

Productive and Nonproductive Counselor Supervision: Best and Worst Experiences of Supervisees

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Abstract

This study examines reported best and worst supervisee experiences of participants. Most supervision research emphasizes productive and effective aspects of supervision. Some efforts, however, have emphasized nonproductive or lousy aspects of supervision (Worthington, 1987). A factor analysis of participants' reported best supervisee experience revealed a one-factor solution, a finding consistent with qualitative research efforts suggesting integration of roles and expectations is key for effective supervision. By contrast, a factor analysis for participants' reported worst experiences as a supervisee revealed a two-factor solution, suggesting a lack of integration as well as problems in two distinct areas of supervision practice. Conclusions and suggestions for further research are offered.

Supervision in the helping disciplines is a critical component of professional development (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 1993). Supervision provides the experiential foundation for integrating, with increased competence, theoretical principles into practice (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998; Falender & Shafranske, 2005; Ronnestad & Skovholt). Some authors have emphasized aspects of the supervisory process associated with exemplary supervisory behaviors as well as strategies characteristic of effective supervision (Borders, Cashwell, & Rotter, 1995; Ronnestad & Skovholt). The most prominent elements of supervision emphasize: (a) structure (e.g., clarifying role expectations, intentionality, and deliberate planning) (Bradley & Ladany, 2001; Ladany, Friedlander, & Nelson, 2005; Nelson & Friedlander, 2001; Ronnestad & Skovholt; Vespia, Heckman-Stone, & Delworth, 2002), (b) strategy (e.g., compromise, tolerance, and scrutiny emphasizing both support and challenge) (Falender & Shafranske), or (c) relationships (e.g., empathic understanding, genuineness, respect, and concreteness) (Blocher, 1983; Carifio & Hess, 1987; Veach, 2001; Worthen & McNeill, 1996).

Nonproductive aspects of supervision have received far less attention in the literature. As Worthington (1987) observed, "a good theory of lousy supervisor behaviors is missing" (p. 203). Worthington alluded to the potential value of examining supervisor behaviors indicative of nonproductive or even detrimental supervision. Similarly, Ladany, Friedlander, and Nelson (2005) observed that problematic behavior of supervisees has elicited intense scrutiny, yet supervisor incompetence has been virtually ignored in the literature.

An initial theoretical framework to conceptualize lousy supervision emerged out of a qualitative study conducted by Magnuson, Wilcoxon, and Norem (2000). These investigators sought to identify nonproductive supervisory behaviors and to develop a schema for categorizing such behaviors. Magnuson et al. identified three primary domains of ineffective supervisory behaviors: (a) administrative/organizational, (b) cognitive/technical, and (c) relational/affective. Indicators of inadequate supervision in the administrative/organizational domain primarily reflect the supervisor's level of adeptness in structuring the supervisory process, clarifying expectations and objectives, and managing the ongoing procedures associated with supervision. In the cognitive/technical domain, professional competence as a practitioner and as a supervisor is the focal point for perceived supervisor inadequacy. Further, deficits in professionalism accompanied by vague and abstract feedback from supervisors, supervisor reliance on a single theoretical orientation, or un-

willingness to incorporate supervisee theoretical ideas tend to amplify perceptions of supervisor inadequacy. Examples of inadequate supervision in the affective/relational domain include limited interpersonal sensitivity, compromised confidentiality, and failure to create a safe environment.

Magnuson et al. (2000) cautioned that lousy supervision may not be easily defined. They concluded that “lousy supervision is more complex than either the presence of ineffective practices or the absence of effective practices” (p. 200). Instead, they suggested that “lousy supervision seems to result from a combination of both factors, with lousy supervision anchoring one extreme of a continuum that ranges to an opposite and equally complex construct of excellent supervision” (p. 200). Such an observation is consistent with the efforts of Allen, Szollos, and Williams (1986), who concluded that nonproductive supervision is difficult to clarify based on the presence of specific characteristics because no single characteristic is a critical determinant of poor supervision. Essentially, poor supervision appears to be described best by what supervisors fail to provide, rather than what they provide. Watkins (1997) expressed a similar belief that ineffective supervision may not be the exact opposite of effective supervision.

Various demographic variables have received attention concerning their influence on supervisee-supervisor interactions and their contributions to the formation of supervisory relationships. These variables include gender, race/ethnicity, supervisee-only status versus supervisor-supervisee status, and academic affiliation (Borders, 2001; Cook, 1994; Helms, 1990). The impact of these and related variables on the supervisory relationship is likely to be “subtle and highly complex” (Nelson & Holloway, 1990, p. 478). Some researchers have argued that designations of gender and racial/ethnic identity are overly simplistic and insufficient in cultivating a deep understanding and appreciation of an individual’s cultural formation and its impact upon the supervisory process (Ellis & Ladany, 1997; Fong & Lease, 1997; Nelson, Gray, Friedlander, Ladany, and Walker, 2001). However, some categorical variables appear to be relevant in relation to lousy or nonproductive supervision. Specifically, two such variables are (a) supervisor experience (i.e., supervisee-only or supervisee and supervisor status), and (b) supervision context (i.e., an academic experience as a component of graduate study or post-graduate supervision in an applied setting).

Skovholt and Jennings (2004) observed “To be an expert, one must accumulate experiences that deepen, improve, and extend one’s vision of a given field or discipline” (p. 4). In terms of supervisory experience, Fong, Borders, Ethington, and Pitts (1997) and Granello (2002) suggested that the most compelling gains in higher-order counseling expertise emerge when supervisees experience the role of supervisor. Peace and Sprinthall (1998) asserted that understanding the complexity of both a counselor and a supervisor role promotes maturity and greater appreciation for the tasks and demands of supervision. Thus, familiarity with the roles of supervisee and supervisor could inform one’s appraisals of their supervised experiences as being beneficial or nonproductive.

Investigating problematic supervision would appear to be of value insofar as such findings might increase understanding about what not to do in clinical supervision. Given the inherent complexity involving the constructs of good supervision and lousy supervision, attempts to examine commonalities as well as differences at both ends of the spectrum of clinical supervision could prove beneficial in understanding more fully the supervision process. Moreover, given the increasing emphasis placed on the quality control aspect of clinical supervision by licensure and credentialing agencies along with training program accrediting bodies (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998), that only one study could be found in the professional literature investigating best and worst supervision experiences suggests the timeliness of such an effort. Additional study juxtaposing best and worst supervision experiences may contribute to greater clarity and understanding of factors that distinguish effective from ineffective supervision.

Magnuson and Wilcoxon (1998) observed that supervision in graduate school differs from supervision in post-graduate practice. For example, counselors-in-training are enrolled in an academic program with built-in structure, well-defined curricula, and typically have multiple supervisors at any point in time. Supervisors of prelicensed counselors, however, assume sole responsibility for the supervisee without the benefit of academi-

cally defined evaluation criteria or any prior unbiased assessments of the supervisee's strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, academic supervisors are able to closely monitor the work of the student supervisee, whereas the supervisor of a prelicensed counselor may have limited contact and limited opportunities to observe a supervisee's work. Additionally, while student supervisees pay tuition, in post-academic supervision there is a direct fee-for-service transaction that takes place between supervisors and supervisees. Finally, prelicensed supervisees are free to choose their supervisor. Each of these aspects of the supervisory relationship has implications for the process and outcome of the supervisory experience and the nature of the supervisory relationship, both in terms of exemplary and nonproductive supervisory practices.

Results and discussion will be offered concerning distinctions in factor patterns distinguishing between productive and nonproductive supervisory practices with respondents. The initial purpose of this study was to develop and validate an instrument to determine whether the domains of lousy supervision identified by Magnuson et al. (2000) could be validated quantitatively. A second purpose was to determine if the three domains of supervision reflect similar factor patterns for participants rating their best supervision experience and their worst supervision experience. A third purpose was to examine the influence of selected demographic variables on the participants' ratings. Specifically, the variables examined in this element of the study concerned supervisor experience and the contextual setting of supervision (i.e., graduate/academic or post-graduate).

Method

Participants

The population for this study was professional members of the American Counseling Association (ACA) who had completed a minimum of 5 years of postgraduate practice as a counselor and who had participated in face-to-face supervision at some point in their graduate or postgraduate careers. The professional membership level represents the highest level of membership, distinguished from associate or student status in the ACA. A national random sample of 1,000 participants was selected. No other screening criteria were used, although the hope was that random selection would yield a sample reflecting an array of practice settings, professional experience as a counselor, and supervisor experience.

Of the 1,000 questionnaire packets distributed, 290 questionnaires were returned, for a response rate of 29%. However, 12 of the questionnaires could not be used because they were either incomplete or were completed by a participant who did not meet the eligibility criteria for inclusion. A total of 278 usable questionnaires yielded a 27.8% response rate.

Instrumentation

A survey instrument was designed to elicit information regarding various aspects of supervisor behaviors. Items were designed to reflect supervisory behaviors that typically occur in one of the three domains of lousy supervision (administrative/organizational, cognitive/technical, and relational/affective) identified by Magnuson et al. (2000). The survey was a Likert-type scale consisting of 19 items.

To establish construct validity prior to data collection for the study, the instrument was distributed to five counseling professionals who agreed to serve as expert raters (four counselor educators and one student affairs administrator). All raters possessed a doctorate in counselor education, and each held a credential for clinical supervision in counseling. As a group, the number of years involved in the practice, teaching, or research of counselor supervision ranged from 5 to 30. The raters reported that during their careers the number of practitioners/students they supervised ranged from 15 to over 300. The raters also reported having had between two and six clinical supervisors each during their professional lives.

The expert raters were asked to consider each item of supervisory behavior in the instrument and to determine which of the three domains of supervision (i.e., administrative/organizational, technical/cognitive, and relational/affective) each item best fit. A tally of the rater responses revealed that on 11 of the 19 items of super-

visory behaviors, rater agreement was 100%. Rater response on two items revealed little agreement among the raters, thus these two items were discarded. Based on expert feedback, two items (“Gave too much or too little corrective feedback”) and (“Gave too much or too little affirming feedback”) were amended so that each item reflected a single inquiry (e.g., Gave too much corrective feedback,” “Gave too little corrective feedback,” etc.). This final revision, designated as the Supervisory Behavioral Profile (SBP), yielded an instrument with a total of 19 items.

Procedure

Survey packets were distributed by postal mail to the preferred mailing addresses indicated on participants’ ACA membership profile. No distinction was made concerning home or work designations for survey packets. Each packet contained an introductory letter explaining the purpose of the research along with a statement of confidentiality and informed consent, a form for reporting demographic data, two versions of the SBP, and a self-addressed stamped envelope for return.

Participants were asked to complete two versions of the SBP. The first version (SBP-Best) inquires about “my best supervisory experience,” and the second version (SBP-Worst) inquires about “my worst supervisory experience.” Responses to items on both versions range from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly Agree*). Specifically for the SBP-Best, each item represents a response to the sentence stem, “*As a description of my best supervisor. . .*” Lower scores on the SBP-Best represent supervisee perceptions of productive supervisor behavior. For the SBP-Worst, each item represents a response to the sentence stem, “*As a description of my worst supervisor. . .*” Higher scores represent supervisee perceptions of nonproductive supervisor behavior. Factor analyses were conducted to compare group data for participants rating their best and worst supervisory experiences.

A short demographic data form was included with the survey questionnaires to gather descriptive data about the participants and about their supervisors. These data included age, gender of participant, race/ethnicity of participant, gender of best and worst supervisor, and race/ethnicity of best and worst supervisor. Two additional variables of interest were also included on the demographic form. First, participants were asked to indicate their experience in a supervisory role. Specifically, participants were queried as to whether they had served in the role of *supervisee only* or in the role of *both supervisee and supervisor*. Secondly, participants were asked whether their best and worst experiences as a supervisee occurred as a graduate student or in their post-graduate status. A series of ANOVA’s were conducted to determine the impact of selected demographic variables on nonproductive supervision.

All procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Research Board (IRB) of The University of Alabama. No follow-up reminders or subsequent contact was made with participants to encourage higher rates of participation.

Results

Participants

Participant ages ranged from 30 to 79 years with a mean age of 52 and a median age of 53. Of the 267 participants who provided information regarding gender, 57 were male and 213 were female. Two hundred forty-eight were Caucasian, 10 were African American, 7 were Hispanic American, 5 selected “other,” and 5 did not respond to this inquiry. Seventy-one participants reported having a doctoral degree in counseling and 193 reported having a master’s degree in counseling.

The mean number of years of counseling experience among the participants was 17.1. When asked about certification status, 256 participants indicated they were certified, licensed, or both, while 18 reported no such credential.

The participants were asked to indicate their experience in a supervisory role. Specifically, participants were queried as to whether they had served in the role of *supervisee only* or in the role of *both supervisee and supervisor*. Seventy-seven participants indicated they had only served in the role of a supervisee, while 194 reported they had served as both supervisee and supervisor. Of the participants, 128 stated they had not taken had taken a graduate supervision course, while 142 indicated that they had taken such a course.

Another variable of inquiry was whether the participants' best and worst experiences as a supervisee occurred as a graduate student or in a post-graduate status. One hundred twenty-seven reported their best supervisory experience occurred during graduate study, while 144 reported their best experience occurred in a post-graduate context. By contrast, 125 indicated their worst supervisory experience occurred during graduate study, and 136 indicated their worst supervisory experience occurred in a post-graduate context.

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Data Analysis

Factor analyses were conducted to identify factor patterns related to participants' ratings of their best supervision experience and their worst supervision experience. Data were derived from participant responses on the SBP-Best and SBP-Worst. The results of these factor analyses are displayed in Tables 1 and 2.

For the SBP-Best, principal components factor analysis yielded three factors with a Kaiser-Guttman criterion of eigenvalue greater than 1.00. Because the criterion of eigenvalue greater than 1.00 may misjudge the most appropriate number of factors (Gorsuch, 1983), the scree plot was carefully examined. The scree plot indicated the total variance was best explained by a single-factor solution for the SBP-Best factor analysis.

The principal component factor analysis conducted on the SBP-Worst yielded a five-factor solution based on the Kaiser-Buttmen criterion of eigenvalue greater than 1.00. Examination of the scree plot indicated a two-factor solution was the most appropriate solution. Therefore, a varimax rotation was conducted using a two- and three-factor model. The two-factor solution was adopted because it provided the most distinct structure for ease of interpretability. Factor 1 was designated as "Relational" because the majority of the items and factor loadings reflected some aspect of the interpersonal relationship between supervisee and supervisor. Factor 2 was designated as "Technical/Cognitive" because the majority of the items reflected aspects of the supervisory process that were cognitively based or technical in nature. Table 2 presents the two factors with their respective items and factor loadings. Factor 1 consists of 11 items, accounting for 26.6% of the total variance. Factor 2 consists of 8 items, accounting for 19.43% of the total variance. Data generated from participant responses to the SBP-Best and SBP-Worst analyses reflected distinctly different factor patterns between participants rating their best supervisory experience when compared to their worst supervisory experience. The reliability of both instruments was also assessed. The alpha coefficient for the SBP-Best was .92, and the alpha coefficient for the SPB-Worst was .87.

Because the emphasis of this study was on lousy supervision, ANOVAs were conducted to determine the influence of supervision context on SBP-Worst scores. The first ANOVA compared total scores, which could range from 19 to 76. Respondents who had been both a supervisor and supervisee had more negative perceptions of their worst supervision experience ($M = 49.82$, $SD = 9.75$) than those who had only been a supervisee ($M = 46.53$, $SD = 11.36$), $F(1,243) = 4.92$, $p < .05$. Comparisons were also made by Relational and Technical/

Cognitive subscores. The possible range of Relational scores was from 10 to 44. A significant difference was found on the Relational subscale when comparing counselors whose worst supervision experience was as after completing graduate school ($M = 29.76, SD = 6.94$) with those whose worst supervision experience occurred while in graduate school ($M = 27.53, SD = 7.07$), $F(1,246) = 5.69, p < .05$. The counselors whose worst supervision experience occurred after completing graduate school had more negative perceptions of their supervisors.

The possible range of Cognitive/Technical scores was from 9 to 36. A significant difference was found when comparing the Cognitive/Technical scores of participants who had both a supervisee and a supervisor ($M = 17.26, SD = 3.95$) with those who had been only a supervisee ($M = 18.54, SD = 4.11$), $F(1,249) = 4.98, p < .05$. The counselors who had been only a supervisee had more negative perceptions of their worst supervision experience than those who had been both a supervisee and a supervisor.

Table 1

Factor Analysis Results for Supervisory Behavioral Profile - Best

Item	Factor 1
Showed insensitivity to my developmental needs	.787
Showed insensitivity to my professional development needs (e.g., lack of professional role modeling, lack of commitment to my professional growth)	.745
Failed to appreciate my theoretical model or orientation	.718
Gave too little affirming feedback	.715
Provided vague feedback	.715
Was an unskilled supervisor	.712
Avoided issues that arose between the two of us	.710
Was an unreliable professional resource (e.g., used supervision time to provide therapy, confidential information disclosed)	.691
Gave too little corrective feedback	.690
Imposed his or her personal agenda	.687
Gave too much corrective feedback	.668
Failed to provide standards for accountability (e.g., expectations not clarified, evaluative criteria not articulated)	.628
Was an unskilled practitioner	.591
Gave too much affirming feedback	.587
Focused primarily on microskills and techniques	.580
Was intrusive (e.g., micromanaging, controlling)	.570
Failed to clarify expectations for supervision	.566
Relied on a single primary theoretical model of counseling	.537
Failed to provide a safe environment during supervision	.503

Table 2
Factor Analysis Results for Supervisory Behavioral Profile - Worst

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2
Gave too much corrective feedback	.790	-.073
Was intrusive (e.g., micromanaging, controlling)	.764	.010
Failed to appreciate my theoretical model or orientation	.724	.134
Imposed his or her personal agenda	.695	.303
Showed insensitivity to my developmental needs	.681	.411
Gave too little affirming feedback	.678	-.034
Focused primarily on microskills and techniques	.644	.027
Relied on a single primary theoretical model of counseling	.568	.074
Showed insensitivity to my professional development needs (e.g., lack of professional role modeling, lack of commitment to my professional growth)	.543	.481
Failed to provide a safe environment during supervision	.492	.284
Avoided issues that arose between the two of us	.399	.391
Failed to provide standards for accountability (e.g., Expectations not clarified, evaluative criteria not articulated)	.075	.743
Gave too little corrective feedback	-.280	.688
Failed to clarify expectations for supervision	.174	.638
Was an unskilled supervisor	.312	.644
Provided vague feedback	.075	.635
Was an unskilled practitioner	.291	.509
Was an unreliable professional resource (e.g., used super- vision time to provide therapy, confidential information disclosed)	.364	.503
Gave too much affirming feedback	-.219	.415

Discussion

The initial purpose of the study was to develop and validate an instrument to determine whether the domains of lousy supervision identified by Magnuson, Wilcoxon, and Norem (2000) could be validated quantitatively. The findings did not provide validation of the three domains of lousy supervision identified by Magnuson et al. (2000). One possible explanation could be that the instrument used in the present study lacked a sufficient number of items to represent each domain of lousy supervision. Additionally, Magnuson et al.'s findings may not have been confirmed because the respondents participating in their study were exclusively classified as experienced supervisors, while a portion of the participants in the present study (27.8%) had never served as supervisors. The data did, however, identify two domains of nonproductive supervision that appear to correspond to the relational/affective domain and the technical/cognitive domain as described by Magnuson et al. Further, the data were consistent with previous findings reported by Gray, Ladany, Walker, and Ancis (2001) and Ellis (2001), who noted multiple and multifaceted aspects of nonproductive supervision in their outcome measures with student supervisees.

A second purpose of this study was to determine if these three domains of supervision reflect similar factor patterns for participants rating their best supervision experience as well as their worst supervision experience. The findings suggest that good supervision is different from poor supervision. Magnuson et al.'s (2000) speculation that lousy supervision may not be straightforward and easily defined corresponds to the evidence found in this study based on different factor patterns for "best" versus "worst" supervisors. In this regard, the

complexity involved in defining the constructs of good supervision versus lousy supervision underscores Watkins' (1997) observation that ineffective supervision may not be the exact opposite of effective supervision.

A recurring theme in the supervision literature suggests that productive supervision is associated with effectively managing multiple tasks that are administrative and relational in nature (Bordin, 1983; Cohen & DeBetz, 1977; Holloway, 1995). One context for examining this theme emerges from the discrimination model of supervision (Bernard, 1979). This model depicts three possible supervision foci (i.e., intervention skills, conceptualization skills, and personalization skills) used in conjunction with three possible supervisory roles (i.e., teacher, counselor, and consultant). From this context, a one-factor solution as the preferred representation of data from participants describing their best supervisor suggests that effective supervisors can navigate smoothly among the differing roles and functions of supervision relative to administrative and relational elements of supervision. By contrast, the two-factor solution to represent the profile of participants' worst supervisors could be viewed as a failure of supervisors to integrate and manage the multiple functions and foci of supervision to yield productive outcomes. The findings from the current study appear to suggest that failure to effectively manage these aspects of supervision could be a critical aspect of nonproductive supervision.

A third purpose of the study was to examine the influence of selected demographic variables on the factor patterns for participants' ratings. Statistically significant differences emerged in the categories of supervision setting and supervisor experience. On the Relational subscale, data revealed that participants describing their worst supervisory experiences occurred following their graduate study. Although this finding is somewhat challenging to interpret due to the scarcity of professional literature addressing the issue of academic versus postgraduate supervision, a qualitative study conducted by Magnuson and Wilcoxon (1998) provided a possible link. Magnuson and Wilcoxon's study investigated needs and practices associated with clinical supervision of prelicensed (i.e., postgraduate) counselors. Supervisor ambiguity emerged as a prominent theme reflecting uncertainty among participants related to their expectations of supervisor competence. Perhaps the findings of this study related to postgraduate supervision may reflect the ambiguity among participants similar to that noted by Magnuson and Wilcoxon.

Two statistically significant findings emerged in the category of supervision status. When compared by overall SBP-Worst scores, the participants who had served in the roles of both supervisee and supervisor held more negative views of their worst supervision experience than participants who had only served in the role of supervisee. This difference was also found when comparing the participants on the Cognitive/Technical subscale of the SBP-Worst. A possible contributor to this outcome may be that participants with experience as both supervisee and supervisor possessed a broader range of experience to draw on when rating their worst supervision experience and are therefore able to examine more critically the differences in those supervision experiences. Such a conclusion would be consistent with the research conducted by Fong et al. (1997) and Granello (2002) that suggests that the most compelling gains in high order counseling skills are brought about by the supervisee's supervised experience, a key component of enhancing cognitive complexity. This view is also corroborated by Peace and Sprinthall (1998) in their conclusion that cognitive development should assume a more critical role in the training of future psychotherapists and should be represented as a specific goal of clinical supervision.

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution and due consideration of its limitations. As an initial limitation, the sample was not representative of the population. It was primarily female (77%) and Caucasian (90%). Due to the unequal representation of participants in this study, the results may not be generalizable to other organizations, ethnicities, or even across genders. As a second limitation, the design of the instrument required participants to respond negatively to negatively phrased items. Such a design may have encouraged a test-taking mindset among participants and influenced the nature of their responses, thereby compromising the integrity of results. However, despite these limitations, unique elements of the study were that participants were recruited via their professional membership status in ACA and that they were professionals working in a variety of practice settings from across the US. Additionally, the study represented an attempt to examine quantitatively some of the findings previously noted in more qualitative methodologies focused on nonproductive supervision.

The findings from this study were projected to have implications concerning (a) early identification of supervisors with less than adequate performance, (b) early intervention to remediate supervisor, and (c) early intervention to mitigate potential negative effects to supervisee (Watkins, 1997). Additionally, the results of this study were projected as a possible contribution to greater understanding regarding the distinguishing features of effective and ineffective supervision as a matter of supervisor training in counselor education programs. Similarly, quantitative validation of a model of detrimental supervisory behavior offered potential assistance for (a) counselor educators involved in preparing counselors to supervise, (b) practitioners who may be supervising pre-licensed counselors, and (c) practitioners receiving supervision.

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