A systematic approach to peer group supervision

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Abstract:

The structured peer group format encourages skill development, conceptual growth, participation, instructive feedback, and self-monitoring. The procedure is described and illustrated.

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Article:

Peer supervision groups are advocated for counselors at all experience levels. For counselors-in-training, peer groups provide a supportive environment and reassurance that others are experiencing similar feelings and concerns (Blocher, 1983; Fraleigh & Buchheimer, 1969; Sansbury, 1982; Yogev, 1982). Novices speak the same language and model achievable skill levels, increasing self-efficacy and motivation to learn (Hillerbrand, 1989). In addition, successful experiences may encourage students to pursue peer supervision in subsequent work settings (Spice & Spice, 1976; Wagner & Smith, 1979; Winstead, Bonovitz, Gale, & Evans, 1974).

For postdegree counselors, peer supervision groups provide an opportunity for continued professional growth. Such groups may be the only available avenue for feedback on counseling performance (Cloud, 1986; Greenburg, Lewis, & Johnson, 1985; Nobler, 1980; Remley, Benshoff, & Mowbray, 1987; Todd & Pine, 1968). Private practitioners in one group reported that their peers provided suggestions for working with difficult clients, offered consultation on ethical and professional issues, and helped them deal with isolation and burnout (Lewis, Greenburg, & Hatch, 1988).

Peer group meetings, however, are not necessarily helpful or productive. Peers may be overly supportive and prone to giving advice, and the group may experience difficulty staying on task (Hart, 1982; Roth, 1986; Runkel & Hackney, 1982; Winstead et al., 1974). To be effective, group meetings need an organizational structure and group members need training in supervisory skills (Roth, 1986; Runkel & Hackney, 1982).

A few writers have described models of peer supervision that include procedures and/or instruction in supervision skills (Remley et al., 1987; Spice & Spice, 1976; Wagner & Smith, 1979). These models, however, emphasize *individual* peer supervision through the use of dyads or triads (supervisor, supervisee, observer). Two "group" models (Spice & Spice, 1976; Wagner & Smith, 1979) give little direction for conducting peer *group* discussions following observations of the supervision sessions. In addition, these two models primarily were designed for beginning counselors in academic settings. It seems that, similar to the "rudimentary level" (Holloway & Johnston, 1985, p. 338) of the literature on group supervision in general, peer group supervision is widely advocated but infrequently described.

In summary, peer groups are a preferred supervision approach for counselors at all experience levels, but there are few guidelines for organizing and conducting them. The purpose of this article is to present a systematic procedure for conducting peer group supervision. This approach, an extension of previous methods (i.e., Spice & Spice, 1976; Wagner & Smith, 1979), was designed to address the following goals: (a) to ensure that all group members are involved in the supervision process; (b) to help members give focused, objective feedback; (c) to give particular attention to the development of cognitive counseling skills; (d) to be adaptable for groups of novice and/or experienced counselors; (e) to provide a framework for supervising individual, group, and family counseling sessions; (f) to teach an approach that counselors can internalize for self-monitoring; and (g) to provide a systematic procedure that can be employed by both novice and experienced supervisors.

Over the last 6 years, the structured peer group supervision format has been employed with practicum and intern students and with experienced counselors (approximately 15 groups and 90 participants), taught to supervisors-in-training, and presented during workshops for practicing supervisors. It has been refined based on observation and feedback from these various groups. Although participants have responded quite favorably, to date no empirical studies have investigated its effectiveness. Thus, the following presentation is based solely on the author's experience. Following an overview of the mechanics of the approach, more complete descriptions and illustrations will be given, the emphasis on developing cognitive counseling skills will be discussed, and some extensions of the approach will be described.

THE STRUCTURED PEER GROUP FORMAT

Procedure

Typically, the structured peer group supervision format involves a small group (three to six) of counselors (practicum students, interns, or practitioners) and one trained supervisor, who meet weekly or biweekly for 1 ½ to 3 hours. As in other supervision experiences (cf. Borders & Leddick, 1987), group members identify learning goals during the initial meetings, and the

supervisor helps establish a supportive atmosphere that is conducive to open and honest interactions. During subsequent meetings, counselors take turns presenting videotapes of counseling sessions for peer review. These meetings follow the format presented in this article.

The procedure of the structured peer group format is relatively simple and straightforward, but it also allows for dealing with subtleties and sophisticated dynamics, depending on the skill level of the counselors and the supervisor. The steps, to be more fully described in subsequent sections, are the following:

(1) The counselor identifies questions about the client or videotaped session and requests specific feedback about his or her performance.

(2) Peers choose or are assigned roles, perspectives, or tasks for reviewing the videotape segment. These tasks may include (a) observing counselor or client nonverbal behavior or a particular counseling skill; (b) assuming the role of the counselor, client, or the parent, spouse, coworker, friend, teacher, or other significant person in the client's life; (c) viewing the session from a particular theoretical perspective; and (d) creating a metaphor for the client, counselor, or counseling process.

(3) The counselor presents the preselected videotape segment.

(4) Peers give feedback from their roles or perspectives, keeping in mind the goals and questions that were specified by the counselor.

(5) The supervisor facilitates the discussion as needed, functioning as a *moderator* and *process observer*.

(6) The supervisor summarizes the feedback and discussion, and the counselor indicates if supervision needs were met.

Supervisor Roles

The supervisor in the structured peer group supervision format has two critical roles. First, the supervisor functions as a *moderator* who helps the group stay on-task. In this managerial role, the supervisor helps the presenting counselor articulate a specific focus for the supervision session, designates roles and tasks for group members, and makes sure everyone is heard and follows feedback guidelines. The supervisor also sets up practice exercises as needed, such as role plays or directed skill practice. Following group discussion, the supervisor summarizes feedback and identifies themes and patterns.

Second, the supervisor is a *process observer* of group dynamics. As a group leader, the supervisor describes patterns of peer interaction and encourages discussion of behaviors, feelings, and relationships. In this role, the supervisor is sensitive to members' reactions to feedback, ways they may protect or compete with each other, manifestations of parallel process, and other group dynamics. (For further descriptions of this type of dialogue, see Orton, 1965; Spice & Spice, 1976.)

In both roles, the supervisor is cognizant of the developmental level(s) of peer group members and varies his or her own behavior accordingly (cf. Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981). For example, the supervisor is more active and directive in novice peer groups, typically taking responsibility for assigning tasks to members, orchestrating feedback, and summarizing discussion. Specific skills or plans for the next session are common topics in these groups. More developmentally advanced counselors assume more responsibility for the conduct of the sessions, and they are more apt to request feedback concerning transference and countertransference, theoretical issues, and ethical concerns. As a result, the supervisor can attend to more subtle, sophisticated dynamics of the counseling session and the supervision group, including parallel process.

To fulfill these roles and functions, the effective peer group supervisor must be a skilled teacher, counselor, consultant, and group leader. Indeed, the success of this approach depends on the supervisor's artistry in recognizing needed and appropriate interventions, assigning tasks to particular peer group members, and orchestrating the feedback. Often working at several levels, the supervisor helps a productive learning experience to unfold.

Peer Feedback

Critical to success of peer groups is the ability of participants to give honest and constructive feedback. Consequently, a key to the structured peer group supervision format is the procedure that peers follow while watching the videotape segment and then giving feedback. In effect, this procedure provides indirect and informal training in supervisory skills. Peers assume or are assigned (by the supervisor) roles, perspectives, or tasks for responding. These perspectives are selected based on the goals of the presenting counselor, learning goals of group members, and developmental needs that the supervisor has identified. The format tends to ensure that each member participates in giving feedback.

Focused observations. First, group members may observe particular components of the session, such as the nonverbal behavior of counselor or client, or they may focus on specific counseling skills and techniques. Such concrete observations match beginning counselors' tendency to focus on separate, specific elements of the counseling session. This procedure, however, also gives them an opportunity to practice additional skills. For example, the group member who has difficulty attending to a client's nonverbal behavior (and may have identified this as a learning goal) may be assigned this task. Free of the anxiety generated by their own counseling sessions, members often are better observers when watching peers' videotapes.

Focused observations also can be used with videotape review or live supervision of family counseling. Okun (West, Bubenzer, & Zarski, 1989) reported she sometimes asks peers to observe a particular family member, subsystem, or family interaction pattern. In addition, the supervisor can assign observational tasks based on learning goals. Piercy (West et al., 1989), for example, reported that if a counselor's goal is to develop skills for working with children, he asks that counselor to watch how a peer joins with the children in a family. Similarly, each peer can observe one client in a group counseling session, giving the group leader a more complete picture of the impact of group interactions and counseling interventions.

Role taking. Second, peer group members may assume a particular role while observing the videotape segment and then give their feedback from that perspective. Instructive roles include the counselor, client, and significant persons in the client's environment (i.e., parent, spouse, coworker, friend, or teacher). This approach has been beneficial and popular with both novice and experienced counselors.

Beginning counselors characteristically are very self-focused, overly aware of their every move. In addition, they tend to assume the client's report is the only truth about a problem situation. Role taking is one way to help broaden beginners' perspectives about their counseling. For example, peers may assume the role of the client and then phrase their feedback in "I messages" based on their experience of the videotaped counseling session. This simple procedure is often powerful.

One student, for example, had asked the peer group what else she could do to help her (female) client see the danger of the client's involvement in an extramarital relationship. Prior to the videotape presentation, the student responded to general group discussion by saying that they also did not seem to understand the gravity of the situation. To help break this impasse, the supervisor asked each group member to assume the role of the client while watching the videotape segment. The counselor finally "heard" her client when five peers eloquently and emotionally responded with variations of "I feel you are lecturing me and not really hearing me. You think I'm selfish, but don't know the pain and fear inside me." This feedback helped the counselor realize that the client's underlying feelings and motivations might be very different from what she had assumed. She was able to see that *her* well intentioned goals for the client were preventing her from helping her client.

Assuming roles also can help a counselor develop a more objective, multifaceted view of a client. For example, a female counselor had accepted her female client's view that her marriage problems were caused by her husband's numerous faults. The supervisor asked group members to describe how they saw the client from the perspectives of her husband, children, and coworkers. In contrast to the counselor's sympathetic view, group members found the client demanding, complaining, rigid, and unforgiving. With these additional perspectives, the counselor was able to help the client focus on herself rather than her husband and take responsibility for her role in relationship problems. Similarly, school counselors have broadened views of their student-clients by hearing the perspectives of other classmates and teachers via peer group members' feedback.

It also can be helpful when peers take on the role of the counselor, particularly in instances of countertransference or identification with the client. Peers often articulate feelings, expectations, and needs that are operating in the counseling session, although outside the counselor's awareness. Peers may surface counselor's feelings of anger, boredom, or attraction to clients. They may identify counselor needs that are influencing the counseling process (e.g., "I need for you to get well!" or "I must save this marriage!").

The role perspective also can be used for videotape review (or live observations) of family counseling sessions. Peers take the role of a family member and then describe their view of the

problem, other family members, the counselor, and the session. Processing of the observations may include sculpting exercises to represent the family dynamics more clearly. Similarly, peers can assume the viewpoint of one client in a counseling group.

Theoretical perspectives. In a more "academic" approach, peer group members view the case presentation from a particular theoretical orientation. Each person conceptualizes the client and counseling issues, explains the etiology of the problem, identifies counseling goals, and indicates what interventions would be appropriate. Group members may speak from their own theoretical framework or practice a new perspective.

Variations of this approach with counselors at different developmental levels facilitate the natural process of creating an integrated theoretical identity (cf. Loganbill et al., 1982). Beginning counselors can gain a deeper understanding of theoretical premises, can "try out" new theoretical approaches of interest, or be challenged to try approaches they do not like. By assuming different theories or hearing them from peers, students are able to judge how the various theories fit for them personally, an important first step in forming a professional identity.

More advanced counselors may want to explore their preferred approach to a greater depth, study a new theory, or hear other viewpoints that can enrich their own. Theory-based groups for professionals are offered by psychological associations in West Germany (Nugent, 1988), whereas peer groups in the United States typically are more theoretically heterogeneous (Lewis et al., 1988). Whatever their composition, peer groups provide practicing counselors with opportunities for broadening and deepening their theoretical understandings.

This approach can be particularly helpful for counselors who are studying family systems theories for the first time. Group members can contrast individual and systemic views of a client or family, and they can explore the course of counseling from each perspective. Similarly, members of family counseling supervision groups can assume different theoretical orientations during videotape review or live observation (see West et al., 1989). The articulation of a theoretical perspective gives life to philosophy and ideas, helps counselors become aware of the rationale and intentions for their actions, and significantly contributes to the development of a consistent, integrated professional identity.

Descriptive metaphors. Peer group members also may think metaphorically while they observe the videotape segment. Peers characterize the client, counselor, client-counselor relationship, or counseling process with a symbol, image, or metaphor. This approach has been particularly helpful when the presenting counselor's request for feedback concerned some aspect of interpersonal dynamics or a generalized feeling of being "stuck." Similar to others who advocate the use of metaphors in supervision (e.g., Amundson, 1988; Ishiyama, 1988), I have found this approach leads to a deeper understanding of client, self, or counseling dynamics. Metaphors may provide new or alternative perspectives and give clarity to planning future sessions.

In one group, for example, peers were asked to describe metaphorically the "dance" of the counselor and client. A counselor gained much insight into his client and the counseling process when a peer reported, "Your client smiles and asks you to dance, then twirls away as you approach. She gracefully leaps from wall to ceiling to wall, etc., smiling almost coyly, and still

beckoning you to meet her. Expectantly, you struggle to catch up, but each time you reach out and almost touch, she is gone." The counselor not only gained insight into his own interactions with this client but also began to hypothesize about similar dynamics in the client's marital relationship. He now wondered, if in contrast to the client's report, the husband really was the only elusive person in the marital relationship.

One might assume that this approach would be more appropriate with developmentally advanced counselors, who are more attuned to interpersonal dynamics and their reactions to clients. Used with deliberate care, however, metaphors also can be effective with beginning counselors. This approach tends to sensitize them to the fact that less concrete variables are at work during counseling, helps them stop focusing on their own performance, and makes them aware they have impressions of and reactions to their clients that are therapeutically relevant.

Cognitive Counseling Skills

In designing the approach, I wanted to give particular attention to the development of cognitive counseling skills. Both beginning and advanced counselors in my groups typically had adequate skills but often lacked intentionality. They had difficulty stating a rationale for their interventions or explaining why a particular intervention was or was not successful. They also presented very limited views of their clients.

Several writers have suggested that increasing cognitive counseling skills depends on the development of higher levels of conceptual thinking in general (e.g., Biggs, 1988; Blocher, 1983; Borders, Fong, & Neimeyer, 1986; Ellis, 1988; Holloway, 1988). They describe high-functioning counselors as being able to integrate and synthesize large amounts of data, including conflicting information. These counselors differentiate between relevant and irrelevant factors, are less influenced by external cues, and are more independent, objective, and flexible in their thinking. Because they are able to view the world from multiple perspectives, they have greater empathic understanding of a wide variety of clients. They also are aware of interactive, mutual influences in interpersonal relationships.

Helping counselors develop higher levels of conceptual functioning is the goal of these writers, and the structured peer group supervision format includes many of the activities they suggest will facilitate cognitive growth (see Biggs, 1988; Blocher, 1983; Ellis, 1988). For example, counselors get feedback from a variety of sources when peers assume roles of the client and significant persons in the client's environment. Counselors are able to practice divergent thinking when peers present views of the client that conflict with their own. Peers' reports of nonverbal behaviors may help counselors distinguish between their observations and inferences. Multiple theory-based hypotheses present counselors with the possibility that there is more than one "correct" way to work with a client. Metaphors are a creative approach to integrating contradictory information, another characteristic of high conceptual thinking.

The supervisor, of course, monitors these activities so that an optimal balance of challenge and support is maintained. The preferred environment is based on a "matching model" that both satisfies the counselor's learning needs and stimulates conceptual development (cf. Blocher, 1983; Holloway& Wampold, 1986; Stoltenberg, 1981).

Self-supervision

One important goal of the structured peer group approach is to teach counselors methods they can adapt for self-monitoring. Observations of group members have indicated that counselors become aware of their own particular "blind spots" and adapt the group methods for challenging themselves. They are not so apt to "forget" to observe the client's nonverbal communication or to assume the client's report is the only perspective on a problem situation. When conceptualizing a case, they more often consider multiple, even conflicting, views of the client and begin to integrate these perspectives into their session plans.

EXTENSIONS OF THE STRUCTURED PEER GROUP

The structured peer group format can be used periodically in any supervision group. It also can be adapted for individual supervision (e.g., counselors can be asked to assume another role or to describe the client from the point of view of a significant other). In addition, supervisors may verbalize feedback in this manner (e.g., "As the client I'm feeling ... "), share a metaphor, or model how they challenge their own conceptualizations and hypotheses about clients. Finally, practicing counselors can use the methods in consultative supervision with their colleagues. The approach would be appropriate in a variety of work settings, including private practice.

The structured peer group approach has been well received by supervisors-in-training and practicing supervisors. The format provides specific guidelines that help beginning supervisors deal with their anxiety about what to do and how to attend to each group member. I usually suggest that they begin by assigning the more concrete tasks, such as observing nonverbal behaviors and assuming the client role. Additional parts of the format are added as they gain confidence and skills. During training, I spend some time in each group, both participating (e.g., modeling by taking the role of the client) and observing the supervisors. Afterwards, we exchange feedback: I share my observations of their work and they discuss their experiences with the format.

Finally, the structured peer group supervision format also is being extended to group supervision of supervisors. Peers observe specific skills or supervisory techniques, focus on the nonverbal behavior of the person supervised or the supervisor, assume the role of the supervised person or client being discussed, or take different theoretical perspectives of the session. Peer supervisors have helped their colleagues realize that a supervised person felt overwhelmed or attacked, that a person was being treated like a "china doll," and that there were striking differences in the supervisor's nonverbal behavior with different individuals. The structured format also has brought to light several instances of parallel process.

SUMMARY

Peer supervision groups are valuable resources for counselors throughout their professional careers. The structured peer group approach provides the procedure and tasks needed for groups to capitalize on the benefits of peer feedback. The approach also offers counselors methods and skills that they can adapt for consultative supervision with other counselors in their work settings

and for self-supervision. By using approaches such as this one, counselors can actively contribute to their own professional development and that of their colleagues.

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