The Supervisory Working Alliance with International Student Trainees in Counseling Programs

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Abstract: Little is known about the training needs of international student trainees in counseling and psychology programs. Supervision as one of the training components may serve as an important medium to identify and support international student trainees' developmental needs. Supervisors may serve as an important role in supporting the development of international student trainees' counseling self-efficacy through the creation of supervisory working alliance between the supervisors and supervisees. However, to what extent does the quality of this supervisory working alliance serve as a support to these students' growth is unknown. This paper will attempt to explore the effectiveness of this supervisory working alliance from the student trainees' standpoint and to what extent the alliance has served to assist them in becoming culturally competent (be able to provide counseling effectively in two cultures).

Introduction

In this exploratory pilot study, four international students who are enrolled in a mid-western university shared their story of their counseling supervision experience. Qualitative analysis of transcripts of audio-taped semi-structured interviews revealed four themes: (a) experiential learning, (b) personal growth, (c) relationships and (d) language. Results may provide supervisors and counselor educators with direction in facilitating international students into the counseling profession.

Supervision has long been recognized as a critical element of counselor training. Supervision is viewed as the primary vehicle in the counseling profession though which trainees provide services to clients in a monitored environment. Supervisors provide an endorsement of their supervisees’ fitness and ability to work as counseling practitioners (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004). In other words, along with facilitating their supervisees’ growth, they also play a role as gatekeepers for the counseling profession. Vast attention has been given to issues and dynamics associated with cross-cultural supervision in the past decade. Cross-cultural supervision generally refers to situations in which the supervisee, supervisor, and/or clients differ from each other culturally, such as in race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, or other cultural variables. The dynamics associated with these cultural differences can affect the content, process, and outcome of supervision (e.g. Bernard & Goodyear, 2004; Brown & Landrum-Brown, 1995; Garrett et al., 2001; Constantine, 1997). One group of supervisees that has yet to gain attention in the literature is international students.

International students are students on U.S. campuses who are not U.S. citizens, permanent citizens, or refugees (Chin, 2002). The exact number of international students in counseling education and applied psychology programs is unknown, yet the number may be sizeable given that 3% of the students in U.S. colleges and universities are international students. Of the international students, it is estimated that 22% are enrolled in master’s-level degree programs and 18% in doctoral degree programs (Institute of International Education, 2005). Although the numbers of international students enrolled in counseling and psychology training programs have not been regularly recorded and reported, it is probable that their presence is significant. Leong and Blustein
(2000) have predicted that U.S. applied psychology (such as counseling psychology) programs are likely to see growing numbers of international students in the future.

Nevertheless, international students in counseling and psychology training programs are a diverse group representing a large number of countries, different religions, languages, age groups, and cultural backgrounds. Given this diversity, it is almost impossible and perhaps unfair to generalize the experiences of international students. Although international students are likely to experience some of the same issues in supervision as U.S. students, they may also face unique challenges that have not been considered in the existing literature.

Counseling supervision takes place in a relational context, making supervisory relationship of paramount importance. This relationship has been viewed as a working alliance, with specific components being the goals, tasks, and bond in the interactions (Bordin, 1983). In Bordin’s model, the supervisory working alliance is viewed as collaboration for change that involves mutual agreement and understanding between supervisor and supervisee on the (a) goals of supervision, (b) tasks of supervision, and (c) emotional bond between the supervisor and supervisee. Supervisor may play an important part in the development of the clinical competency of all students, but they may be especially important for the professional growth of international students. International students in practicum training are often managing two roles at once: developing clinical competence and conducting counseling in a nonnative language. Two central areas in international student supervision are; (a) counseling self-efficacy, and (b) supervisory working alliance. Counseling self-efficacy is related to an international student’s beliefs in his or her capabilities to effectively counsel a client. Most if not all international students will have to work with supervisors, peers, and clients who are culturally different than them during their training program.

At this point, it is vital to the counseling training programs to have a better understanding of the international students’ supervisory experience as they pursue their practicum training and the U.S. counseling graduate programs in general. Specifically, the study explored international students’ supervision experience in U.S. counseling graduate programs, their understanding of supervisory working alliance/relationship, their sense of counseling self-efficacy in relation to their supervision experience and their sense of professional identity as a bicultural counselor. The aim of this study is to expand the literature on the supervision of international students who were enrolled in graduate counseling programs by giving them the opportunity to share their supervisory experiences. Specifically, the study is interested in identifying distinct factors that international student trainees identified as being important in their training during individual supervision and in developing counseling self-efficacy.

Research Questions

This study explored the supervision experiences of international students in U.S. counseling graduate programs. In keeping with the guidelines for designing and focusing on qualitative research, the method of inquiry in this study was driven by the following research questions: (a) how effective is the supervisory working alliance from the international students’ stand point, and (b) to what extend does the quality of the supervisory working alliance serves as a support to the
international students’ growth in becoming bi-culturally competent, and (c) if more training were available, what would international students like to have?

Method
A qualitative approach was used to explore the effectiveness of supervisory working alliance from the student trainees' standpoint. According to Strauss & Corbin (1998), qualitative research pays attention to meaning and focuses on how individuals make sense of their experiences. Participants were interviewed and their stories were analyzed using the constant comparative method.

Participants
The participants were four international students who were enrolled in counseling graduate programs in the department of counselor education and counseling psychology in a mid-western university and had both individual and group supervision through their practicum/internship. All of the students in the sample were female. During the period of the study there were 46 international students in active enrollment status (36 females and 10 males). The department has approximately 964 active students in various counseling programs and only 5% of the student body is international students.

Procedure
Students were selected using purposive sampling since the study is only limited to international students who had experienced supervision through their practicum/internship. At the beginning of the interview, participants were presented with an informed consent letter and emphasized the confidentiality of participants’ responses. Semi-structured interview were used using the following questions:

1. How do international students describe their supervision experiences in U.S. counseling graduate programs?
2. How do international students describe their understanding of supervisory working alliance/relationship?
3. How do international students describe their counseling self-efficacy in relation to the supervisory working alliance/relationship?
4. How do international students describe their development of professional identity as a counselor?

Transcript data were coded and analyzed using the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Recurring words, phrases and themes in the transcripts were coded, commonalities and contradictions within and among the interviews were noted. While constantly comparing the data, themes and meanings were analyzed to develop theoretical interpretations and implications of the data. After the data had been analyzed, results were compared with the literature to determine the degree to which the findings confirmed prior research.

Results
Overall, participants are satisfied with the supervision that they received. The analysis of the data resulted in the identification of four major themes that were central to the effectiveness of supervisory working alliance for international students. The general themes emerging from the interviews that seemed consistent with previous researches are supervision encourages (a) experiential
learning and (b) personal growth while themes mediated by issues specific to international students were: (c) relationships and (d) language.

a) Experiential learning
Based on the interviews, satisfaction with their supervision experiences was expressed by attainment of knowledge and skills from the participants’ interaction with their supervisor. Most participants commented on the difficulty of transferring knowledge obtained in class into practice. Participants highlighted how they view their supervisor as a source of knowledge and guidance and they have expected for more structure and constructive feedback during supervision. It is understandable that students that are in the earlier stages of training may expect more attention and guidance from their supervisor compared to those at a more advanced level. These findings support research on development theories, which describe transitional growth from confusion, anxiety and dependence to confidence and independence (Bruss & Kopala, 1993).

b) Personal growth
Participants mentioned about the personal gains they had achieved during their practicum/internship. An increased self-awareness is a critical dimension of development that is linked to the supervisory working alliance. Participants reported “I have gained a lot of insight about myself as I am willing to take more risk and make mistakes” and “Friends back home tell me I’ve changed and I listen more”. Participants also reported that gaining a different view of themselves allow them to reevaluate their future aspirations and goals.

c) Relationships
From the interviews, participants’ view of the effectiveness of the supervisory alliance is largely influenced by their perception of the quality of the relationship they have with their supervisors. Participants that reported lack of satisfaction with the alliance have had negative experiences with their supervisor such as being criticized for their English language difficulties and being judged, received harsh or insufficient feedback which had directly affect supervisees’ confidence level and counseling self-efficacy. Participants who perceived their supervisors as supportive and accepting reported good practicum/internship experience. The impact of relationship not only affects the supervisee but may also have impacted their relationship with clients. Participants expected supervisors to be open and encouraging in building a stronger and trusting supervisory relationship. The perception of positive alliance with the supervisor significantly reduced the fears and anxiety of the practicum. In addition, participants reported that the evaluative nature of supervision along with power differences in the supervision relationship may have an affect on their willingness to self-disclose and express their training needs.

d) Language
In general, participants articulated that one of the challenges of their practicum experience is that they have to conduct most of the counseling sessions in English which is often not their native language. Many if not all international students are bilingual. Participants felt that supervisors are prone to comment on their English proficiency rather than focusing on their ability to provide counseling. One participant reported a poor alliance with a supervisor who was also bilingual. It was assumed that matching of some cultural
variables between supervisor and supervisee is likely to improve the supervisory alliance. Studies have found that cultural or racial matching of supervisor and supervisee were not found to be related to supervisee ratings of supervision satisfaction or supervisory working alliance (Gatmon et al., 2001; Hilton et al., 1995). For this particular participant, she reported that sharing a similar aspect (the fact that the supervisor is also bilingual, although English is the supervisor’s first language) did not help and has resulted in the rupture of the supervisory relationship.

**Discussion and recommendations**

This study intends to identify the dynamics that contribute to the effectiveness of supervisory working alliance with international students. Themes of experiential learning, personal growth, relationships, language and opportunity emerged as participants discussed their supervision experiences during their practicum/internship. As mentioned before, results from this study supported much of the limited literature. However, it also yielded some interesting observations regarding this sample of international students.

International students are likely to be shaped by their previous educational experiences and expectations. For students who came from educational systems where student-teacher relationships are hierarchical and clearly defined, international students may be overwhelmed by the lack of clarity in their relationship with their supervisor and some may seek to establish relationships closer to what they are expecting to find. They are likely to expect hierarchical relationships with supervisor where supervisor exercises higher control of the supervision. Students expect supervisor to take the initiative and adopt a role close to being a guide or parent. Students may expect clear directions, and guidance from the supervisor, whom they will hold in high esteem, and they often have high expectations of the relationship. They also assume that the supervisor is very knowledgeable in their area of study. International students, especially the ones who came from a collectivistic framework, are often unprepared for the independence and isolation in their learning journey. Furthermore, the expectation of developing their own counseling style may be culturally foreign to them.

Although the findings are exploratory and preliminary, they prompt considerable suggestions that may help provide a glimpse of international students’ training needs and expectations in supervision. A strong supervisory alliance is viewed as a vital component in international students’ professional identity development. However, a strong emphasis is placed on how supervisors are willing to spend considerable attention towards issues unique to international students during supervision time. A more interpersonal and informal approach might be more appealing for international students. Supervisors working with international students especially those in beginning level of training should take into consideration the need for support, acceptance and encouragement as their struggles and challenges may be different from U.S. students. It is interesting to find that the international participants in this study did not mention cultural differences as their main barrier in having satisfactory supervisory working alliance. The alliance were likely to be perceived as stronger when supervisors displayed a genuine interest in welcoming and accepting international students’ differences and uniqueness into the supervisory
As well as the practicum experience as a whole. Findings of this study confirm the notion that international students faced greater challenges in navigating the counseling training programs. Due to their limited exposure to the U.S. culture and the relatively limited exposure to clinical training experiences, international students often feel that their training is almost not enough for them to be able to be a competent counseling practitioner. We suggest that international students engage in counseling-related activities beyond what their training has to offer. For example, it is recommended that international students seek personal or vocational counseling to assist them in life and career transitions. At the same time, being in a client role and observing their counselors may serve as a catalyst towards their learning experiences and understanding of the helping profession. Counseling programs could also complement the international students’ lack of training experience by offering an extra clinical experience prior to the practicum.

Conclusion

This study explored the supervisory experience of international students during their counseling practicum training. Although in general, international students expressed considerable satisfaction with their supervisors and the supervisory relationship, it is important to highlight that international students may face additional challenges in supervision and in developing their counseling skills compared to the U.S. students. This may sound like more time and energy is needed in filling gaps in students’ background knowledge and in international students’ practical experience from the supervisor stand point. However, perhaps what are really needed for an international supervisee are an empathic ear, and the sense of being heard and understood from others.

It is important that interpretations of this study be made with caution. As the study is a pilot study and exploratory in nature, and the sample is limited to only four international student trainees who were purposively selected, the results of this study may not be generalizable to other students. The researchers wish to expand this study in the near future in order to collect more concrete data in this area.

It is hoped that these findings will inspire further investigation into how effective supervisory alliance could help international counseling students develop a sense of professional identity/self-efficacy as counselors. Perspectives on supervision and supervisory working alliance of international students should also be sought from the perspectives of supervisors and counselor educators. Future quantitative research would be advantageous and may provide a more generalizable result, thus adding new perspectives in improving the effectiveness of counselor education programs for international students and support their training needs.

References


