

# Counseling Supervision: A Reflective Model

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The article presents a new model of counseling supervision that integrates reflective learning theory with the concurrent development of counselors-in-training and the supervision relationship. A pedagogical framework for applying this model is introduced.

Counseling supervision is central to both counselor education and to the ongoing professional development of counselors. Although skill enhancement frequently is the specified goal, the supervision process also encourages greater self-awareness and fosters an integrated professional and personal identity related to the roles and tasks of counselors (Holloway, 1995). Various models have been proposed to assist supervisors in conceptualizing the unique dynamics of counselor development as a learning context distinctly different from counseling (Littrell, Lee-Borden, & Lorenz, 1979; Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Russell, Crimmings, & Lent, 1984; Stoltenberg, 1981; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987; Yogev, 1982).

A review of the research suggested that (a) cross theoretical models to counseling supervision portray counselors-in-training as progressing through a sequence of definitive stages while experiencing increased levels of emotional and cognitive dissonance (Borders, 1990; McNeill, Stoltenberg, & Pierce, 1985; Rabinowitz, Heppner, & Roehlke, 1986; Tracey, Ellickson, & Sherry, 1989), (b) transforming dissonant counselor-training experiences into a meaningful guide for practice is largely a factor of increased conceptual complexity and articulates the difference between novice and advanced trainees (Borders, Fong-Beyette, & Cron, 1988; Cummings, Hallberg, Martin, Slemmon, & Hiebert, 1990; Frontman & Kunkel, 1994; Haverkamp, 1994; Lutwak & Hennessy, 1982; Martin, Slemmon, Hiebert, Hallberg, & Cummings, 1989; Morran, 1986), and (c) a positive

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learning alliance (supervisory relationship) characterized by perceived levels of trust and support is a prerequisite for advanced supervisee development (Carey, Williams, & Wells, 1988; Frankel, 1990; Heppner, 1994; Kennard, Stewart, & Gluck, 1987; Ladany & Friedlander, 1995; Piercy, 1990; Wark, 1995; Worthen & McNiell, 1996). Although identifying elements consistent with supervisee development, researchers have largely ignored how supervision assists counselors in meaningfully reconstructing their clinical experiences in relation to their professional growth.

The purpose of this article is to present a new model of counseling supervision. The proposed model integrates reflective learning theory with the concurrent development of both supervisees and the supervision relationship. We propose that this pedagogical framework will assist supervisors as they work with the complex issues of the supervisory relationship.

### REFLECTIVE LEARNING APPLIED TO COUNSELOR DEVELOPMENT

Described in teacher education literature as primarily a problem-solving paradigm (Ross, 1989; Van Manen, 1977), reflective practice has been interpreted in a variety of ways (Stuessy & Naizer, 1996). First defined by Dewey (1938) as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 9), *reflective learning* is essentially the metamanagement of concentration, comprehension, and affect. Wilson, Shulman, and Richert (1987) supported this contention and added that the reflective professional must reconstruct the events, emotions, and accomplishments of a professional experience.

An emphasis on reconstructing professional experiences is central to Mezirow's (1994) belief that meaningful learning occurs only through self-examination of assumptions, patterns of interactions, and the operating premises of action. Critical self-reflection, therefore, represents the essence of transformational learning. This is summarized by Tremmel (1993), who pictured reflective learning as "a dance-like pattern, simultaneously involved in design and in playing various roles in virtual and real worlds while, at the same time, remaining detached enough to observe and feel the action that is occurring, and to respond" (p. 436). Schon (1987) viewed this as knowing-in-action and explained,

When the practitioner reflects-in-action in a case he [or she] perceives as unique, paying attention to phenomena and surfacing his [or her] intuitive understanding of them, his [or her] experimenting is at once exploratory,

move testing, and hypothesis testing. The three functions are fulfilled by the very same actions. (p. 72)

In this framework, counselors are encouraged to reflect in the moment of action when situations do not present themselves as given, and clinical direction must be constructed from events that are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain (Schon, 1983). It is this recognition of discomfort in response to professional experiences that highlights the reflective learning process and provides a context for the critical analysis of base assumptions and beliefs about clients, change, and one's practice. Providing a context that encourages supervisees to willingly explore dissonant counseling experiences and "move into the center of the learning situation, into the center of [our] own doubts" (Schon, 1987, p. 83) is the essence of a reflective supervisory relationship and necessary for counselors to shift to a higher order of conceptual processing (Mezirow, 1994).

Reflective learning as applied to counselor development and supervision can be defined, therefore, as the process whereby trainees meaningfully reconstruct counseling experiences using a repertoire of understandings, images, and actions to reframe a troubling situation so that problem solving interventions can be generated. In construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action (Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993; Mezirow, 1994), the counselor's level of consciousness through the recognition of inconsistencies or incongruities is increased.

Reflective learning is contingent on the quality of the supervisory relationship (Sexton & Whiston, 1994). It is in this "constructed interaction" that active learning occurs and knowledge of how to change behavior develops (Mahon & Altmann, 1991). This implies a cyclical supervisory interaction that aids counselors-in-training as they reflect on uncertain counseling experiences in supervision and, subsequently, reenter the counseling context with a meaningful change in perception and practice. The supervisory relationship becomes a container to review counselor's intentionality, belief, and base assumptions surrounding disorienting professional events.

This cyclical dynamic has previously been demonstrated through the research of Neufeldt, Karno, and Nelson (1996) and Worthen and McNeill (1996). These authors found that counseling supervision stemmed from a causal condition of uncertainty, which is addressed in the supervisory relationship. In this relationship, a reexamination of professional assumptions assists the supervisee in developing a metaperspective of the counseling process. As a result, a counseling supervisor is challenged to create a learning

context that enhances supervisees' skills as they construct relevant frames from which to devise effective strategies in working with clients (Holloway, 1992).

The following is a model that links these principles of reflective learning theory to the dynamics of counseling supervision and phases of supervision development. It is our belief that whether supervision is contextual, conceptual, or clinical, the uncertainty experienced by counselor trainees provides the learning dissonance necessary for developing advanced conceptual and clinical skills in supervision.

### REFLECTIVE LEARNING BASED SUPERVISION

The model (see Figure 1) outlines the sequence of supervisee development as well as the interactive reflective learning cycle between the supervisor and supervisee. Hence, as dissonant experiences are transformed into meaningful schemas and corresponding counseling skills, the supervisee develops in concert with the progression of the on-site supervision relationship. This learning alliance is illustrated as a series of four phases representing the developmental process of counseling supervision: contextual orientation, trust establishment, conceptual development, and clinical independence. Each phase of the supervisory relationship illustrates the experience of the participants (supervisor and supervisee) and the central focus for the reflective learning experience of the supervisee. The model represents a dynamic interchange that demonstrates the concurrent development of both supervisees and the supervision relationship, which in turn leads to the clinical independence of the counselor trainees. Brief descriptions of each phase and two relevant themes that are applicable to counseling supervision and counselor education follow.

#### Phase 1: Contextual Orientation

Novice counselors are plagued by guilt, anxiety, perfectionism, confusion, and anger (Friedberg & Taylor, 1994), all of which challenge supervisors to work through these thoughts and feelings so that they are able to promote professional development. In this phase, supervisees experience significant levels of emotional and cognitive dissonance as they enter the counseling climate. Areas of supervisory focus may include the following:

1. Confronting the trainee's sense of contextual urgency in orientation to the counseling relationship and over-responsibility for client welfare

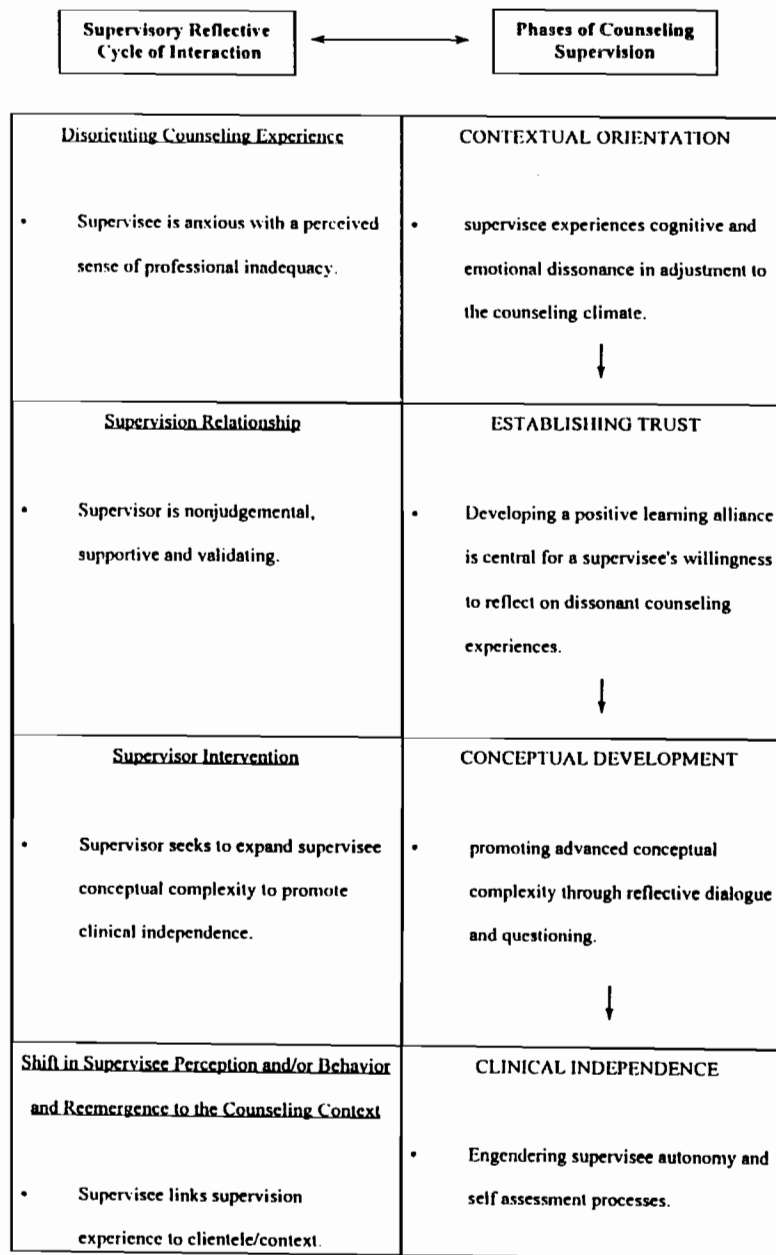


FIGURE 1

### A Model of Reflective Counseling Supervision

2. Addressing the disparity between academic understanding and clinical skill acquisition
3. The ambiguity associated with the application of ethical principles to counseling relationships

### **Phase 2: Establishing Trust**

Perceiving the counseling supervisor as supportive has been shown to be important to both the perceived level of trust (Carey et al., 1988; Frankel, 1990; Kennard et al., 1987; Wark, 1995) and the supervisee's learning and growth (Ladany & Friedlander, 1995; Worthen & McNeill, 1996). Developing and maintaining a positive learning alliance is crucial for enhancing the supervisee's willingness to reflect on the dissonant counseling experiences as well as on the conceptual and clinical demands that are essential for further counselor development.

### **Phase 3: Conceptual Development**

As trust is experienced within the supervisory dyad, the dissonance of supervisees shifts from that associated with contextual orientation to the conceptual uncertainties associated with working in a counseling site. The importance of conceptual complexity to the process of transforming early dissonant training experiences into meaningful schemas representative of advanced counselor trainees is clearly demonstrated in previous counseling supervision research (Borders & Fong, 1989; Borders et al., 1988; Cummings et al., 1990; Lutwak & Hennessy, 1982; Martin et al., 1989; Morran, 1986). Consistent with these research conclusions, this model indicates that the supervisory relationship must address trainee conceptual dissonance before it can enhance the understanding of client issues and case planning.

### **Phase 4: Clinical Independence**

In this final phase of counseling supervision, supervisees are encouraged, engendered, and supported as they develop their independence in clinical self-assessment and case planning and as they generate professional activities related to counseling. Furthermore, the supervisory relationship provides a context in which supervisees become more confident in professional risk-taking behaviors and strategies related to counseling relationships.

## **Applicability to Counseling Supervision and Education**

The goal of counseling supervision is to maintain a relational context in which supervisees transform dissonant training experiences into a meaningful guide for their professional practice. This is done by supervisors who can establish and maintain a reflective supervisory dialogue with supervisees. By assuming that supervisees need a way to think through the puzzles presented by clients (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 1993), supervisors can assist counselor-trainees in developing their skills in hypothesis generating and synthetic thinking in relation to themselves and the counseling relationship. Characteristics of a supervisory reflective dialogue are presented as is a practical framework for applying the model to the counseling supervision relationship.

### **A Reflective Supervisory Dialogue**

A primary characteristic of a reflective supervisory dialogue is a focus on thematic rather than content patterns of the supervisees' report of the counseling session. Open-ended thematic observations can prompt a shift from content review to a process-oriented supervisory conversation. Supervisors who expose counseling trainees to simultaneous tentative and opposing explanations of client/family dynamics increase the trainee's tolerance for generating and balancing multiple hypotheses. A supervisory dialogue overly focused on client content can lead to premature problem solving by the supervisor. This dynamic maintains a certain level of supervisee dependence on the supervisor's thinking process that, in turn, hampers the supervisee's confidence in his or her own conceptual abilities.

A secondary characteristic of a reflective dialogue is an emphasis on self-assessment. Central to reflective learning theory, this internal process is characterized by the trainee's ability to reflect objectively on the counseling process in relation to the needs of clients. Supervisors who encourage trainees to address the following questions promote self-assessment.

1. What hypotheses are possible for explaining the client/family needs?
2. Do you have the skills to address these needs effectively and ethically?
3. If not, what do you need to do to address this gap?

Supervisors can also promote self-assessment in supervisees by encouraging (a) an identification of goals regarding client issues

and the counseling process, and (b) an increased self-direction in identifying professional gaps and strategies for development of the skills necessary for addressing supervisors' own professional learning needs. Supervisors need to engender supervisees to reflect on their "visions of professional learning" with increased critical assessment, less self-judgment, and increased ownership for taking deliberate and appropriate professional risks.

### A Reflective Supervisory Framework

To assist supervisors in applying the precepts of this model to their work with supervisees, a pedagogical framework is presented. This seven-step reflective dialogue has been articulated in conjunction with clarifying supervisor questions and statements (see Appendix).

### CONCLUSION

Although describing reflective qualities such as self-monitoring (Haverkamp, 1994), self-instructional cognitions (Borders et al., 1988; Morran, 1986), and conceptual development (Cummings et al., 1990; Lutwak & Hennessey, 1982; Martin et al., 1989), counseling supervision research has provided little in the way of identifying strategies for enhancing the growth and development of counselors-in-training. This gap was addressed in this article by the presentation of a counselor supervision model that integrated reflective learning theory with the principles of counselor trainee development. It is hoped that future research will investigate facilitative interventions that are used by supervisors to better understand how reflective learning theory can be linked to dynamics of counseling supervision.

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## APPENDIX

### A Reflective Supervisory Framework

*Step 1: Encourage the counselor-in-training to picture a recent uncertain counseling experience.*

*Step 2: Encourage the counselor-in-training to examine related affect.*

What are you aware of feeling while picturing this counseling event?

Describe it. . . . It's like . . .

*Step 3: Encourage the critical assessment of the counselor-in-training's assumptions.*

What does it mean to you to feel this?

What advice are you giving yourself in the picture?

How do you interpret what is happening for yourself and the client? What hypotheses can you make?

Take some guesses about your intention in this counseling event.

*Step 4: Encourage the exploration of new roles.*

How would you like this experience to be different (perception and behavior)?

Take some guesses about what will be different about you when you are more on track in your role as counselor with regard to this counseling event.

*Step 5: Planning a course of action.*

What are you aware of that keeps this shift in roles from happening for you (i.e., barriers to change)?

Does this shift happen some now? What's different at those times?

*Step 6: Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementation.*

What will you need to know/accomplish/overcome for this to occur?

How might you integrate this plan into your present counseling role and context?

*Step 7: Trying out new roles.*

How will you know when you have successfully integrated this new role into your role as a counseling professional?

How will others know (clients, colleagues, etc.)?