Systemic Approaches to Clinical Supervision and its Cultural Implications

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Abstract

Clinical Supervision guides counselors and therapists to ensure competence and ethical practice (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Systemic and culturally affirming supervision spaces have been shown to effectively supervise and teach junior-level clinicians and students (Ancis & Landy, 2010; Christiansen et al., 2011; Inman, 2006; Inman & Landy, 2014; Lawless et al., 2001). Supervision models provide tools to assist supervisors in their pedagogical approaches to counselors and therapists, aiding their matriculation as licensed clinicians (Holloway, 2016). However, there are cultural barriers to consider within the supervision process, such as clinicians who do not share the supervisor's cultural background. This paper will address the cultural aspects of supervision from a systemic approach and provide a basis for developing culturally affirming supervision tools within systemic models of supervision.

Introduction

Supervision is a systemic intervention between senior and junior-level clinicians (Benard & Goodyear, 2019). The development of the clinician, the safety of the client, and gatekeeping are significant concepts in the supervisor-supervisee relationship (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Systems approaches to clinical supervision have been broken into "clusters" which include four main groupings: (1) relationship; (2) supervisor and supervisee; (3) contextual dimensions; and (4) process dimensions (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Holloway, 2016).

However, supervisors' cultural competency and ability to foster culturally affirming supervision spaces may have implications for the overall success of junior-level clinicians (Sepideh et al., 2014).

Supervisor Multicultural Competence is "the supervisor's ability to address and facilitate cultural discussions in supervision; incorporate culturally sensitive interventions, assessments, client conceptualizations; and evaluate the multicultural competence of her or his supervisee" (Sepideh et al., 2014). The supervisors' ability to "initiate discussions and practices that address multicultural competence, both for the benefits of the therapist and the client" is integral to the context of supervision (Inman & Landy, 2014; Mori et al., 2009).

Additionally, "the effectiveness of supervisors' ability to impart such knowledge is contingent on the supervisees' perception of their supervisors and supervision experiences (Inman, 2006; Sepideh et al., 2014). Literature has identified that "supervisor self-awareness, genuineness in sharing personal cultural struggles, and openness to discussing cultural and racial factors" are crucial to providing culturally affirming supervisory relationships (Ancis & Landy, 2010; Christiansen et al., 2011; Inman, 2006; Inman & Landy, 2014; Lawless et al., 2001).

This paper will explore systemic supervision models as my chosen supervision model and approach, review a theoretical foundation and central tents of the approach, provide research supporting systemic models' validity and effectiveness, and describe ethical considerations of systemic models and their application through a culturally affirming lens.

Relevance and Appropriateness of Systemic Approaches

Systems approaches to supervision (SAS) utilize seven dimensions that serve as a "road map" for supervisors as they navigate supervision (Holloway, 1995, 2016; Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). The figure below illustrates the dimensions (Holloway, 2016):
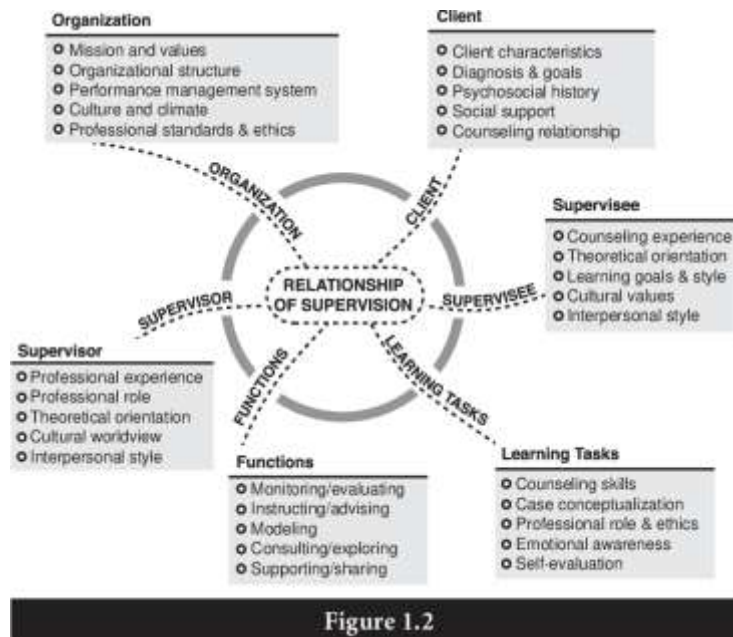

Organization
- Mission and values
- Organizational structure
- Performance management system
- Culture and climate
- Professional standards & ethics

Client
- Client characteristics
- Diagnosis & goals
- Psychosocial history
- Social support
- Counseling relationship

Supervisee
- Counseling experience
- Theoretical orientation
- Learning goals & style
- Cultural values
- Interpersonal style

Supervisor
- Professional experience
- Professional role
- Theoretical orientation
- Cultural worldview
- Interpersonal style

Functions
- Monitoring/evaluating
- Instructing/advising
- Modeling
- Consulting/exploring
- Supporting/sharing

Learning Tasks
- Counseling skills
- Case conceptualization
- Professional role & ethics
- Emotional awareness
- Self-evaluation

RELATIONSHIP OF SUPERVISION

Figure 1.2

Contrary to developmental models, which incorporate critical developmental milestones to identify the supervisee's current stage accurately, systemic models focus primarily on the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee (Littrell et al., 1979; Loganbill et al., 1982; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987; Holloway, 2016). The relational components of the systemic approach to supervision emphasize the interpersonal structure as it relates to power with and power over-involvement, the phase of a relationship, and the contract of supervision (Holloway, 2016; Bernard & Goodyear, 2019).

Further explanation of these relational tenets explains that "clarity about roles, commitments, and expectations can enhance the relationship by reducing supervisee anxiety and infusing accurate information about what is to follow" (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). As a result, it appears that the supervision process from the systemic approach places great emphasis on defined roles in addition to understanding the contextual details of each phase of the supervision process within the systems approach.

The relevance of systems approaches to the supervision process leans heavily on developing a relationship between supervisor and supervisee, translating to the relationship between the counselor and client.

Tenants of Systemic Supervision Model (SAS)

Cluster one within the SAS supervision model explores the relationship elements that adjust the relational posture of the supervisor and supervisee, thereby enhancing the supervision experience (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Holloway (2016) elaborates on the power structure within the supervision role, which may mirror the hierarchal approaches to family systems. Evidence of this dynamic is demonstrated through the power shifts during the supervisor's evaluative responsibilities, which create a "power over" stance (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Holloway, 2016).

Cultural implications can be identified within this cluster of SAS. For example, White counselor educators make up over 80% of counselors, while African Americans account for less than 4% of counselor educators (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], (2016). These numbers are shared across other fields of counseling as well: 4% of psychologists (American Psychological Association, 2018), 2% of psychiatrists (American Psychiatric Association, 2021), 22% of social workers (National Association of Social Workers, 2020), 7% of marriage and family counselors, and 11% of professional counselors are black.

Considering these numbers, an apparent disparity exists between counselors and supervisors. The SAS model and its hierarchal structure may have implications for black counselors receiving supervision from white supervisors who utilize the SAS approach. As a result, white supervisors may benefit from learning culturally affirming methods to utilize in conjunction with SAS.

Secondly, the *phase of the relationship* relates to developing the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Consistent in this relationship are development, maturing, and termination of the relationship (Holloway, 2016). Supervisor and supervisee relationships matriculate through these stages and sometimes mirror the interactions between the therapist and the client, a phenomenon known as the parallel process (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019).

Parallel processes between the supervisor, supervisee/client, and therapist may also mirror the cultural dynamics. Clients reported a desire for an "extended family" atmosphere in treatment work between themselves and the counselor; this family dynamic may draw from a family systems approach to counseling but is best received from a counselor who shares the client's cultural background (Longshore et al., 1999; Field et al., 2010; Osborn et al., 2010).

If the cultural dynamic and systemic approach to supervision is matched, the parallel process within the supervision experience may produce the best results for the clinician (Longshore et al., 1999; Field et al., 2010; Osborn et al., 2010).

Thirdly, the supervision contract clarifies the roles, commitments, and expectations of the supervisee and supervisor (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Holloway, 2016). Cultural implications of the supervision process may create barriers to effective evaluative measures within the SAS model. Counseling supervisors must be aware of the power dynamics within the supervision experience and its impact on the supervision contract's role, commitment, and expectations (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1997; Sue et al., 1996).

Given the dominant presence of white clinicians in the counseling field (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], (2016), White clinicians supervising Black counselors may benefit from developing supervision contracts that include plans for culturally affirming conversations, facilitation of supervisees personal values and beliefs, facilitate multicultural client conceptualizations, guide supervisees towards utilizing culturally appropriate interventions with clients, attend to multicultural processes in supervision, and effectively evaluate supervisees multicultural competencies (Sepideh et al., 2014; Ancis & Ladany, 2010).

Validity and Effectiveness

Carlson & Lambie (2012) combined systemic and developmental approaches to supervision to formulate the SDS model. The SDS model "provides a framework for supervisors to foster supervisees' professional growth and skill acquisition through a focus on the supervisor relationship" (Carlson & Lambie, 2012).

Supervisees who have experienced this form of supervision reported a sense of value and quality in the approach (Worthen & McNeill, 1996). Incorporating systemic supervision and process-oriented supervisor approaches addresses transference, countertransference, and the parallel process within the supervision space (Ladany et al., 2000).

Counseling students with influential "family of origin" relationships has demonstrated a correlation with increased counselor effectiveness (Trusty et al., 2004; Watts et al., 1995; Wilcoxon et al., 1989; Wolgien & Coady, 1997). Trusty (et al., 2004) reported that "perhaps counselor trainees who are more real with themselves are more real with others and therefore more attractive (i.e., friendly, likable, sociable, and warm) in counseling" (p.11). It appears that the systemic approach promotes the connection between the supervisee and their family of origin, which may parallel the ability of the client to do the same. Thus, providing a basis for the effectiveness of the systemic approach to supervision.

Description of Application/Evaluation

Ultimately, supervisors are responsible for facilitating supervisee multicultural competence (Inman, 2006). Supervision that encourages the exploration of multicultural issues " promotes growth in supervisees' cultural competencies" (Killian, 2001; Ladany et al., 1997). These efforts to promote multicultural approaches to counseling and supervision align with the ethical practices identified in counseling psychology (American Psychological Association {APA}, 2010).

Within the SAS model, these multicultural tenants may be implemented at various stages of the supervision process. For example, during evaluative measures, a supervisor utilizing the SAS model may view video recordings of the supervisee's sessions with a client of a different cultural background and facilitate discussions around the cultural aspects of the session. Additionally, the supervisor may allow room for exploration of each of their individual cultural experiences utilizing interventions such as modeling and the parallel process to encourage the supervisees' work with the client.

These evaluative measures may create space for the supervisees to assess their therapeutic presence and encourage ethical, relational development between them and the client. Other practical evaluation measures include the 3D Systemic Supervising Rating Scale (3D-SSRS). The 3d-SSRS "utilizes a seven-point scale to rate supervision practice and prioritizes qualitative comments in 11 dimensions, including the supervisory relationship, context of supervision, developmental stage of supervisee, development of systemic skills and thinking, and attention to power and difference (Butler et al., 2021). While this evaluative measure has been proven effective (Butler et al., 2021), cultural considerations may present limitations.

Discussion

Summary of research and theoretical grounding

Systemic supervision literature continues to grow, as evidenced by papers and literature describing the various aspects of the systemic supervision process (i.e., philosophy of supervision, psychotherapy, etc.) (Burck & Daniel, 2010; Campbell & Mason, 2002; Gorell Barnes *et al.*, 2000; Holloway, 2016; Lee & Everett, 2004; Lee & Nelson, 2014; Todd and Storm, 1997, 2014). The SAS model focuses on developing the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee (Holloway, 1995; Bernard & Goodyear, 2009; Butler et al., 2021).

The specific areas of this relationship include evaluative measures, power-over, power with dynamics, phase of relationship, and contract of supervision (Holloway, 2016; Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). These approaches create space for adequate supervision and therapist/client relationship development; however, the cultural implications of supervision must also be addressed (Sepideh et al., 2014).

Coupling the SAS model with aspects of multicultural supervision may provide a more robust supervision experience and allow the supervisee to consider their cultural perspectives when working with clients and identify supervisors who can encourage culturally affirming supervision spaces (Sepideh et al., 2014). Adding cultural competencies to the supervision process has seen success in therapists and their ability to deliver culturally and ethically competent treatment to clients (Barnes et al., 2000; Holloway, 1995; Sepideh et al., 2014; Holloway, 2016).

In summation, the preponderance of evidence highlighting the successful use of culturally competent and systemic approaches to supervision provides a basis for collaborating these models to enhance the supervision process.

Ethical challenges

The perceived benefits of the model rest in the role of power in psychotherapy, "where the intent is not to control, but rather to empower individuals to exercise self-control and determination" (Holloway, 1995, p. 51). Contradistinctively, supervisors utilizing the model must have the ability to strike a balance between monitoring and mentoring (Shaw, 2013). This balance includes identifying their tasks and integrating leadership and critical appraisal tasks (Shaw, 2013). These boundaries are essential for ethical, relational development between the supervisor and supervisee and encourage the ethical practice of the supervisee with the client (Shaw, 2013).

Unclear boundaries may present relational difficulties within the supervisor-supervisee relationship. These may include ethical violations of dual relationship roles, sexual relationships, abuse of supervisor power, and others as described in each of the ethical codes within the counseling profession (American Counseling Association, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2017; American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, 2015). Avoiding the devastating nature of such ethical violations may rest in the systemic supervisors' ability to be culturally affirming, ethically aware, and adherent to the SAS model.

Haug and Storm (2014) discuss ethical dilemmas within the systemic approach to supervision, emphasizing contextual factors (i.e., culture, race, ethnicity, etc.) and their impact on the supervision process and the supervisees' ability to conduct ethical and competent sessions. Demonstrating ethical decision-making by the supervisor may enhance the ethical awareness of the client.

This ethical awareness and decision-making "begins" with the awareness that all supervisory actions, even seemingly insignificant ones, have potential ethical consequences that may impact the well-being of supervisees, their clients, the professional community, and the public" (Haug & Storm, 2014).

Practical implications

Traditional approaches to clinical practice with populations of color must be more effective (Bahafzallah et al., 2019). This trend may be due to the desire for an extended family approach discussed in culturally responsive pedagogy. Bahafzallah (et al., 2019) noted that African American populations reported the desire to have a more paternalistic approach to counseling settings. Realizing the meaning of this paternalistic approach lands us in the middle of culturally responsive practice as it relates to black people in the treatment room.

Counseling and psychological workforces continue to be dominated by white males and females; more than 80% of licensed clinicians and psychologists are white, while African Americans account for about 4% (APA Workforce Study, 2016; Sims et al., 2018). Bahafzallah (et al.,2019) reported that having a counselor of the same ethnic background does support progress; considering the disparity between African Americans in the mental health field and the total population of African Americans battling mental illness, culturally affirming supervision of African American therapist and their ability to translate culturally affirming clinical practices in the treatment room appear essential.

The use of the SAS model provides a basis for relational development between the supervisor/supervisee relationship and the relationship developed between the client and therapist (Holloway, 2016). The supervisor's ability to incorporate culturally affirming aspects of supervision opens the practicality of the supervision experience, given that most African American clinicians may receive supervision at some point by a White supervisor.

The cultural and structural aspects of the SAS model may also have implications for counselor educators in their abilities to create culturally affirming pedagogy that mirrors the intent not to control but to "empower individuals to exercise self-control and determination" as it relates to their learning experiences (Holloway, 1995, p. 51).

Gay (2000, 2010) describes culturally responsive pedagogy as multidimensional, empowering, and transformative. More specifically, culturally responsive pedagogy is "cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frame of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective…It teaches to and through the strengths of the students. It is culturally validating and affirming" (Gay, 2000, p. 29). The affirming nature of this approach allows the learner to see themselves in the material as it relates to their own life experiences.

Creating such spaces therapeutically and educationally may connect individuals with their cultural perspectives and teach the skills necessary for perspective counselor educators and therapists to do the same for other students and clients.

Limitations & Strengths

Culturally responsive pedagogical and supervision methods are effective teaching and supervision methods (Butler et al., 2021; Howard, 2021; Sepideh et al., 2014). Multicultural approaches to clinical training and educational spaces allow room for critical thinking and create space for students to synthesize and evaluate information and apply it across other contexts, demonstrating increased levels of cognition (Ford, 1996; VanTassel-Baska, 1992).

A primary benefit of systemic approaches to supervision is the development of trusting counseling relationships between the supervisee and supervisor (Carlson & Lambie, 2012). Additionally, Systemic approaches promote the therapist's self-control and determination through the therapeutic process (Holloway, 2016). Skill development obtained through culturally affirming systemic supervision and educational spaces strengthens systemic and multicultural models.

However, limitations may include ethical barriers when the culturally affirming nature of systemic supervision and educational approaches are not maintained. While this is a reality for many supervision and pedagogical models, it is the same for systemic approaches. Other limitations may be considered through the evaluative measures of systemic approaches. Butler (et al., 2021) noted the cumbersome nature of completing the 3D-SSRS evaluation tool.

Gonsalves (2020) added, "It was impossible to value context in such a way as to produce a 'shore scale' as has been done in other contexts." This may present additional opportunities for supervisors and supervisees to be less authentic in the evaluative process and may produce results that are not reflective of the experiences of supervision.

Conclusion

SAS supervision models are effective (Butler et al., 2021; Holloway, 1995), and incorporating multicultural supervision aspects may increase their effectiveness among culturally diverse groups. Supervisors and counselor educators' ethical compliance and ability to competently utilize systemic and multicultural models in the classroom and supervision spaces may continue to promote the therapist's sense of self and ability to provide practical, ethical, and competent services to clients.

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