
Group Supervision for Counsellors-in-Training

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Abstract

This paper describes the use of the group format to create quality learning conditions for counsellor trainee supervision. The author details how the effective use of group process integrates the individual skills of the supervisor, while building upon the existing skills of other group members. The advantages of this approach are individually presented and discussed. Following the presentation of a rationale for group supervision, the paper concludes with some recommendations on how supervisors can design and effectively lead such a group.

Résumé

Cet article décrit l'utilité de la formation du groupe pour créer des conditions de qualité pour la supervision de conseillers en formation. L'auteur détaille comment l'utilisation efficace du processus de groupe peut intégrer les habiletés individuelles du superviseur, tout en construisant sur les habiletés déjà présentes des autres membres du groupe. Les avantages de cette approche sont individuellement présentés et discutés. Après la présentation du cadre de référence concernant le groupe de supervision, l'article conclut avec certaines recommandations sur comment un superviseur peut organiser et conduire efficacement un tel groupe.

Supervision, whether individual or group, involves two components. These are feedback of observations, and personal development of the trainee. Ideally, the role of the supervisor includes teaching specific clinical skills as well as attending to development of supervisee self esteem and confidence.

Group supervision has not received much attention in counsellor education literature (Wendorf, Wendorf & Bond, 1985). Other topics in the area of supervision such as personal styles, similarities of expectations and trainee needs have received much more attention in the counselling journals (Bartlett, Goodyear & Bradley, 1983; Friedlander & Snyder, 1983; Hansen, Pound & Petro, 1976). Blocher (1983) and Wessler & Ellis (1983) observed that authors often make reference to some form of group supervision; but frequently this is viewed as an adjunct to individual supervision. In a search of literature on the topic of group supervision, Holloway and Johnston (1985) found only three articles (from 1967-1983) dealing with group supervision of trainees. In the review of these articles the same authors noticed that many counsellor educators simply considered supervision in a group setting synonymous with group supervision. For the purposes of this discussion, group supervision involves: (i) careful attention to design and planning, (ii) development of excellent individual communication skills, (iii) application of effective leader skills and (iv) ongoing attention to the stage development of the group. Holloway and Johnson (1985) concluded that it is "imperative that authors and researchers of supervision

begin a systematic examination of the group supervision process” (p. 388).

The purpose of this paper is to consider the contributions of key components of group theory and practice for group supervision of counsellors-in-training. Having used a group supervision approach for a number of years the author has identified distinct merits.

Some Advantages of Group Supervision

Unlike individual supervision, groups provide for the possibility of direct peer support. Putting students together in a group, whether they will be evaluated on an individual or group basis, enables a sharing of common concerns. Initial cohesion often becomes the subsequent basis for group support and the development of trust. Greater trust encourages cooperativeness which has been shown to increase productivity and achievement in groups with set goals (Gibb, 1961). Multiple sources of support are available in the group for the learner when risk taking is required. Lieberman, Lakin and Whitaker, (1968) and Schutz (1958) have indicated that with high levels of acceptance and support within a group, risk taking and self disclosure increases. Blocher (1983) indicates that the group is a particularly important source of support for fledgling counsellors in this regard.

Receiving supervision in a group tends to be less intense than the one-to-one situation. The focus and attention on what the trainee does tends to be more diffuse as what is being presented frequently applies to others. A feeling of being “in the same boat” can help build a sense of mutual support. For many, self evaluation and self disclosure to a group of peers is easier than in the presence of a supervisor only. According to Johnson and Johnson (1987) feedback in the group “. . . feels less dramatic and less anxiety-laden” (p. 382). Reduced interpersonal intensity promotes a greater sense of relaxation in the learning process. Projections by both parties (supervisor and trainee) are more easily identified and readily checked when others are present during this process.

Groups provide an ideal opportunity for modelling or imitation learning to occur among peers. Observational learning is particularly helpful when others in the group identify with the needs and/or goals of the trainee who is receiving input from the supervisor. With several present in a session, trainees can observe, then adapt their own approaches to what the supervisor is doing. They can also view alternate approaches used to achieve the same goal for the client taking into account the differing learning styles operating among the students. Critical analysis and discussion of specific cases is often richer and more spontaneous when several people are participating in this approach than in the one-to-one situation.

Leader modelling of core counselling methods and interventions in

the group can be a very efficient use of instructional time. A prepared demonstration of a particular intervention or approach need only be presented once for several others to learn. The additional time freed up can be used by the supervisor observing and doing corrective teaching with those who most need it. Frequently, supervisors can supplement their own teaching when a particularly skillful approach is presented by one of the students. A peer who is skilled is often seen to be a more credible model in the eyes of others, than is a supervisor who may appear as too expert. As Bandura (1976) found in his research, the closer the model resembles the learner in certain traits, the greater the likelihood of accurate imitation.

Arranging behavioural rehearsals of certain counselling interventions is much easier and more effective within the group than in a one-to-one context. This is due, to a large extent, to the greater range of opportunity for differing roles. Very often, certain members, due to their own life experiences and/or personalities can simulate actual client cases with remarkable closeness. Of course the more often the leader uses this type of highly interactive role play or rehearsal approach within the group, the greater the degree of inclusion and acceptance will be among the members.

The group setting is an ideal place for supervisors to encourage members to make commitments to practice certain skills or interventions within or between sessions. Contracts for individual change and development made in a group context have a greater likelihood of being carried out than those agreed to with one other (Argyris, 1970; Corey & Corey, 1982). Group members can help others amend or modify their contracts for change to be more realistic, thereby increasing their chance of success.

Multiple reinforcement for the learner in the group also provides for a variety of sources of feedback (Lieberman, Lakin & Whitaker, 1968). When a supervisee presents a case or intervention well, praise from several has more impact than from one other. Even though the supervisor's evaluation certainly carries more weight than that of a peer, the combination of both can be especially useful in shaping behaviour.

A final important advantage of this approach is found in the process observations which can be made by the leader on the group dynamics present. Such observations provide excellent possibilities for extrapolation on how to set up and run group counselling sessions.

Potential Negative Issues in Group Supervision

There are some potential negative issues involved in using the group approach to supervision. In some situations the group format may be counterproductive in that heightened individual attention may be indicated for certain trainees. Unless the group is well managed initially, a norm of competitiveness can emerge which can block trust formation

and decrease amounts of member support. Finally, the issue of client confidentiality can be more difficult to ensure when several people are involved in the review of cases.

The Foundation for Development of Effective Group Supervision

In establishing effective groups for supervision it is recommended that specific aspects from the theory of groups (group processes, leadership and stage development) be adopted by the instructor.

The literature on group theory development (Bradford, Gibb & Benne, 1964; Gazda & Ohlsen, 1961; Johnston & Johnston, 1987; Lieberman, Yalom & Miles, 1973; Schein & Bennis, 1965) has shown how groups can be highly effective learning units. Basic needs of group members, and what is needed for them to function effectively are identified in these group theories. Stages of group development are outlined, along with the approaches leaders can take to move groups through these stages toward a mature stage of productivity. It quickly becomes apparent that the needs of learners in groups and the stated conditions needed to meet these are very similar to those of the counsellor trainee expectations in supervision (Holloway & Wampold, 1983; Kirchner, 1974; Leddick & Dye, 1987).

Basic Recommendations for the Counsellor Educator

Some specific suggestions arising out of the above discussion for how to develop a group supervision format are given below:

- 1) Establish, early on in the group, norms which protect confidentiality of participants, ensure use of the basic communication skills and reinforce the need to follow stated guidelines for giving and receiving feedback.
- 2) Establish group cohesion and inclusion among members in the initial stage of the group so members quickly feel they belong and will be supported. Such inclusion activities will contribute to a sense of cooperativeness and reduce learner defensiveness and competitiveness.
- 3) Help members articulate clearly to the group what individual goals each has. Indicate in what specific ways other members (including the supervisor) may assist them in achieving their goals.
- 4) Lay out a clear structure for how the sessions will be conducted and the basis of evaluation. The supervisor should describe expectations on the supervisee in presenting and reviewing cases, the role of others in providing support and feedback, and the responsibilities of the supervisor. Lack of specificity in these areas leads to increased member anxiety and defensiveness.
- 5) It is imperative that the leader model all of the skills and interventions that others are required to use. It is not only an efficient way to teach the essential clinical skills, but it also serves to increase supervisor

credibility tremendously in the eyes of the group members. Holloway (1982) and Worthington (1984) found that trainees had a strong preference for modelling from others — primarily the supervisor — as it contributed to their willingness to risk and practice skills.

6) Apply essential group leadership skills, such as initiating, limiting, blocking, encouraging etc., within the group in order to: (a) effectively manage group interactions, (b) prevent and/or resolve interpersonal conflict and (c) to promote the individual development of each member in the group. Pearson (1981) provides an excellent summary of basic skills for group leadership for counsellor educators.

CONCLUSION

The group approach is an important form of supervision for the preparation of counsellors. This paper has attempted to present a rationale for the use of group process in counsellor education. Key components involved have been provided along with some basic recommendations for the delivery of effective group supervision.

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