Clinical Supervision for Licensure: A Consumer’s Guide

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Graduates of counselor education programs simultaneously receive their diplomas and the challenge of obtaining requisite supervised experience in order to be licensed, certified, or registered. This article features recommendations to assist counselors-in-training and entry-level, prelicensed counselors in (a) planning for postgraduate supervision and experience, (b) selecting a supervisor, (c) contracting for supervision, and (d) participating in professionally rewarding experiences.

Accreditation, licensure, certification, and other significant advances in the counseling profession have contributed to consistent academic training standards with increased levels of rigor. Requirements for postgraduate supervised experience are among many related changes. Essentially, postgraduate supervision and experience have become informal culminating components of the training sequence for counselors working in applied settings (Magnuson & Wilcoxon, 1998). Although accreditation has increased the standardization of academic preparation, the standard of consistency and coordination applied to postgraduate training has not been so rigorous.

Ryan (1978) called attention to inadequate mechanisms for systematic articulation from academic to postgraduate supervision experiences. Although Ryan’s observation related to preparation practices in the late 1970s, his observation seems notably contemporary. Many graduates of counselor education programs simultaneously receive their diplomas from nurturing academic programs and face the challenge of independently obtaining the requisite supervised postgraduate experience.

Participants in studies concerning supervision practices for prelicensed counselors have reported that their preparation for postacademic supervision has been limited (Magnuson, 1995; Magnuson & Wilcoxon, 1998). In one study, a practitioner participant asked, “How do you learn about supervision?...
So, what is supervision supposed to be? I just don’t have the foggiest idea” (Magnuson, 1995, p. 92). Similarly, a participating counselor educator emphasized concerns for students at the completion of their graduate studies:

They need to come out of their clinical experiences with the counselor educators linking them into models, to mentors, to continued professional development, and to really good training experiences. . . . It’s a huge omission. . . . I don’t even call it a gap. I call it a gorge. (Magnuson, 1995, pp. 92–93)

Such observations corroborate Ryan’s (1978) observation concerning the lack of clarity concerning postgraduate supervision indicated by many new graduates.

This article is predicated on the premise that graduates of counselor education programs need to know what to expect from supervision and how to obtain the highest quality supervision. It is intended to be a guide that will assist counselors-in-training as they (a) make arrangements for postgraduate supervision and experience, (b) select a supervisor, (c) contract for supervision, and (d) participate in a mutually beneficial experience. Thus, the intent of this article is to assist entry-level counselors in becoming more informed about postgraduate supervision.

INITIATING THE PROCESS

The general purposes of clinical supervision required by licensure boards or similar bodies are to (a) promote professional development; (b) monitor the work of less experienced counselors to protect clients’ welfare; (c) ensure that legal, ethical, and professional guidelines are followed; and (d) ensure that licensure applicants demonstrate appropriate levels of competence to practice autonomously (Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, 1993, Standard 2; Bernard & Goodyear, 1998; Magnuson & Wilcoxon, 1998). In addition to external requirements for postgraduate supervision, entry-level counselors typically have additional specific learning and performance goals for their early professional years. For example, they may wish to strengthen essential counseling skills, achieve competence for working with specialized client populations, or learn more about various professional topics. Clear definition of personal goals can guide these entry-level counselors in designing a beneficial postgraduate supervision experience.

In addition to examining what they wish to gain from supervision, supervisees should also consider supervision approaches and styles that are conducive to their professional growth (Kottler & Hazler, 1997). Some supervisors observe counseling sessions on video monitors or behind one-way mirrors; others review tapes after sessions. Supervisors may work conjointly with their supervisees. They may adopt an individual approach or combine individual and group supervision formats. Thus, supervisees should consider the modalities in which they learn best by reflecting on previous supervision experiences, consulting with peers about various supervision modalities and styles, and reading about supervision.
Fee structures for supervision may also govern decisions in supervisor selection. Qualified counselors in private practice often supervise with a fee arrangement. Some agencies provide no-cost supervision to their prelicensed counselors as an internal employee benefit. Costs for supervision vary. For example, some supervisors assess an hourly amount that may be commensurate with client charges. Other supervisors base their fees on the supervisees’ income from clients. Although paying for supervision is not an option for all entry-level counselors, autonomy in selecting a supervisor may warrant the additional expense.

Counselors-in-training can become more informed consumers of supervision by reviewing various documents adopted by professional associations. For example the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (1995) contains a section addressing standards for teaching, training, and supervision, and the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC; 1998) has outlined Standards for Ethical Practice of Clinical Supervision. The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision’s (ACES; 1993) Ethical Guidelines for Counseling Supervisors amplifies roles and responsibilities of supervisors in the context of professional ethics. The Standards for Counseling Supervisors (Supervision Interest Network, 1990) offers additional guidance for selecting supervisors. In summary, initiating the process of postgraduate supervision begins with the supervisee devoting considerable time and attention to preliminary issues such as regulatory requirements, learning goals, supervision modalities, cost, and recommendations from varied professional sources.

SELECTING A SUPERVISOR

Although various factors contribute to productive supervision, many counselors and supervisors believe that the relationship between supervisors and supervisees is critical (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998; Bordin, 1983; Fox, 1989; Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998; White & Russell, 1995). Thus, once entry-level counselors gain information about preliminary considerations for supervision, selecting a supervisor is perhaps the most important decision they face. We encourage supervisees to view themselves as consumers of supervision in the same way they are consumers of other professional services. From this perspective, they may conduct preliminary inquiries with peers, consult former counselor educators, and request copies of prospective supervisors’ professional disclosure statements. Such activities may lead to a request for an initial interview with potential supervisors.

In a reciprocal manner, supervisees should respect prospective supervisors’ selection preferences and procedures. The magnitude of supervisors’ responsibilities extends beyond supervisees to include current and future clients, regulatory bodies, professional colleagues, the counseling profession, and the general public. Thus, judicious supervisors typically engage in supervisory contracts only after careful deliberation. They may require
an interview as well as a review of materials representing cumulative academic training (e.g., portfolios). Prospective supervisors often request written authorization to consult with university faculty members and internship supervisors regarding supervisees' previous experiences and professional needs. They may ask supervisees to identify limitations or gaps in their training. Although such inquiry may be intimidating, it actually demonstrates supervisors' wisdom and desire to examine compatibility with supervisee candidates prior to entering a formal relationship.

**Supervisor Qualities and Satisfactory Supervision**

Entries in the professional literature provide information about supervisors' attitudes and practices that are generally equated with effective and satisfactory supervision (Allen, Szollos, & Williams, 1986; Shanfield, Matthews, & Hetherly, 1993). The literature tends to support the premise that competence as a supervisor requires preliminary knowledge, skills, experience, and effectiveness as a counselor (Carifio & Hess, 1987). Effective supervisors promote supervisees' professional development by communicating, modeling, and teaching those skills (Dye & Borders, 1990; White & Russell, 1995). Moreover, such supervisors are knowledgeable about the process of supervision and strategies for working effectively with supervisees (Dye & Borders, 1990; White & Russell, 1995). However, these technical skills are also balanced by facilitation skills and personal traits conducive to establishing a professional relationship (Dye & Borders, 1990). Competent supervisors define the parameters of supervision in the context of a supervisor–supervisee contract. They also adhere to the *Ethical Guidelines for Counseling Supervisors* (ACES, 1993) and recognize their responsibilities to their supervisees as well as to their supervisees' clients (Nance, 1995). Responsible supervisors assess the skills of their supervisees and structure supervision accordingly (Swanson & O'Saben, 1993). Competent supervisors acquire adequate information to evaluate supervisees' progress (Borders, 1995) and systematically respond to them with specific feedback (Allen et al., 1986; Carifio & Hess, 1987). Thus, effective supervisors are able to balance their responsibilities related to client welfare and supervisees' professional growth. Such balance is not easily achieved but, when present, typically promotes a satisfactory supervision experience.

**Supervisor Qualities and Unsatisfactory Supervision**

By contrast, less effective supervisors may be indirect, avoidant, and preoccupied with their own problems. They may respond to distractions and interruptions during supervision sessions and demonstrate intolerance for divergent points of view (Allen et al., 1986).

In their study of "lousy" supervision, Magnuson, Wilcoxon, and Norem (2000, p. 189) suggested that ineffective and counterproductive supervision
may result when counselors who have not received adequate training and supervision accept responsibility for supervising other counselors. Participants in this study associated lousy supervision with intolerance, inflexibility, and professional apathy. More specifically, they suggested that ineffective supervisors neglect initial clarification of expectations and assessment of supervisees' needs, give vague and abstract feedback, and give excessive corrective or affirming appraisal. In addition, less effective supervisors may impose their own agendas without regard for supervisees' theoretical orientation.

*Supervisor–Supervisee Fit*

Supervisees are cautioned to consider potential limitations of and exceptions to the foregoing discussion. Because of the idiosyncratic nature of supervisory relationships, benefits derived from supervisory styles, approaches, and interventions vary among supervisees. Furthermore, supervisees' needs are dynamic. During various stages of their professional development, they benefit from increased latitude for making counseling decisions and from exposure to different counseling orientations (Stoltenberg et al., 1998).

Interpersonal qualities and preferences also vary greatly. Thus, one of the most important meetings between supervisors and supervisees occurs when they first discuss a possible supervisory relationship. During this initial encounter, lasting impressions may develop that influence the decision to proceed with supervision, the quality of the interpersonal relationship, and the nature of supervisory processes.

Counselor supervisors have ethical guidelines that govern information they provide to potential supervisees (ACES, 1993; NBCC, 1998). Thus, prospective supervisees can expect supervisors to discuss (a) their professional credentials, experience, training, and areas of expertise; (b) their philosophies of counseling and supervision; (c) their expectations and requirements; (d) parameters related to legal and ethical responsibilities; and (e) ethical codes to which they adhere (Magnuson, Norem, & Wilcoxon, 2000; McCarthy et al., 1995). Financial arrangements, if appropriate, should also be established (Magnuson et al., 2000).

To explore theoretical compatibility, Moore (1998) suggested that inquiring supervisees pose a case for a prospective supervisor to conceptualize. In this process, supervisees may gain insight related to (a) supervisors' general orientation and beliefs about counseling, (b) the consistency between the approach to which they ascribe and actual practice, and (c) the general goals that guide their work.

**FORMALIZING THE AGREEMENT AND ENGAGING THE PROCESS**

Once a supervisor and supervisee agree to a relationship, they often prepare a written contract. As foundational elements of productive supervisory rela-
tionships, contracts document discussion and agreement on (a) reciprocal expectations, (b) supervision goals, (c) proposed methods for achieving goals, and (d) procedures for evaluating progress toward achieving goals (Fox, 1983). Contracts also include ethical guidelines to be followed, procedures for emergencies, and logistical parameters such as fee arrangement and meeting schedules (Osborn & Davis, 1996; Storm, 1997; Todd, 1997). As consumers of supervision, supervisees are encouraged to be sure their desires and goals for supervision are addressed in the contract. Supervisees should also expect supervisors to clarify what they expect and require of their supervisees (Kottler & Hazler, 1997). Collaborative preparation of the contract often becomes a template for the interaction between supervisors and supervisees throughout the supervision. In many ways, the process of preparing the supervision contract may be as important as the content of the document.

Although the literature is replete with entries related to effective supervision (as previously discussed), less attention has been given to supervisees’ roles in establishing positive supervisory relationships. Proficient supervisors receive training and supervision related to effective approaches, modalities, and techniques for supervision. However, no supervisor is prepared to read supervisees’ minds. Thus, supervisees contribute to positive working relationships by requesting feedback, seeking clarification of instructions, examining contract modifications, and engaging in dialogue to examine the supervisory relationship. White and Russell (1995) further suggested that supervisees’ contributions to successful supervision include “personal maturity and emotional health, acceptance of the role of the supervisee, cognitive abilities, relationship skills, and technical skills” (p. 41).

Kottler and Hazler (1997) noted that relationships in the context of supervision are complicated by a curious tension. On one hand, a working alliance characterized by mutual respect, authenticity, trust, and open communication provides the foundation for productive supervisory relationships (Bordin, 1983; Fox, 1983, 1989). Conversely, supervisors are the legal and ethical guardians of client welfare and gatekeepers of the profession; thus, it would be highly unprofessional for them to endorse supervisees for licensure who have failed to demonstrate minimum competencies or who display professional incompetence (ACES, 1993, Standards 2.12 & 2.13; NBCC, 1998, Standard 10). Supervisors’ gatekeeping and evaluation responsibilities can contribute to conflict and tension within the supervision relationship; however, supervisees have indicated that they resent licensure boards for awarding licenses to incompetent colleagues (Magnuson, 1995).

Although the nature of a supervisory contract assigns a degree of hierarchical power to supervisors, supervisees are by no means powerless in this relationship. In many respects, their dynamic influence on the quality of the relationship is equal to or greater than that of supervisors. Both supervisors and supervisees have the capacity to thwart the purposes or sabotage the efforts of each other.
Supervisory relationships generally progress through phases (D'Andrea, 1989; Hess, 1987; Stoltenberg et al., 1998). As supervisors and supervisees gain trust in each other, in the relationship, and in the supervisory process, anxiety often diminishes and energy often emerges. Hess (1987) characterized supervisees' posture during this transition as "an apprentice role" leading to "a greater degree of autonomy" (p. 252). When professional growth continues, supervisees recognize their own integrated sense of professional identity and evidence of more mature counseling skills. Entry-level counselors are not without a context for such emerging relationships because, if successful, they would have encountered similar developments during their time as graduate students.

Although typical supervisory relationships are time limited, the final stages often evoke ambivalence for both supervisors and supervisees. Supervisees may be simultaneously excited about practicing autonomously and insecure about proceeding without the consistent and well-established support provided by the supervisor. Similar to other areas of development, professional transitions often entail loss of former, obsolete identities while accepting somewhat unfamiliar roles. Once again, supervisees may recognize corresponding clinical experiences as they encounter their final stages of formal supervision. Indeed, ambivalent feelings and thoughts experienced by counselors and clients as they approach the conclusion of counseling often parallel reactions at the culmination of supervision. Supervisees are encouraged to discuss such experiences as they participate in the final evaluation and redefinition of their relationships with supervisors.

CLOSING COMMENTS

Through the years, former students and friends have visited with us about their experiences as supervised prelicensed counselors. At one extreme, counselors have said their supervision was essentially a dreaded requirement and "another hoop" through which they had to pass in order to be licensed. Conversely, a prelicensed counselor told us,

> I think everybody needs to have some form of supervision or consultation... Just to have some place to process cases... For me it is incredibly valuable... There have been times when it was like, "Get me to the emergency room!" (Magnuson, 1995, p. 53)

This article has been fashioned as a consumers' guide for counselors in formalizing satisfactory postacademic supervision. Few entries in the professional literature directly address supervision for prelicensed counselors, thus some recommendations are based on our anecdotal experiences as supervisees, supervisors, professors, and researchers. We offer these ideas as suggestions that are neither exhaustive nor conclusive. Practicality and forethought in arranging postgraduate supervision involve choice and considered judgment as supervisees pursue a deliberate path for supervisor
selection rather than simply accepting faculty members or field supervisors assigned for an academic course. In many ways, the pursuit of postgraduate supervision is one of entry-level counselors' earliest statements of professional competency. We believe the comments offered in this article may assist in making that decision with clarity and intention for both supervisees and supervisors.

REFERENCES


*If you have a setback, don’t take a step back—get ready for the comeback.*

—Tim Storey, Religious leader