has on supervisor and supervisee, in order to achieve positive client outcome.

Keywords: *Supervisory relationship, Supervisory alliance, Supervisory working alliance, Working alliance models, Elements of supervisory relationship*

Abstrait

La relation de supervision est perçue comme la base du travail qui se déroulera dans la supervision. Comme la supervision est différente de la thérapie, l'alliance de supervision est considérée comme l'un des éléments qui constituent la relation de supervision. Historiquement, l'alliance de supervision est de plus en plus émergée comme une variable essentielle dans la conceptualisation et la conduite de l'expérience de supervision et a été adoptée comme le cœur et l'âme de la supervision.

Cet article, grâce à un bref examen de la recherche de supervision qui a émergé au cours des 50 dernières années, aborde les deux perspectives d'alliance qui dominent la théorie, la pratique et la recherche de supervision; les effets de certaines variables sur l'alliance et la relation de supervision; et les implications d'une alliance de travail de supervision efficace sur le superviseur et le supervisee, afin d'obtenir un résultat positif pour le client.

Mots clés: *Relations de supervision, Alliance de supervision, Alliance de travail de supervision, Modèles d'alliance de travail, Éléments de relation de surveillance*

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The importance of the supervisory relationship (SR) in delivering effective supervision, has been emphasized by an increasing number of supervision research in the last 5 decades (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Falender & Shafranske, 2012), supported

by the internationally accepted competency frameworks (Falender & Shafranske, 2004 US, Psychology Board of Australia 2013); and continues to be considered to be of central significance in guiding the supervision practice (Ellis, 2010; Watkins & Milne, 2014).

Supervisory Relationship

The SR may be best described as ‘an intervention provided by a more senior member of a profession to a more junior member or members of that same profession’ (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014, p.7) that is ‘evaluative, hierarchical...extends over time’ (p.9), and also serves as a way of monitoring client welfare.

A positive and strong SR is the heart/(the cornerstone) of successful work in supervision (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009, 2014; Corey et al., 2010). The supervisee’s perceived support and confidence within a SR has the potential to change their perception of their self-confidence, self-efficacy, cognitive complexity, and commitment for the profession (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998).

Supervisory Working Alliance

The term ‘alliance’ begun with Freud in 1937 (Hatcher, 2010). In mid-1960-s, Fleming and Benedek (1964,1966), introduced the term ‘learning alliance’ (LA) for psychoanalytic supervision and since became widely accepted as being crucial for and pivotal to the psychoanalytic supervision process and outcome.

Based on his therapeutic working alliance (TWA) model, Bordin (1983), proposed the ‘supervision working alliance’ (SWA) model in 1983, which consisted of three core elements: mutually agreed upon goals and tasks, and the bond or intimacy between supervisor-supervisee as they worked together towards the same goals. He also emphasised the importance of rupture and repair factors of the alliance as they play an essential role in its development and maintenance. A strong working alliance (WA) is one of the most important aspects of successful supervision and viewed this concept as pantheoretical (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014, p. 72), as a ‘collaboration to change’ (Bordin, 1983, p. 73), and transtheoretical/can be generalized to any theoretical orientation (Bordin, 1979). This means that, a strong SWA is a model that supervisees can use in building the therapeutic working relationships with their clients. For example, how the various elements of the SR are addressed by the supervisor, can be used/paralleled by supervisees as they arise in client sessions (Borders & Brown, 2005; Corey et al., 2010). With advances of technology in the counsellor training programs, supervision is currently using a variety of different formats, including cybersupervision, in which the SR and WA still plays an integral part in the success of supervision.

Bordin’s SWA model has been embraced as being of pivotal and significant importance in the supervision practice and increasingly

stimulates research in supervision (Inman & Ladany, 2008).

The Fleming/Benedek and Bordin SWA models help us understand the supervisory alliance (SA) and its development. The SA has since been embraced in other fields of mental health (Carroll, 2009, 2010; Hawkins & Shohet, 2012; Ladany, Eriedlander, & Nelson, 2005; Stoltenberg & McNeil, 2010; Watkins & Milne, 2014), and viewed as the very heart and soul of the supervision experience.

As clinical supervision is fundamentally different from therapy due to its educative function and the evaluative component, the SA model is seen as the quality of or a partial explanation of the SR (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). And, while it is widely acknowledged in the definitions and models of supervision, there are only a few definitions and models of the supervisory relationship itself (Corey et. Al., 2014).

The Developmental models (Stoltenberg, 1981; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987) focus on how supervisees change throughout training and supervised experience. Research on how the SR impacts supervisee’s development, identified that beginning supervisees’ needs are very different from those who are more advanced, and that the SR has an important role in their development and their commitment to the profession (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 1993). A weak WA results in supervisees having negative supervisory experiences with feelings of anxiety, exploitation, and self-doubt, whereas a strong WA provides a strong foundation to supervisees’ increased competence, confidence, and professionalism (Nelson & Friedlander, 2001; Bernard & Goodyear, 2014), and less ambiguity about their supervision role. (Ladany & Friedlander, 1995).

Holloway’s (1995) systems approach to supervision model (SAS), perceived as the most comprehensive of all supervision models, includes seven dimensions: 3-core factors: the SR, task, and function; and 4-contextual factors: supervisor, supervisee, client, and institution/agency. The contextual factors are seen as the basis of supervision and affect the core factors of the SR, tasks and functions. The SR is the foundation/container of supervision in which supervisors and supervisees negotiations enable supervisee’s progression of learning (Holloway, 1995).

The contextual factors involve three phases: the early phase (clarifying the nature of relationship, developing: collaboration, supervision contract, teaching interventions, competencies, and treatment plans); the mature phase (promoting bonding and individuality); and the termination phase (trainees’ better

collaboration and understanding of linking theory into practice, less need for supervisor direction, summative evaluation, and discussions of meaning of termination and associated feelings and thoughts) (Holloway, 1995).

The development of the SWA— is one of the first steps in supervision. Variables that can influence the development and the strength of the SA, include: trust, self-disclosure, transference and countertransference, parallel process, diversity, personal values, boundaries, power and authority, evaluations, supervisor-supervisee characteristics such as: attachment styles (White & Queener, 2003); Supervisors' style of supervision, the frequency of supervisor self-disclosure (Chen & Bernstein, 2000; Corey et al., 2014); personality differences between novice and experienced counsellors (Newgent, Higgins, Mulvenon, & Balkin, 2006); Supervisee anxiety over role conflict and role ambiguity (Ladany and Friedlander, 1995); culture (Nilsson and Anderson, 2004); ethnicity (Landany, Brittan-Powell, and Pannu, 1997), technology (Efstation, Patton, & Kardash, 1990).

These factors influence the development of the SWA, its maintenance, the strength of the SWA, and the overall satisfaction in supervision. 'Supervision satisfaction' is related to: changes in and the building and repair of the SWA (Ladany et al., 1992); gender, frequency of supervision, and the supervisees' perceptions of supervisory roles (Herbert & Trusty, 2006); supervisee's developmental level (Stoltenberg, McNeill & Delworth's, 1998; Stoltenberg, 1981; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987); differences in theoretical orientation, presentation style, strategies for treatment planning (Corey et al., 2014); and supervisees lack of disclosure (Ladany, Hill, Corbett, & Nutt, 1996). Changes in the supervisee's perception of the WA and supervision outcome was not only related to satisfaction but also to self-efficacy (Ladany, Ellis, & Friedlander, 1999).

The strength of the SWA is usually related to supervisees' skills acquisition and personal growth. In a poor SWA, supervisees lack in disclosure and avoid topics such as: concerns with evaluation, negative reactions to supervisor, personal issues, clinical mistakes, and general client observations (Ladany, Hill, Corbett & Nutt, 1996).

The SWA is also related to the link between supervision and therapy outcomes, the: 'client's perception of the counselling alliance and to aspects of treatment adherence' (Patton & Kivlighan, 1997, p. 108).

Support for the theory that supervision may impact client outcome came about by early literature reviews of Freitas (2002),

and further confirmed by studies of Bambling, King, Raue, Schweitzer, and Lambertm (2006).

For example, weak variations in the SWA can predict weak variations in the TWA. Bambling, King, Raue, Schweitzer, and Lambertm (2006), also found that the SWA affects the reduction of the symptom, retention of treatment, and the way clients evaluate their treatment; and concluded that a positive SWA can encourage supervisees to develop the skills necessary and make the necessary changes to establish the TWA, which in turn influences the client to do the same in order to improve their situation.

Thus, it is important that supervisors continually focus on the preservation of the SWA by regularly monitoring and evaluating the strength of the alliance, as there are many factors that can foster or hinder its development and influence counsellors' professional development, supervision outcomes, and client outcomes.

Conclusion

Over the last 50-years, the SA has emerged as a very significant factor in how supervision is conceptualised and conducted (Bordin, 1983; Falender & Shafranske, 2004; Fleming & Benedek, 1964), and has been increasingly accepted as the heart and soul of supervision that has a potential to affect the supervision outcome, how a supervisee changes through the supervision experience (Inman & Ladany, 2008), and the client outcome (Freitas, 2002 and Bambling, King, Raue, Schweitzer, and Lambertm, 2006). Throughout the psychology competency frameworks, 'forming and managing' a SA has been accepted as a 'core competency' internationally, including Australia (Falender & Shafranske, 2004, Gonsalvez & Milne, 2010; Psychology Board of Australia, 2013). The alliance is currently recognised as a pivotal factor in making the supervision work possible regardless of the model used and the field in which supervision takes place (Falender & Shafranske, 2008; Hess, Hess, & Hess, 2008; Stoltenberg & McNeil, 2010).

The aim of this article is not only to increase the readers' awareness of the importance of having an effective SR but also to influence them to use this awareness to manage its implications in order to achieve the desired supervisor, supervisee and client outcomes. For example, supervisors need to use supervision tools to monitor and evaluate the strength of the alliance on a regular basis; or supervisees who find themselves struggling with their client work may want to look into the quality of their supervisory relationship and the impact it has on their therapeutic work. ■

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Biography

Veronika Basa is the managing director of Basa Education and Counselling Services (BECS) (www.becsonline.com.au) and the founder of the International Society of Counselling and Clinical Supervisors (ISOCCS) (www.isoccs.com). She is an independent researcher (supervision), educator, and a course designer, developer, and course author, within the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF). She designed, developed and authored the first nationally accredited course in supervision in Australia, the (69828) Certificate IV in Counselling Supervision (AQF level 4, 2007-2010), and the (69795) Graduate Diploma of Counselling Supervision (AQF level 8, 2010-2015), a Nationally Accredited Course at the highest AQF level in Australia.

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