Professional Issues

Supervisory Working Alliance: A Model Providing Direction for College Counseling Supervision

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This article presents an overview of the Supervisory Working Alliance Model (E. S. Bordin, 1983) and related research. The author proposes an extension of the model by applying it to evaluation and multicultural competency. The following major advantages of the model for supervision in college counseling centers are discussed: (a) model's transtheoretical nature, (b) model's compatibility with alternate models, (c) model's conduciveness toward multiculturally competent supervision, and (d) model's utility in evaluation.

College counselors are often called on to conduct counseling supervision. Counseling centers at colleges and universities are popular practicum and internship placements for counselor education programs (Dorn, 1979; Gloria, Castillo, Choi-Pearson, & Rangel, 1997). There may be more opportunities for the practice of supervision during internships at college counseling centers compared with agency internships (Scott, Ingram, Vitanza, & Smith, 2000). Moreover, counselors in college counseling centers (Borders & Usher, 1992) and in community college centers (Coll, 1995) indicate a desire for counseling supervision.

Unfortunately, many master's-level counselor education programs lack courses on counseling supervision (Borders & Leddick, 1988), and states often fail to require a background in supervision for counselor licensure (Borders & Cashwell, 1992). The professional literature has identified the lack of training in supervision as a serious “gap” in the profession (Hoffman, 1994; Russel & Petrie, 1994). Some counselors in college counseling centers, then, may be called on to supervise counseling interns and other counselors despite having had little or no specific training in counseling supervision.

Counselors in college counseling centers are faced with several challenges in regard to supervision. Novice counselors bring different levels of training and/or experience as well as differing theoretical orientations. Counseling supervision should also recognize the needs of diverse populations, be culturally responsive, and foster multiculturally competent practice. Moreover, college counselors need a supervision model that assists with the arduous task of evaluation. As a supervision model that addresses these special considerations, the Supervisory Working Alliance Model (Bordin, 1983) has utility for college counselors and directors of counseling centers.

In this article, I propose the Supervisory Working Alliance Model (Bordin, 1983) as a means for college counseling supervisors to understand and struc-
ture counseling supervision. I describe the components of the working alliance within the context of supervision; the adaptability of the model for the needs of college counseling supervisors; the relevant research; and, finally, the potential limitations of the model in the college counseling setting.

Supervisory Working Alliance Model

There are several different supervision models available for counselor supervisors. Social role models, such as the discrimination model (Bernard, 1979), emphasize specific functions and roles of the counseling supervisor. Developmental models (Stoltenberg, 1981; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987) focus on how supervisees change throughout training and supervised experience. Holloway's (1995) systems approach to supervision (SAS) model is perhaps the most comprehensive of all supervision models. The SAS model takes into account seven empirically derived dimensions that interact as part of a complex process affecting the core factor of the supervision relationship and supervision tasks and functions. As a more straightforward heuristic, the supervisory working alliance (Bordin, 1983) can be conceptualized as a model for supervision (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998) and used as a framework providing direction for what occurs during counseling supervision. I propose the extension of the Supervisory Working Alliance Model by incorporating evaluation and multicultural competency considerations into its use.

The Supervisory Working Alliance Model (Bordin, 1983) has several advantages for counselors working in college counseling centers. This model affords both versatility and parsimonious use. As a supervision model, it is simple to understand and easy to use in supervision, enabling it to be used by counseling supervisors with little or no formal training in supervision. In addition, the supervisory working alliance can be used in a transtheoretical fashion—allowing for the incorporation of different counseling and supervision theory. As counseling supervisors gain more training and experience, the more complex supervision models can be used in conjunction with the Supervisory Working Alliance Model. For these reasons, the Supervisory Working Alliance Model lends itself to use by supervisors in college counseling settings.

Components of the Supervisory Working Alliance

The working alliance as a psychological construct stems from the psychoanalytic approach to therapy. Working alliance theory as a theory of counseling and psychotherapy was initially developed by Edward Bordin (Bordin, 1979; Dykeman, 1995; Horvath & Greenberg, 1994). Bordin's working alliance theory is the conceptual foundation of the Supervisory Working Alliance Model (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998; Bordin, 1979, 1983; Bradley & Ladany, 2001). The Supervisory Working Alliance Model was originally proposed by Bordin (1983) as an application of working alliance theory to the supervision process.
Working alliance theory explores the nature of the therapeutic alliance in the counseling relationship. There are three major components of the working alliance: goals, tasks, and bond. Building a strong working alliance involves mutual agreement and understanding regarding the goals sought in the change process and the tasks of each partner. In addition, it involves the development of a strong emotional bond between the counselor and the client. The Supervisory Working Alliance Model (Bordin, 1983) applies working alliance theory and the goal, task, and bond constructs to the supervisory relationship.

Figure 1 gives a visual representation of the Supervisory Working Alliance Model. As the figure illustrates, the supervisor and supervisee must have a common articulation of the goals of supervision. These goals must be established through negotiation during initial supervision sessions. The tasks of supervision must be in line with those goals, and, again, there must be a common definition and consistent agreement on said tasks. The emotional bond between the supervisor and supervisee provides the support necessary to sustain the work done in supervision.

Goals

The goals in the supervisory working alliance are defined as objectives for change or outcomes, mutually endorsed and valued by supervisor and trainee. Goals refer to the extent to which the supervisor and supervisee agree about and invest in the desired counselor improvement and outcomes of the supervi-
sion. As Figure 1 illustrates, formulating these goals is a collaborative process between the supervisor and supervisee in which change goals are negotiated until reaching mutual agreement. Thus, there is a collaborative process to establish which goals take precedence. This is done in consideration of the supervisee’s individual needs, interests, and developmental level.

Bordin (1983) outlined eight goals that he maintained are the core goals of the supervisory relationship. Regarding the first proposed goal, “mastery of skills” (p. 37), those skills that become outcome goals of supervision can be determined by the supervisor/supervisee conjointly. Together the supervisor and supervisee can prioritize the mastery of specific skills and subsequent outcome goals. For example, a supervisor and supervisee might prioritize “reflection of feeling” as a specific counseling skill for a trainee to master.

### Tasks

In a similar fashion, the supervisor seeks mutual agreement with the supervisee regarding those tasks that they will engage in to reach their established supervision outcome goals. When specific skills are designated as goals, the supervisor should give feedback on the supervisee’s movement toward mastering those skills. The mode of delivery of this feedback can also be mutually established between the supervisor and supervisee. For example, many supervisors use feedback forms that provide supervisees with specific information regarding their progress.

The supervisor and supervisee can share responsibility in adhering to these tasks. Because of the imbalance in power, the supervisor needs to make efforts to share power with the supervisee; this includes checking in with the supervisee about his or her feelings regarding the current tasks and determining if predetermined tasks are the most salient for the present supervision meeting. In sharing responsibility regarding tasks of supervision, it is important to be cognizant of the emotional bond between the supervisor and supervisee because this influences the mutual establishment of goals and subsequent tasks.

### Bond

The extent to which the supervisor and supervisee trust each other, respect one another, and care for each other is known as the bond. These feelings of liking, caring, and trusting will be strengthened by sharing the experience of supervision and mutually agreeing on the goals and tasks therein (Bradley & Ladany, 2001). Ultimately, these essential elements affect whether positive change occurs throughout the process of supervision; “the amount of change is based on the building and repair of strong alliances” (Bordin, 1983, p. 36).

### Adaptability of the Supervisory Working Alliance Model

The Supervisory Working Alliance Model (Bordin, 1983) is adaptable to the needs of supervisors in college counseling centers because it holds the follow-
ing four advantages over other approaches: (a) model’s transtheoretical nature, (b) model’s compatibility with alternate models, (c) model’s conduciveness toward multiculturally competent supervision, and (d) model’s utility in evaluation.

Model’s Transtheoretical Nature
The working alliance model has been discussed as transtheoretical (Bordin, 1983; Horvath & Greenberg, 1994). The model is transtheoretical in the sense that it can be used with different theoretical approaches. The supervisory working alliance can be used with psychotherapy-based models of supervision. In a cognitive model of supervision, techniques such as mental practice, covert modeling, and cognitive modeling can be used within the supervisory working alliance frame (Bradley & Ladany, 2001). Similarly, a psychodynamic model of supervision might place an emphasis on parallel process and interpersonal dynamics, again within the supervisory working alliance framework. Both goals and tasks can then be adjusted to incorporate different theoretical approaches.

Model’s Compatibility With Alternate Models
Just as the Supervisory Working Alliance Model (Bordin, 1983) can be adapted to different theoretical models, it can also be used with alternate models of supervision. The use of models in conjunction with the supervisory working alliance can help guide a supervisor in selecting appropriate supervisor roles. For example, the discrimination model (Bernard, 1979) can be used to help the supervisor and supervisee identify the focus of supervision. Bernard organized her model into three areas of focus: intervention, conceptualization, and personalization (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998, p. 29). Each area of focus also has three potential supervisor roles: teacher, counselor, and consultant. Depending on a supervisee’s needs, there are different areas of focus and subsequently different roles for the supervisor. This model, then, could be used with the supervisory working alliance to help match relevant tasks to appropriate goals, as well as helping a supervisor choose appropriate roles for use with those tasks.

Model’s Conduciveness Toward Multiculturally Competent Supervision
Also essential in any model of supervision is the standard of multicultural competence (American Psychological Association [APA], 2003; Ladany, Brittan-Powell, & Pannu, 1997; Ladany, Inman, Constantine, & Hofheinz, 1997; Neufeldt, 1999). Certainly, the Supervisory Working Alliance Model (Bordin, 1983) affords the opportunity to incorporate multicultural counseling competencies (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992) into the goals for supervision and to address the influence of cultural differences as a task in supervision.

Due to its collaborative nature, the Supervisory Working Alliance Model (Bordin, 1983) is better able to address cross-cultural issues than are other models. Necessary in the process of establishing goals and tasks as well as developing a
supervisor-supervisee bond is the understanding of each other’s cultural background and worldview (Sue & Sue, 1999). Ashby and Cheatham (1996) advocated using a “worldview” (p. 50) sensitivity with supervisees, in which supervisors should work to be aware of shared understandings of cultural worldviews between supervisor and supervisee just as they should be aware of culturally based conflicting worldviews. Because the very process of establishing goals and tasks in supervision necessitates the consideration of the respective cultural backgrounds of counselor and supervisor, the Supervisory Working Alliance Model, in essence, models multicultural counseling competencies.

My experience with a supervisee several years ago illustrates how multicultural competencies can be achieved using the Supervisory Working Alliance Model (Bordin, 1983). After discussing how gender, culture, and race/ethnicity might affect the work in supervision, the supervisee and I (as her supervisor) negotiated the goal of being able to articulate the influence of the supervisee’s cultural worldview on her case conceptualization of clients (also a multicultural counseling competency as identified by Sue et al., 1992, and APA, 2003). Toward this goal, the supervisee and I negotiated tasks to be done both within and outside of supervision sessions. Each supervision session devoted time to discussing the supervisee’s worldview as a counselor and its potential influence on the case conceptualization of the videotaped client under review. Similarly, the supervisee and I, together, noted cross-cultural communication issues occurring in the session. Outside the session, the supervisee completed additional readings on racial/ethnic identity development (Helms & Cook, 1999) dimensions of worldview (Sue & Sue, 1999) and “journalled” about her personal cultural identity. I completed readings on the sociopolitical history of Nicaragua (the supervisee’s country of origin) and readings by several Latina authors recommended by the supervisee as resonating with her personal experience. Thus, the Supervisory Working Alliance Model can be used not only to improve the multicultural competence of supervisees but to improve the cultural responsiveness of supervisors.

Model’s Utility in Evaluation

A final important consideration regarding the supervisory working alliance is the concept of evaluation. Interventions regarding the establishment of mutually agreed-upon goals can help make the necessary task of evaluation a process that strengthens the supervisory working alliance.

A key feature of the working alliance is the explicitness of goals. A supervisor can spend time with a supervisee exploring the trainee’s view of a competent counselor. The supervisor and supervisee can then make connections between those competencies and expected outcomes for the supervisee’s practicum or internship. In this way, agreement on goals is fostered.

The supervisor and supervisee can then examine the process of evaluation and determine how the task of evaluation relates to the achievement of those goals. Through this process, the supervisee “buys-in” to both the evaluation criteria and the process of evaluation.
In sound evaluation, the supervisee performance objectives are clear, the performance indicators are clear to both the supervisor and supervisee, and the performance indicators have a clear relationship to the mutually agreed-upon goals. If the relationship between the performance evaluation and the articulated goals is unclear, this will become evident when the supervisor and supervisee engage in the evaluation process. If the supervisor is unable to articulate the connection between the evaluation and expected counselor/trainee outcomes (or if there are identifiable gaps between the two), the supervisor has an opportunity to improve the process and refine the outcome expectations with the supervisee.

An additional supervisory working alliance intervention (task) regarding evaluation involves conducting the evaluation together. Using set criteria, the supervisor and supervisee can sit down together and go through the evaluation process with dual input. It is especially helpful to discuss any discrepancies between supervisor and supervisee evaluation items. In this fashion, it is possible not only to identify areas in need of improvement but also to resolve differences in perception regarding the counselor's skills.

**Instruments.** Some standardized instruments also afford an evaluation of the working alliance. Development of the Working Alliance Inventory (WAI; Horvath & Greenberg, 1989) has allowed standardized investigation of the transtheoretical conceptualization of the working alliance (Dykeman, 1995). The WAI has been shown to be a reliable and valid measure (Hanson, Curry, & Bandalos, 2002; Tracey & Kokotovic, 1989). Moreover, ratings using the WAI and a 12-item short form (Busseri & Tyler, 2003) of the WAI with college counseling center clients and therapists were highly correlated. The WAI or similar instruments can be used in supervision by changing the references to therapist and client to supervisor and supervisee.

In addition, several supervisory versions of the WAI have been created. Efstation, Patton, and Kardash (1990) created the Supervisory Working Alliance Inventory (SWAI), which is composed of a 23-item supervisor scale and a 19-item supervisee scale that have demonstrated good validity across the working alliance constructs (Patton, Brossart, Gehlert, Gold, & Jackson, 1992). The SWAI is available in the Bernard and Goodyear (1998) text on clinical supervision. Smith, Younes, and Lichtenberg (2002) developed the Working Alliance Inventory–Supervisory Relationship (WAI-SR) to investigate how the supervisory relationship develops in regard to goal, task, and bond. Although there is no evidence to suggest the overwhelming efficacy of any of these instruments over the others, these instruments offer a means to evaluate the status of the supervisory working alliance during or after clinical supervision. Exploring the current status of the supervisory working alliance can be a form of formative evaluation during the supervisory process.

**Research.** There has been a variety of research done on both the working alliance and the supervisory working alliance. Horvath and Symonds (1991) conducted a meta-analysis of 24 studies investigating the relationship of the working alliance to
therapy outcome. This meta-analysis discerned a reliable association between a good working alliance and positive outcomes from therapy. Horvath and Greenberg (1994) expanded the previous meta-analysis and produced similar findings. It is interesting that empirical evidence suggests that a counseling trainee’s perception of the supervisory working alliance is positively related to a client’s perception of the counseling working alliance (Patton & Kivlighan, 1997).

Current evidence suggests that supervisees would respond well to an emphasis on the working alliance in supervisory relationships. Usher and Borders (1993) determined that supervisees have a preference for a supervisor who is collegial and relationship oriented. Ladany and Friedlander (1995) discovered that a stronger supervisory working alliance was predictive of less counselor trainee role conflict and less ambiguity in supervision. White and Queener (2003) determined that supervisors’ ability to make healthy adult attachments was predictive of the strength of the supervisory working alliance. Furthermore, Ladany, Ellis, and Friedlander (1999) discovered that improvements in the emotional bond between supervisees and supervisors were associated with greater trainee satisfaction. Similar results indicate that trainees and supervisors do not differ in their ratings of goals, bonds, or session impact, despite unresolved weakening of the supervisory working alliance (Burke, Goodyear, & Guzzard, 1998).

Some research indicates the influence of various factors on the supervisory working alliance. Ladany and Lehrman-Waterman (1999) determined in their study that the more supervisors made self-disclosures, the more supervisees perceived agreement on the goals and tasks of supervision and the stronger the emotional bond. Similarly, supervisors’ self-perceptions of supervisory style are related to their perceptions of agreement on goals and tasks in supervision (Ladany, Walker, & Melincoff, 2001). Ramos-Sanchez et al. (2002) found that supervisee developmental level was positively related to supervisory working alliance and satisfaction. Moreover, supervisees who reported negative events in supervision (such as differences in interpersonal relationships, supervision tasks, theoretical orientation, ethical violation, or multicultural incompetence) had weaker supervisory alliances and less satisfaction with supervision and reported that supervision adversely influenced their current training experience. Other studies have determined that when a supervisor and supervisee discuss cultural variables such as race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, supervisees report significantly higher satisfaction with supervision and an enhanced working alliance (Gatmon et al., 2001). Unfortunately, Gatmon et al. also found that supervisory discussions about culture do not occur frequently. Future research is needed to explore the working alliance’s impact on cross-cultural supervision and the use of the Supervisory Working Alliance Model (Bordin, 1983) in conjunction with other models of supervision, as well as determining which elements of the supervisory working alliance seem to take precedence for novice trainees versus more experienced counselors.

Limitations

The transtheoretical nature, the adaptability to alternate models/theory, the ability to foster multiculturally competent supervision, the ability to make evaluation
salient for the supervisee, and the research on the Supervisory Working Alliance Model (Bordin, 1983) in college counseling centers point toward the advantages of the model. There may, however, be several disadvantages for college counseling supervisors. The Supervisory Working Alliance Model clearly hinges on the ability of the supervisor and supervisee to negotiate and agree upon specific goals for supervision. This is clearly a time-intensive endeavor and may be beyond the immediate resources of a supervisor in a college counseling center.

There may be factors present in college counseling supervision that may impede essential elements of the Supervisory Working Alliance Model (Bordin, 1983). Many colleges require a uniform evaluation procedure for employees. This required evaluation procedure might be challenging to adapt for use in conjunction with the Supervisory Working Alliance Model. Thus, the college counseling supervisor may have to work with the supervisee to incorporate the college requirements into the goal-setting process in ways that are salient and meaningful for the supervisee. Similarly, graduate programs also require formal evaluation procedures for students, and again this may limit the ability of a supervisor to use the Supervisory Working Alliance Model in the evaluation process. Although every supervision model has limitations, models of supervision can be a useful heuristic for understanding and guiding the supervision process (Borders, 2001). As such, the Supervisory Working Alliance Model can assist college counselors engaged in the challenging task of counseling supervision.

References


