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ABSTRACT

The merits of peer group supervision have been advocated widely, but the actual practice has been described infrequently. The structured peer group format is a model that provides an organizational structure and a systematic procedure for conducting peer groups. In application, the approach can be adapted to match the developmental levels of the counselors and the supervisor. Members also receive training in methods and skills that they can use in supervising their colleagues and themselves throughout their professional careers. In addition, the approach emphasizes development of conceptualization skills and enhances cognitive growth in general. Illustrations from actual groups are included, and some extensions of the approach are suggested.
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Structured Peer Group Supervision

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Abstract

The merits of peer group supervision have been advocated widely, but the actual practice has been described infrequently. The structured peer group format is a model that provides an organizational structure and a systematic procedure for conducting peer groups. In application, the approach can be adapted to match the developmental levels of the counselors and supervisor. Members also receive some training in methods and skills that they can use in supervising their colleagues and themselves throughout their professional careers. In addition, the approach emphasizes the development of conceptualization skills and enhances cognitive growth in general. Illustrations from actual groups are included, and some extensions of the approach are suggested.

Structured Peer Group Supervision

Peer supervision groups are advocated for counselors at all experience levels. For counselors-in-training, peer groups provide a supportive environment and reassurance that others are experiencing similar feelings and concerns (Blocher, 1983; Fraleigh & Buchheimer, 1969; Sansbury, 1982; Yogev, 1982). Novices speak the same language and model at a more understandable level for their peers than do experts (Hillerbrand, 1989). Peer interaction also may increase novices' perceptions of self-efficacy and motivation to learn (Hillerbrand, 1989). In addition, successful experiences may encourage students to create similar opportunities for peer supervision in subsequent work settings (Spice & Spice, 1976; Wagner & Smith, 1979; Winstead, Bonovitz, Gale, & Evans, 1974).

For post-degree counselors, peer supervision groups provide an opportunity for continued professional growth. They are one remedy for professional isolation and burnout, and may be the only available avenue for feedback on counseling performance (Cloud, 1986; Greenburg, Lewis, & Johnson, 1985; Nobler, 1980; Remley, Benschhoff, & Mowbray, 1987; Todd & Pine, 1968). Private practitioners who responded to one survey said they highly valued their peer consultation groups (Lewis, Greenburg, & Hatch, 1988). They reported that their peer groups provided suggestions for difficult clients, discussed ethical and professional issues, and helped them deal with isolation and burnout.

While many believe peer supervision is beneficial, few have presented models for conducting these groups. To be effective, however, peer groups need an organizational structure and group members need training for their supervisory roles (Roth, 1986; Runkel & Hackney, 1982). Without clearly articulated procedures, groups may experience difficulty adhering to the task; without training, peers may be overly supportive, prone to advice-giving, or otherwise limited in their ability to give informed and constructive feedback (Hart, 1982; Roth, 1986; Runkel & Hackney, 1982; Winstead et al., 1974).

Two models that do address these issues are the triadic method (Spice & Spice, 1976) and the peer-dyads approach (Wagner & Smith, 1979). Each of these models describe a systematic procedure for conducting peer supervision with counselors-in-training. In addition, specific supervision skills (e.g., reviewing tapes of counseling sessions and giving constructive feedback) are taught. A faculty supervisor serves as a role model, observes peer interactions, and provides feedback on peer supervision sessions.

It should be noted, however, that these two models primarily describe individual peer supervision through the use of dyads or triads (supervisor, supervisee, observer). Little direction is given for conducting peer group discussions following observations of the supervision sessions. It appears that, similar to the "rudimentary level" (Holloway & Johnston, 1985, p. 338) of the literature on group supervision in general, peer group supervision is widely advocated but infrequently described.

In summary, peer groups are a preferred supervision approach for counselors at all experience levels. Surprisingly, however, there are few guidelines for organizing and conducting peer supervision groups. The purpose of this article

is to present a structured format for peer group supervision. This approach, an extension of previous methods (Spice & Spice, 1976; Wagner & Smith, 1979), was designed with the following goals in mind: a) to ensure that all group members are involved in the supervision process; b) to help members give focused, objective feedback; c) to give particular attention to the development of cognitive counseling skills; d) to be appropriate for groups of novice and/or experienced counselors; e) to provide a framework for supervising individual, group, and family counseling sessions; f) to teach an approach that counselors can internalize for self-monitoring; and g) to provide a systematic procedure that can be employed by novice and experienced supervisors.

The structured peer group supervision format has been employed with practica and intern students and experienced counselors, has been taught to supervisors-in-training, and has been presented during workshops for practicing supervisors. While informal feedback has been quite favorable, to date no empirical studies have been conducted to investigate its effectiveness. Thus, the following presentation is based on the author's experience conducting peer groups and teaching the approach to others. It reflects several years of "fine tuning" based on observation and feedback. Following an overview of the mechanics of the approach, more complete descriptions and illustrations will be given, the emphasis on developing cognitive counseling skills will be discussed, and some extensions of the approach will be described.

Components of the Structured Peer Group

Procedure

Typically, the structured peer group supervision format involves a small group (three to six) of practicum students, interns, or practicing counselors, and one trained supervisor who meet weekly or biweekly for one-and-one-half to three hours. Similar to other supervision experiences (cf. Borders & Leddick, 1987), groups members identify learning goals during the first group meetings, and the supervisor helps establish a supportive atmosphere that is conducive to open and honest interactions.

Subsequently, counselors take turns presenting videotapes of counseling sessions. They review their tapes beforehand and select a segment to play for the group. They begin by identifying specific questions about their performance; these questions become the focus for members' review of the videotape segment.

The procedure of the structured peer group format is relatively simple and straightforward, but it also allows for dealing with subtleties and sophisticated dynamics, depending on the experience and skill levels of the counselors and the supervisor. The steps, to be more fully described in subsequent sections, are the following:

1. The counselor identifies questions about the client or videotaped session, and requests specific feedback.
2. Peers choose or are assigned roles, perspectives, or tasks for reviewing the videotape segment. These tasks include a) observing counselor or client nonverbal behavior or a particular counseling skill; b) assuming the role of the counselor, client, or the parent.

spouse, coworker, friend, teacher, or other significant person in the client's life; c) viewing the session from a particular theoretical perspective; and d) creating a metaphor for the client, counselor, or counseling process.

3. The counselor presents the videotape segment.
4. Peers give feedback from their roles or perspectives, keeping in mind the goals and questions that were specified by the counselor.
5. The supervisor facilitates the discussion as needed, functioning as a moderator and process commentator.
6. The supervisor summarizes the feedback and discussion, and the counselor indicates if supervision needs were met.

Supervisor

The supervisor in the structured peer group supervision format has two critical roles. First, the supervisor functions as a moderator who helps the group stay on-task. In this managerial role, the supervisor helps the presenting counselor articulate a specific focus for the supervision session, assigns and/or designates roles and tasks for the group members, and makes sure everyone is heard and follows feedback guidelines. The supervisor also summarizes the feedback, identifying themes and patterns (e.g., each time the client teared the counselor asked a question). In addition, the supervisor sets up 'followup exercises as needed, such as role plays or directed skill practice.

Second, the supervisor is a process commentator who gives feedback on the dynamics of the peer group. As a group leader, the supervisor describes patterns of peer interaction, and encourages discussion of behaviors, feelings, and relationships. In this role, the supervisor is sensitive to members' reactions to feedback, ways they may protect or compete with each other, manifestations of parallel process, and other group dynamics. (For examples of this type of dialogue, see Orton, 1965; Spice & Spice, 1976.)

In both of these roles, the supervisor is cognizant of the developmental level(s) of peer group members and varies his/her own behavior accordingly (cf. Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981). For example, the supervisor is more active and directive in novice peer groups, typically taking responsibility for assigning tasks to members, orchestrating feedback, and summarizing discussion. More developmentally advanced counselors assume more responsibility for the conduct of the sessions, and are more apt to request feedback concerning transference and countertransference, theoretical issues, and ethical concerns. As a result, the supervisor can attend to more subtle, sophisticated dynamics of the counseling session and the supervision group, including parallel process.

To fulfill these roles and functions, the effective peer group supervisor must be a skilled teacher, counselor, consultant, and group leader. Indeed, the success of this approach depends on the supervisor's artistry in recognizing a needed and appropriate intervention, assigning tasks to particular peer group

members, and orchestrating the feedback. After working at several levels, the supervisor helps a productive learning experience to unfold.

Peer Feedback

A critical component of success in peer groups is the ability of participants to give honest and constructive feedback. Consequently, a key to the structured peer group supervision format is the procedure that peers follow while watching the videotape segment and then giving feedback. This procedure, in effect, provides indirect and informal training in supervision skills. Peers assume or are assigned (by the supervisor) roles, perspectives, or tasks for responding. These perspectives are based on the goals of the presenting counselor, learning goals of group members, and developmental needs that the supervisor has identified. The format tends to ensure that each member participates in giving feedback.

Focused observations. First, group members may observe particular components of the session, such as the nonverbal behavior of counselor or client or specific counseling skills. Practicum students frequently request feedback about the use of specific skills (e.g., rephrasing questions as empathic statements) or theory-based techniques (e.g., setting up or processing a two-chair dialogue). Such concrete observations match beginning counselors' tendency to focus on separate, specific elements of the counseling session. This procedure, however, also gives them an opportunity to practice additional skills. For example, the counselor who has difficulty attending to a client's non-verbal behavior (and may have identified this as a learning goal) may be assigned this task. Free of the anxiety generated by their own counseling sessions, members often are better observers when watching peers' videotapes. They also practice counseling skills as they help their peers rephrase responses.

Focused observations also can be used with live supervision of family counseling. Okun (West, 1988) reported she sometimes asks peers to observe a particular family member, subsystem, or family interaction pattern. In addition, the supervisor can assign observational tasks based on learning and instructional goals. Piercy (West, 1988), for example, reported that if a counselor's goal is to develop skills for working with children, he asks that counselor to watch how a peer joins with the children in a family. He also may ask group members to observe a particular concept (e.g., family boundaries) he is teaching during the supervision session. Similarly, each peer can observe one client in a group counseling session, giving the group leader a more complete picture of the impact of group interactions and counseling interventions.

Role-taking. Second, peer group members may assume a particular role while observing the videotape segment, and then give their feedback from that perspective. Roles that frequently have been instructive include the counselor, client, and significant persons in the client's environment, such as a parent, spouse, coworker, friend, or teacher. This approach has been beneficial and popular with both novice and experienced counselors.

Beginning counselors characteristically are very self-focused, overly aware of their every move. In addition, they tend to assume the client's report is the only truth about a problem situation. Role-taking while watching the videotape segment is one way to help broaden these counselors' perspectives about their

counseling. For example, peers may assume the role of the client and then phrase their feedback in "I messages" based on their experience of the videotaped counseling session. This simple procedure has often been very powerful for practicum students.

One student, for example, had asked the peer group what else she could do to help her (female) client see the danger of the client's involvement in an extra-marital relationship. Prior to the videotape presentation, the student responded to general group discussion by saying that they also didn't seem to understand the gravity of the situation. To help break this impasse, the supervisor asked each group member to assume the role of the client while watching the videotape segment. The counselor finally "heard" her client when five peers eloquently and emotionally responded with variations of, "I feel you are lecturing me and not really hearing me. You think I'm selfish, but don't know the meaninglessness of my life, the pain and fear inside me." This feedback helped the counselor realize that the client's underlying feelings and motivations might be very different from what she had assumed. She was able to see that her well-intentioned goals for the client were preventing her from being in contact with and helping her client.

Assuming roles can also help a counselor have a more objective, multifaceted view of a client. For example, a female counselor had accepted her female client's view of her marriage problems. The client described her husband's numerous faults. The supervisor asked group members to describe how they saw the client from the perspectives of her husband, children, and coworkers. In contrast to the counselor's sympathetic view, group members found the client demanding, complaining, rigid, and unforgiving. With these additional perspectives, the counselor changed her counseling approach. She began to help the client to focus on herself rather than her husband and take responsibility for her role in relationship problems. Similarly, school counselors have gotten new views of their student-clients by hearing the perspectives of other classmates and teachers via peer group members' feedback.

It also can be helpful when peers take on the role of the counselors, particularly in instances of countertransference or identification with the client. Peers often articulate feelings, expectations, and needs that are operating in the counseling session, although outside the counselor's awareness. Peers may surface counselor's uncomfortable feelings about clients, such as anger, boredom, or attraction. They may identify counselor needs that are influencing the counseling process (e.g., "I need for you to get well!" or "I must save this marriage.").

The role perspective also can be used for videotape review (or live observations) of family counseling sessions. Peers take the role of one of the family members and then describe their view of the problem, other family members, the counselor, and the session. Processing of the observations may include sculpting exercises to more clearly represent the family dynamics. When reviewing group counseling sessions, peers can speak from the viewpoint of various group members. In another variation of this approach, Williams (1988) asks a counselor to identify the various roles a particular client plays (e.g.,

angry person, shy person, and dreamer). Group members are selected to act out the various client roles in a modified psychodrama approach.

Theoretical perspectives. In a more "academic" approach, peer group members view the case presentation from a particular theoretical orientation. Each person uses a theoretical framework to conceptualize the client and counseling issues, explain the etiology of the problem, identify counseling goals, and indicate what interventions would be appropriate. They may speak from their own theoretical orientations or practice a new perspective.

Variations of this approach with counselors at different developmental levels facilitate the natural process of creating an integrated theoretical identity (cf. Loganbill et al., 1982). Beginning counselors can practice linking their preferred theory with application and gain a more in-depth understanding of the premises of the theory. They also can "try out" new theoretical approaches of interest, or can be challenged to try those they do not like. In practicum groups for counseling theory classes, students may be asked to report what they think Rogers, Perls, Freud, Ellis, Meichenbaum, etc., would say about the session being reviewed. By assuming different theories or hearing them from peers, students are able to judge what and how the various theories fit for them personally, an important first step in forming a professional identity.

More developmentally advanced counselors may want to explore their preferred approach to a greater depth, study a new theory, or hear other viewpoints that can enrich their own. Both theoretically homogeneous and heterogeneous peer groups of practicing counselors have been reported. In West Germany, theory-based casework seminars for professionals are offered by psychological associations (Nugent, 1988). Members meet twice a month for the expressed purpose of upgrading their counseling skills in a specific theory (e.g., behavioral, client-centered, psychoanalytic). In contrast, most peer groups in the US were described by their members as theoretically heterogeneous (Lewis et al., 1988). Whatever their composition, peer groups provide practicing counselors with opportunities for broadening and deepening their theoretical understandings.

This approach can be particularly helpful for counselors who are studying family systems theories for the first time. Group members can contrast individual and systemic views of a client or family, and explore the course of counseling from each perspective. Similarly, members of family counseling supervision groups can assume different theoretical orientations during videotape review or live observation (cf. Piercy in West, 1988).

The articulation of a theoretical perspective gives life to philosophy and ideas, helps counselors become aware of the rationale and intentions for their actions, and significantly contributes to the development of a consistent, integrated professional identity.

Descriptive metaphors. Peer group members also may think metaphorically while they observe the videotape segment. Peers characterize the client, counselor, the client-counselor relationship, or the counseling process with a symbol, image, or metaphor. This approach has been particularly helpful when the presenting counselor's request for feedback concerned some aspect of

interpersonal dynamics or a generalized feeling of being "stuck," with few clues about the source of the block. Similar to others who advocate the use of metaphors in supervision (Amundson, 1988; Ishayama, 1988), I have found this approach leads to a deeper understanding of client, self, or counseling dynamics. Metaphors may provide new or alternative perspectives and give clarity to planning future sessions.

In one group, for example, peers were asked to metaphorically describe the "dance" of the counselor and client. A counselor gained much insight into his (female) client and the counseling process when a peer reported, "Your client smiles and asks you to dance, then twirls away as you approach. She gracefully leaps from wall to ceiling to wall, etc., smiling almost coyly, and still beckoning or expecting you to meet her. Perplexed, you struggle to catch up, but each time you reach out and almost touch, she is gone." The counselor expanded the metaphor as he articulated some of his feelings during sessions. Not only did this counselor gain insight into his own interactions with this client; he also began to hypothesize about similar dynamics in the client's marital relationship. In contrast to the client's report, he now wondered if the husband really was the only elusive person in the marital relationship.

One might assume that this approach would be more appropriate with developmentally advanced counselors, who are more attuned to interpersonal dynamics and their reactions to clients. Used with deliberate care, however, metaphors also can be effective with beginning counselors. This approach tends to sensitize them to the fact that less concrete variables are at work during counseling, helps them stop thinking about their own performance, and makes them aware they have impressions of and reactions to their clients that are therapeutically-relevant.

Developing Cognitive Counseling Skills

In designing the format, I wanted to give particular attention to the development of cognitive counseling skills. Both beginning and advanced counselors in my groups often had adequate performance skills (facilitative skills, theoretically-based techniques, procedural skills, etc.; cf. Borders & Leddick, 1987). They seemed to lack intentionality, however, and frequently had difficulty stating a rationale for their interventions or explaining why a particular intervention was or was not successful. In addition, they often presented a very limited view of their clients.

Several writers have suggested that greater cognitive counseling skills depends on the development of higher levels of conceptual thinking in general (e.g., Biggs, 1988; Blocher, 1983; Borders, Fong, & Neimeyer, 1986; Ellis, 1988; Holloway, 1988). They describe counselors at high levels of cognitive functioning as being able to integrate and synthesize large amounts of data, including conflicting information. These counselors differentiate between relevant and irrelevant factors, are less influenced by external cues, and are more independent, objective, and flexible in their thinking. Because they are able to view the world from multiple perspectives, they have greater empathic understanding of a wide variety of clients. They also are aware of interactive, mutual influences in interpersonal relationships.

Helping counselors develop higher levels of cognitive functioning is the goal of these writers, and the structured peer group supervisor format includes many of the activities they suggest will facilitate cognitive growth (see Biggs, 1988; Blocher, 1983; Ellis, 1988). For example, counselors get feedback from a variety of sources when peers assume roles of the client and significant persons in the client's environment. Counselors are able to practice divergent thinking when peers present views of the client that conflict with their own. Peers' reports of nonverbal behaviors may help counselors distinguish between their observations and inferences. During the ensuing discussions, counselors become aware of how they make decisions and choices during sessions. Higher levels of thinking also are enhanced when peer group members generate multiple theory-based hypotheses about the client; counselors must consider the possibility there is more than one "correct" way to work with a client. Metaphors are a creative approach to integrating contradictory information, another characteristic of high conceptual thinking. The supervisor, of course, monitors these activities so that an optimal balance of challenge and support is maintained. The preferred environment is based on a "matching model" that both satisfies the counselor's learning needs and stimulates conceptual development (cf. Holloway & Wampold, 1986; Stoltenberg, 1981).

Extensions of the Structured Peer Group

One important goal of the structured peer group approach is to teach counselors methods they can adapt for self-supervision. My observations of group members have indicated that this does happen. Over time, counselors become aware of their own particular "blind spots," and adapt methods for challenging themselves. They are not so apt to "forget" to observe client nonverbals or to assume the client's report is the only perspective on a problem situation. When conceptualizing a case, they more often consider multiple, and even conflicting, views of the client. They sometimes assume different roles or theoretical perspectives while reflecting on a client or making plans for a session. How would the client's husband, mother, child, or coworker describe the client?, they have learned to ask themselves. What would be their perspective of the presenting problem? How might this client interact with each of these persons?

The structured peer group supervision format may be incorporated into other group supervision approaches and used on a periodic basis. In addition, the role perspective can be adapted for individual supervision. Counselors can be asked to assume another role or to describe the client from the point of view of a significant other. Supervisors may verbalize feedback in this manner (i.e., "As the client I'm feeling..."), share a metaphor, or model how they challenge their own conceptualizations and hypotheses about clients.

In addition, practicing counselors who have participated in structured peer groups can use the methods they learned in consultative supervision with their colleagues. The approach would be appropriate in a variety of work settings and for private practitioners. In groups of developmentally advanced counselors who have had some supervision training, peers may take turns assuming one or both of the supervisor roles.

The structured peer group approach has been well received by doctoral-level supervisors-in-training and supervision workshop participants. The format

provides the type of guidelines that novice supervisors need as they lead their first group supervision sessions. The structure and steps help them deal with their anxiety about what to do and how to attend to all the group members. I usually suggest that they begin by assigning the more concrete tasks, such as observing nonverbal behaviors and assuming the client role. Additional parts of the format are added as they gain confidence and develop their supervision skills. Currently, the format also is being used by advanced master's counseling students who are working with small groups of first-practicum students. As the supervisor-instructor, I determine which tasks they will assign to their group members. During the sessions, I spend some time in each group, both participating (i.e., taking the role of the client, and thus modeling for the group members and group leaders) and observing the supervisors. Afterwards, we exchange feedback: I share my observations of their work and they discuss their experiences with the format.

Finally, the structured peer group supervision format also is being extended to group supervision of supervisors. Each of the roles, perspectives, and tasks can be adapted for reviewing videotapes of supervision sessions. Peers can observe specific skills or supervision techniques, focus on the nonverbal behavior of supervisee or supervisor, assume the role of the supervisee or client being discussed, or take different theoretical perspectives of the supervision session. Peer supervisors have helped their colleagues realize a supervisee felt overwhelmed or attacked, that a supervisee was being treated like a china doll, that a "resistant" supervisee was actually a skittish rabbit underneath, that co-workers might describe a "confident" counselor as arrogant, and that there were striking differences in the supervisor's nonverbal behavior with different supervisees. The structured format also has vividly brought to light several instances of parallel process.

Summary

Peer supervision groups are valuable resources for counselors throughout their professional careers. The structured peer group approach provides the type of structure and procedure that groups need if they are to capitalize on the benefits of peer feedback. It also offers counselors methods they can adapt for consultative supervision with other counselors in their work settings and for self-supervision. By using approaches such as this one, counselors can actively contribute to their own professional development and that of their colleagues.

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