Personal Supervision Model: Autonomy Progression  
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Abstract

The supervision model outlined in this paper is autonomy progression. The aspects of this model are drawn from my prior experiences with flight instruction. The model will be fleshed out with examples from the principles of learning to fly while explaining the details of the model. Items that will be discussed include a definition of supervision. This includes a definition on what it means to be autonomous and the process to attain that definition. Additionally, the role of the supervisor will be outlined with an understanding of the responsibilities the supervisor has in bringing about autonomy. Finally, a summary of the process and evaluation will be explained through four steps: to first teach the skills necessary, evaluate the use of those skills, determine the impact of the person of the supervisee, and release the supervisee into autonomy. The supervisory relationship is an imperative aspect to this model which will be shown in how it can enhance or hinder the process of autonomy progression.

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Clinical supervision and learning to fly: two disciplines that on the surface may not have much in common. However, I want to make the argument that a personal supervision model can be developed integrating these two tasks. My background in aviation along with studying many of the factors in clinical supervision has formed my model of supervision. While the analogy is not a pure one, there are many aspects that can help enhance and color an understanding of my personal supervision model.

**Definition**

Many definitions of supervision can be found. Bernard and Goodyear (2014) define supervision as:

“an intervention provided by a more senior member of a profession to a more junior colleague or colleagues who typically (but not always) are members of that same profession. This relationship is evaluative and hierarchical, extends over time, and enhances professional functioning” (p. 9).

Others, such as Cohen (2004) define supervision as

“a process whereby a person in a supervisory role facilitates the professional growth of one or more designated supervisees to help them attain knowledge, improve their skills, and strengthen their professional attitudes and values as they provide clinical services to their clients” (p. 3).

Within both of these definitions is the idea of progression and learning. While these definitions are well thought out and encompass many of the critical aspects of clinical supervision, they lack one thing that I value: simplicity.

While simplicity will inherently lack the ability to describe all aspects of supervision, it does allow flexibility and variations that are present in both the supervisor and supervisee. Holloway (1987) echoes the problems with complexities in other models stating that models that are complex in their definition and implementation “lack the elegance and simplicity usually expected of ‘truth’” (p. 211). Holloway (1987) also contends that by having a broad definition for all the aspects of supervision it could “endanger the usefulness of the developmental approach” (p. 211). It is true, and I have found in my own experiences, that when there are too many layers and variations of development it is nearly impossible to keep track of them all. Thus, my definition of clinical supervision is: the process of counselor development for the purpose of allowing the counselor to be autonomous. More specifically, autonomy progression.

The key word to this definition is “autonomous.” To avoid sounding like a robotics program description, I will further define what is meant by autonomy. This idea comes from the principles found in the process of learning to fly. It can be said that the goal of flight instruction is to prepare the student to fly an aircraft on their own. The key to flight training is to know at all times what the airplane is doing and to know how to cause it to respond in the way the pilot wants (Voorbach, 2013). It is thus imperative that the pilot be trained to know the process to handle any adverse situation. This preparation instills confidence in the student pilot and allows the instructor to be confident the student pilot can handle the airplane safely. A student pilot will begin with “solo” flights in which they are flying the plane without the instructor in the aircraft, but not yet “approved” to fly in this manner without permission from the instructor (having a private pilot’s license). Additionally, the private pilot license has been called a “license to learn” (Voorbach, 2013, n.p.). Even after the pilot has demonstrated skills and is licensed, essentially being autonomous, they continually must learn and be prepared for unexpected situations. Weiss (2016) describes his flight experience as never being alone. He states, “even if I am the only one in the airplane, I am in the company of very special people” (Weiss, 2016, n.p.). The impact and lessons learned from flight instructors will (and should) stay with the pilot during their career in order to remain safe for themselves and others.

This is the idea of autonomy within the goal of supervision. Just as a licensed pilot is free to fly on their own autonomously, a licensed counselor can “fly” on their own with their clients. However, during the supervision process, as in flight training, the supervisor must prepare, evaluate, and encourage the supervisee to be able to be autonomous with their clients. There are two types of pilots that are the most dangerous: the newly licensed pilot, and a pilot with thousands of hours of flight time (Bazargan & Guzhva, 2011). Therefore, autonomy does not include absence of error or need for continued learning. The same would be said for my definition of autonomy. The supervisee will be guided towards the goal of autonomy once licensed. However, the continued learning, and input from others would be emphasized and should continue.

**Role of the Supervisor**

The role of the supervisor remains somewhat fluid based on the needs and progression of the supervisee. Ultimately, the supervisor is a teacher. The new counselor would be uncertain in their skills and thus look to the supervisor for guidance and instruction on how to handle the clients that they see. However, the supervisor must also provide insight into how the person of the supervisee may be affecting or being affected by the counseling process. As in flight instruction, the instructor must know if the attitude, tiredness, or emotions of the student could make a flight unsafe. Parallel process, transference, countertransference, and other dynamics that affect the counseling process for the supervisee should all be understood and facilitated by the supervisor.

Additionally, since the goal of supervision in this model is to bring the supervisee to a development level of autonomy, the supervisor must also act as a facilitator. Rønnestad & Skovholt (1992) conclude in their study that “development involves a movement from reliance on external authority to reliance on internal authority” (p. 514). Thus the supervisor facilitates this process through knowing where the supervisee is developmentally and choosing the right approach to progress the supervisee.

Finally, the supervisor must be ready to challenge the supervisee if needed. While the new supervisee would not respond to criticism very well, the more advanced supervisee may need prodding for lack of progression. Since the goal is autonomy, anything that would hinder the progression to that should be addressed and eliminated. This can be done through one of three approaches. The choices are a directive approach, non-directive approach, or positive withdraw (Wright, 2001). A quick understanding of each of these approaches lies in the following statements: “This is what you do” (Directive), “What do you think?” (Non-directive), and “You do it” (Positive Withdraw) (Wright, 2001). It is the supervisor’s role to choose and implement the correct approach within the development of the supervisor in order to bring about autonomy.

**Evaluation and Development**

Evaluation is an ongoing process throughout the progression of supervision. Development of the supervisee specifically in the supervisee’s ability to be autonomous, but also in the process of supervision. The process of the supervision is fourfold: to first teach the skills necessary, evaluate the use of those skills, determine the impact of the person of the supervisee, and release the supervisee into autonomy. Apart from the last step, all of these steps in the process are fluid. There will be teaching, evaluation, and refection on the person of the counselor throughout the supervision process. The model is not linear but more cyclical with ability to enter the process at any point.

Similar to the lifespan development model, there is progression through the stages that the supervisor is responsible for understanding and facilitating. The beginning stage, or first step in my model, begins with the understanding that the supervisee has little knowledge and confidence in their skills. In this beginning stage of flight instruction, a flight instructor will do all the takeoffs and landings (the critical phases of flight) and allow the student to perform limited maneuvers. At all times the flight instructor can take control of the aircraft if safety is endangered. Similarly, the supervisor is ultimately and legally responsible for the clients of his supervisee and the progression of the supervisee. Thus teaching the skills needed and providing strong structure is an important first step. The comfort for the fledgling counselor is to know that their supervisor is only a phone call away, just as a flight student knows their instructor is in the next seat.

The evaluation in this early stage will be centered around direct methods of assessment. Videotaped sessions are the preferred method along with live observation when possible. Since the supervisee is a novice in so many areas, they may not know what things to discuss or be aware of when just discussing a client. Thus, by direct observation, the supervisor is able to know exactly what happens in a session and provide feedback as well as know where the supervisee is developmentally. Indirect methods such as self-evaluations and case studies will be used once the supervisee progresses more into autonomy. Since the supervisory relationship is an unequal relationship, there is a fine balance between the evaluation process and the supervisory relationship. This will be discussed more later.

As the supervisee begins to develop from a novice towards autonomy, they can begin to develop confidence in their skills and even choice of interventions. However, with each new client or presenting problem, the developmental cycle can begin all over again. As in the example of flight instruction, it can be seen that just because a new pilot can land at a large airport, does not mean they are safe to land at a much smaller one with a cross wind (across the runway instead of parallel). Similarly, a new supervisee who has good reflection skills with a depressed client does not mean they have the same ability with an agitated, angry client. The supervisee may be autonomous with the former client but not the latter. Thus the process of supervision will continue in this new area of uncertainty.

Determining the final step can be a more challenging enterprise. The question arises, when does a supervisee become autonomous in their counseling? I would argue that true autonomy is never reached. As stated above, continued learning and external authority input should be a continued enterprise for the autonomous supervisee. Most often the supervisory process ends once a supervisee completes the educational or licensure requirement they are attempting to achieve. However, there is a growing desire to develop more restorative and rehabilitative purposes for supervision (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). For example, supervision has been found to reduce the burnout rate of substance abuse counselors (Knudsen, Ducharme, & Roman, 2008). Additionally, the supervisee will still have the external input from a state board of counseling as well as employment supervisors or others that have oversight of them even after licensure or graduation. Thus the supervision model of autonomy progression I am proposing should not be one the plateaus at degree confirmation or licensure. It should continue to be emphasized by the supervisor. The difference is the responsibility shifts from the supervisor providing the supervision to the supervisee seeking it out. The internal motivation should take over.

**Counseling Theory**

Simply because of my experience and comfort level, this supervision model will have a strong relationship to cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). Skills that will be taught and interventions given for this model of supervision will tend to have a CBT bent. Additionally, the process of autonomy progression finds many of its goals in a CBT approach. Cognitive behavioral supervision contains such common goals as teaching “appropriate therapist behaviors and extinguishing inappropriate behavior” (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014, p. 28). Skill acquisition through learned behavior is foundational to my supervision model.

The process of a supervision session is based on the CBT theory as well. Bernard & Goodyear (2014) give an example of a CBT supervision session which has been adapted to this model. First, there is a check-in, followed by setting the agenda for the session and reviewing goals of supervision. The supervisor will then ask about previous homework assignments and any previous clients or cases that are of concern to the supervisor. The agenda of this session will then be carried out for the purpose of skills acquisition and behavior change in the supervisee. This can be done through review of a video session or discussing a difficult case of a client the supervisee has. This process along with all the other aspects of this model that have been discussed should be understood within the framework of the supervisory relationship.

**Supervisory Relationship**

A discussion on an effective supervision model would not be complete without a brief discussion on the importance of the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Cohen (2004) states that successful clinicians find a way to build rapport and be relatable to their clients or supervisees. Without this factor and awareness of this relationship by the supervisor, the progression toward autonomy will be greatly hindered. As in flight instruction, a stressful cockpit is an unsafe one. Similarly, an unsafe supervisory relationship can cause stress and lack of improvement in the supervisee. Thus skills such as being a supportive presence, utilizing engagement skills, listening, empathy, and self-management are all critical to the progression toward autonomy in the supervisee (Cohen, 2004).

**Conclusion and Reflection**

While I am very new to the understanding of supervision, there are some advantages to this model as well as some shortcomings. Simplicity is an important factor which I desire for any model. However, just like in the ability to fly an airplane, there are complexities that cannot be ignored. By having a model that is simplistic in its goal of allowing the supervisee to reach autonomy, you can quickly evaluate any skill or intervention that may benefit of hinder this process. Yet there are some shortcomings to this model. It does not account for cultural differences or variations in learning styles of the supervisee. More could be said regarding what it means to be autonomous and understanding the need to continue to rely on others’ expertise. Just because I can get my pilot’s license does not mean I am ready to fly everything that has wings. In the same manner, just because a supervisee is autonomous does not mean they are equipped for every situation. It does mean they are prepared ethically, relationally, and personally to handle it to the best of their ability.

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