Understanding the Supervisory Relationship with Social Work Students

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In my past field placement, I had two supervisors. This was something that was very new to me and, often, it was difficult to manage because of their different supervisory styles. Many times, I found myself preferring one supervisor over the other, because I felt I was better understood and that this supervisor’s supervisory style was more aligned with my learning style. These differences really caused me to struggle with how I approached cases and caused me to question the differences in my relationship with each supervisor. Until recently, I never thought or even considered that there were theories and styles of supervision that supervisors may use to help teach and guide MSW students’ development in their field placements.

In an effort to better understand the relationship I had with my supervisors and how it affected my practice within my field agency, I decided to do some research on the role of attachment in the supervisory relationship with MSW students. Attachment theory is a theory of human relationships/behaviors and motivation (Shilkret, 2005; Bennett, 2008). Within supervision, better understanding of the relationship-specific attachment styles of the supervisee and the supervisor will better explain the type of relationship they have. Therefore, this article will provide a literature review that discusses this topic in detail. Finally, I will discuss how this new knowledge has helped me to better understand the role of attachment in the supervisory relationships and how it can improve students’ practice within the field agency.

Literature Review

C. S. Bennett (2008) presents a model for training field supervisors of MSW students, which incorporates key components of attachment theory. Attachment theory, when placed within the supervisory relationship, encourages the supervisees’ professional development. This model shows how supervisors can provide a safe space for critique and support for the supervisee. As challenges arise within supervision, this safe space will encourage supervisees to develop a professional sense of self and exploration of their clinical practice with confidence (Bennett, 2008). Bennett (2008) states that supervisees are more likely to create a safe space for their clients if this was first modeled through their supervisory relationship. The supervisory relationship provides a blueprint of knowing how to relate to one’s client. Therefore, Bennett’s work demonstrates how the relational dynamics between the supervisor, supervisee, and client potentially mirror themselves.
Previous research has revealed that students value supervisors who are supportive, open to differences, available, and able to develop positive relationships with the supervisee (Bennett, 2008; Bennett, BrintzenhofeSzoc, Mohr, & Saks, 2008). Bennett (2008) contends that “attachment theory is applicable to supervision because it provides an empirically-based framework for understanding both the nature of relationships and the process of establishing a supportive, secure base for supervision” (p. 97).

Bennett’s (2008) 8-month training program for social work field supervisors had five objectives, as follows:

(1) To critically examine the supervisor’s role in the context of the student’s education; (2) to understand the components of a successful working alliance and effective supervision; (3) to understand how supervision may trigger attachment processes; (4) to increase the supervisor’s skills for reading student attachment cues and learning needs; and (5) to understand the supervisory relationship as a circle of security facilitating development of the student’s professional self. (p. 100)

The participants in this training model felt that it was successful in helping them develop confidence in their skills. They reported that they were successfully able to establish a supportive environment that was appropriate for the student’s learning and exploration. As a result of the positive relational dynamics within supervision, the supervisees achieved more confidence in their work with their clients.

Bennett, Mohr, BrintzenhofeSzoc, and Saks (2008) hypothesized that students’ perceptions of, and behaviors in, their supervisory relationships may be influenced by the students’ general patterns of attachment. Their cross-sectional study was completed with 72 master’s-level social work students. The study examined “general attachment styles (anxiety and avoidance) and supervision-specific attachment (anxiety and avoidance)” in the MSW students’ foundation year (Bennett et al., 2008, p. 79). These variables were studied to better understand the students’ perception of their supervisory relational experience in terms of the working alliance and the supervisory style. For purposes of this study, the working alliance was defined as an agreement between the supervisee and supervisor regarding the goals and tasks of the work to be completed, and the essential relational bonds needed to complete the goals and tasks agreed upon. The supervisory style was defined as the particular approach used by the supervisors to carry out their roles and functions of supervision. Although the authors believed that the students’ general attachment style would influence their perceptions of and behaviors in their supervisory relationships in terms of the working alliance and the supervisory style, this was not supported in the study.

In fact, the results showed that “the supervision-specific attachment was a much stronger predictor of the supervisory alliance and supervisory style variables” perceived by the students (Bennett et al., 2008, p. 89). For example, even if a student demonstrated an avoidant type of attachment, because of fear of rejection from the supervisor, if the supervisor demonstrated a lack of trust in his or her supervisory style, this had a greater impact on the students’ perceptions of the supervisory alliance and style than their general avoidant attachment style. Therefore, this study confirms that, “supervision-specific attachment plays a significant role in the student’s perceptions of supervisors and the working alliance” (Bennett et al., 2008, p. 91). Additionally, this
study demonstrates the importance of positive relationships within supervision to help develop a secure environment for exploration for supervisees, which is further mirrored in their relationships with their clients.

Another article not only talks about the interaction of attachment within the supervisory relationship, but it also discusses the students’ developmental stages that occur within the supervisory relationship. Bennett and Deal (2009) suggest that students’ “affective, cognitive, and behavioral development” (p. 105) changes over time, which also requires the modification of the supervisors’ approach. For example, Bennett and Deal state that an MSW student in his or her foundation year would view the helping process in its most simple terms, whereas a more advanced MSW student would be able to understand the helping phase with clients as a process and would have developed the knowledge and skills needed to conceptualize the client’s presenting problems to the supervisor. So, not only do MSW students mature interpersonally, but also these maturations reflect within the supervisory relationship. For example, Bennett and Deal (2009) state that initially the relationship with the supervisor is best described as an anxious dependency. As the student continues to grow and enters the middle stage of the supervisory relationship, the student feels a little less dependent on the supervisor and is ultimately striving for independence. This newfound desire to be independent can create a conflict within the supervisory relationship, because the student no longer views the supervisor as all-knowing. During the end of training, students are described as having a “more self-revealing, collaborative relationship with their supervisors, consistent with their greater self-confidence in their abilities and a stronger sense of themselves as autonomous practitioners” (Bennett & Deal, 2009, p. 106). Bennett and Deal also emphasize that the interaction between the students’ developmental stage and their attachment patterns may trigger an attachment process. Therefore, it is important for supervisors to be attuned to the student’s learning level and attachment pattern, because when the supervisor is attuned, this provides the positive environment needed for the student’s professional growth and maturation.

**Implications and Conclusions**

White and Queener (2003) define working alliance as “the collaboration between supervisee and supervisor for change in the supervisee based on mutual agreement on the goals (e.g., mastery of counseling skills) and task (e.g., observing counseling sessions) of supervision, as well as a strong emotional bond (e.g., mutual caring, trusting, and respect)” (p. 203). The supervisory relationship is an interactive process that is greatly affected by the attachment styles of both the supervisor and the supervisee.

As I previously stated, within my past field placement, I had two supervisors, with whom I met separately each week. Each supervisor supervised a certain number of my cases, each one never overlapping the other. I found it difficult to balance the two different supervisory styles, which had an impact on my ability to be confident with my cases. I noticed that one supervisor created a supportive environment for self-disclosure and clinical exploration when we met on a weekly basis. I felt that I approached those cases with confidence and experienced a greater working alliance with those particular clients. With my other supervisor, I consistently felt that my views and perceptions were being attacked in some way. I began to fear rejection and disapproval from this supervisor.
which ultimately made me anxious and second-guess all my efforts with the clients this particular supervisor was supervising. I found this to be extremely puzzling, because I was now in my advanced year of training and felt I should have more confidence in my abilities.

The presented literature review contends that my relationship with my supervisors was being mirrored in my working alliance with my clients. During the beginning stages of my supervisory relationships, I couldn’t make sense of the differences. It was only when I started to research supervision that I was better able to understand the dynamics of our relationships and how it was affecting my practice.

Within my MSW educational experience, students were not educated on the need for positive relationships with their supervisors. Nor was it ever shared that having a negative relationship could potentially affect your performance and connection with your clients.

Often, students are apt to stick through their field placements, because they don’t want to have to go through the hassle of changing placements, or they don’t want to cause too much trouble for the field office. Through this experience, I realized the importance of the type of relationship I have with my supervisor, because it could potentially mirror the same effects within my practice with clients.

Moving forward, I would encourage students to advocate for their supervisory relational needs. If you find that your supervision is not supportive or is causing a negative impact on your worker-client relationships, I would encourage you to reach out to your field office or academic advisor for guidance. It is important to understand that to improve your practice with your clients, you must first collaborate with your supervisor to create a secure environment that will support your professional growth and development through self-reflection and clinical exploration. Understanding the dynamics of the relationship you have with your supervisor and how it affects your practice is extremely important for the development of your professional identity as a future social worker.

References


Dierdra Oretade, MSW, obtained her master's degree in social work in 2011 from University of Connecticut (UCCONN) School of Social Work. She was recognized by the National Association of Social Workers Connecticut Chapter as the 2011 MSW Student Social Worker of the Year for her outstanding academic achievement, significant contributions to a Social Work Practice Initiative for Military Families, and for being an agent of change in our world. Dierdra has extensive work experience within various human service settings and is an active member in various national organizations. She is employed with a non-profit agency in which she serves as an active member of a multidisciplinary team that provides clinical services to justice involved women with trauma histories, mental illness, and addiction disorders as a diversion to incarceration.

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