Negative Supervisory Events: Effects on Supervision Satisfaction and Supervisory Alliance

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What are the consequences when a supervisee experiences a negative event in supervision? Supervisee developmental level, supervisory working alliance, trainee attachment style, and negative supervisory events were examined to determine their relationship with one another. Findings underscore the destructive impact negative supervisory events can have on supervision and supervisee development. This impact varies depending upon a supervisee's developmental level or the strength of the supervisor–supervisee working alliance. Supervisors are encouraged to be more supportive of supervisees in early development, and suggestions are offered on ways to ensure a strong supervisory relationship.

"I don't really like my supervisor" or "I didn't get anything out of supervision with that person." These are likely common sentiments that a supervisee may have of a supervisor with whom they have had a negative experience. The supervisory relationship is one in which the supervisor trains, guides, and encourages development of the supervisee so that the supervisee becomes an effective therapist. It is also one in which the supervisor takes an evaluative role, which places the supervisee in a more vulnerable subordinate position. The combination of these has implications for the importance of a strong supervisory relationship. However, what happens when there is a negative event in supervision? Does it cause irreparable harm to the supervisory relationship? Can it lower satisfaction with supervision? Finally, can factors such as

developmental level and attachment style of the supervisee mediate the effects of a negative event?

Much attention has focused on elements of a good supervisor (Carifo & Hess, 1987), the supervisory relationship (Holloway, 1995), and various models of supervision itself (Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981; Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998; Watkins, 1995). Ellis (1991) indicated that the supervisory relationship was identified as the most critical element in supervision by the supervisee, underscoring its importance in the supervisory process. It is hard to imagine that effective supervision can occur without a solid supervisory relationship. To proceed without one could possibly compromise supervisee training. Factors that have been identified as influential to this dynamic

process include developmental level of the supervisee, experience, attachment, and negative events (Loganbill et al., 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981; Watkins, 1995).

Supervisee development is another factor that has received much attention in the literature. Various models have attempted to explain the process of change that occurs with increased psychotherapy training and the subsequent effect on the supervisory relationship. Generally the models propose that supervisees will exhibit different characteristics and abilities based on accrued experience (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). This differential level of experience may necessitate that supervisors accommodate supervision to each supervisee's level of development (Stoltenberg et al., 1998). If supervisors are unable to make this adjustment, the supervisor–supervisee match may prove to be problematic.

Of particular interest to us was the developmental model outlined by Stoltenberg (1981). This model focuses on supervisee level of development as expressed by supervisee dependency and the impact of the supervisory environment. Stoltenberg proposed four developmental levels for supervisees: Level 1 is represented by a supervisee who is highly dependent on the supervisor; Level 2 is characterized by a conflict between dependency and autonomy; Level 3 emphasizes conditional dependency; and Level 4 is the final stage, described as a "master counselor." The changing abilities and reliance on supervisors suggest an ever-evolving relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee.

Along with development level, another influential variable of the supervisory relationship is the supervisee's experience level. Factors such as the trainee's year in school or hours of counseling experience have been found to have an impact on the amount of support and structure necessary within the supervisory relationship. Specifically, for beginning-level trainees, a high level of encouragement and structure may be beneficial (McNeill, Stoltenberg, & Pierce, 1985). Predoctoral interns, however, often express more interest in transference issues, exhibit higher level counseling skills, and may desire less structure in the supervision (McNeill et al., 1985). Again, it is necessary for the supervisor to be cognizant of these differences to ensure congruence in the relationship.

Unlike research on such variables as developmental level and years of experience, research on what happens when negative events occur in supervision has been sparse. Allen, Szollos, and Williams (1986) reported that although negative supervisory experiences were difficult to define, there were several factors that distinguished "worst" from "best" supervision relationships. These factors included uninterested or inept supervisors, sexual harassment, and authoritarian styles of supervision. Similarly, Chung, Baskin, and Case (1998) found that negative supervisory experiences were related to the relationship itself—for example, when supervisors were distracted or impersonal problematic relationships developed. Bernard and Goodyear (1998) postulated that both supervisor and supervisee factors contribute to problems and harmful consequences in the supervisory relationship. They go on to say that it is surprising that this has been ignored in the supervision literature. We hypothesized that negative supervisory events could lead to unfavorable consequences in both the relationship itself and in the supervisee's professional and personal development.

Like negative events, attachment styles have received little attention in the literature. A number of theorists have proposed that attachment theory can be useful in conceptualizing psychotherapeutic processes and relationships (Bowlby, 1988; Pistole, 1989; Sperling & Lyons, 1994). Although attachment theory was originally developed to explain the interaction between infant and caregiver, Bowlby (1979) maintained that the attachment system continues to evolve and influence the relationships of "human beings from the cradle to the grave" (p. 129). As a result, an individual's attachment system plays an important role in the formation and ongoing functioning of adult relationships, including friendship, kinship, romantic partnerships, and even the therapeutic alliance (Ainsworth, 1989). Extending this idea further, Pistole and Watkins (1995) outlined the relevance of attachment theory to counseling supervision. They suggested that "supervisee attachment style can enter into and affect the nature and character of supervision" (p. 471). Thus, it is conceivable that the therapist with a secure attachment style might use supervision and respond to supervisory challenges more effectively than a therapist with an insecure attachment style. Conceptualizing the supervisory relationship from an attachment perspective, we proposed that attachment style may have a significant impact on the quality of the developing therapist's alliance with clinical supervisors and his or her perception of negative supervisory events.

Exploratory National Supervision Study

This investigation attempted to assess the relationship between supervisee developmental level, working alliance, attachment, and negative experiences in supervision.

Survey packets were mailed to 55 randomly selected American Psychological Association (APA) internship program training directors and 30 APA doctoral program training directors. Internship and doctoral program addresses were listed in the *APPIC Directory 1999–2000* (Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers, 1999) and the December *American Psychologist* (APA, 1999), respectively. A follow-up inquiry to the selected sites helped identify 8 internship training directors and four academic training directors who did not distribute the surveys to the trainees. This resulted in a maximum of 452 possible respondents (192 interns and 260 graduate students). The overall response rate was 28% (126/452).

The final sample consisted of 126 respondents (73% women and 27% men; 54% predoctoral interns and 46% practicum students). The ages of the participants ranged from 23 to 51 years ($M = 30.7$). The sample was predominantly Caucasian/European American (79%), with 21% from other ethnic groups. This corresponds to the student affiliate segment of the American Psychological Association (J. Kohut, personal communication, APA Research Office, March 28, 2000).

A four-part survey was used to explore the following: respondent demographics, negative events in supervision, satisfaction with supervision, attachment style (using Bartholomew & Horowitz's, 1991, Relationship Questionnaire), supervisory working alliance (using Baker's, 1990, revision of the Working Alliance Inventory by Horvath & Greenberg, 1989), and supervisee developmental level (using the Supervisee Levels Questionnaire—Revised [SLQ–R] developed by McNeill, Stoltenberg, & Romans, 1992). The SLQ–R produces a global rating of supervisee level plus three subscale ratings. The three subscales are Self- and Other Awareness, Motivation, and Dependency/Autonomy.

Analyses of qualitative data followed a series of strategies recommended by Marshall and Rossman (1999). Initially, the data were organized and categorized by themes. Next, we tested emergent hypotheses against the original data, searching for alternative explanations and generating descriptions of categories that demonstrated "internal convergence" and "external divergence" (Guba, 1978).

Developmental Level and Supervision

The first question of the study examined whether supervisee developmental level was related to supervisory working alliance and satisfaction with current supervision. A significant positive relationship was found between developmental level and the global measure of alliance ($r = .22$, $p = .012$). In addition, the developmental level Self-Awareness subscale was significantly related to the global measure of alliance ($r = .29$, $p = .001$) and to each of the subscales of the alliance measure (Task Agreement: $r = .27$, $p = .002$; Bond: $r = .27$, $p = .003$; Goals Shared: $r = .29$, $p = .001$). No relationship was found for trainee development and satisfaction with supervision.

These results indicate that supervisees at higher developmental levels were more likely to report a better working alliance with their supervisor than supervisees at a beginning developmental stage. It is expected that advanced levels of development would be evident in supervisees with more experience and training than in supervisees with less training (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). Thus, it would follow that as supervisees gain experience in supervision and counseling, their skills, theoretical grounding, and case conceptualizations may begin to approximate those of the supervisor. As a result, the supervisee and supervisor would likely agree on tasks and goals for supervision, less conflict would occur, and this would produce a better working alliance in the supervisory relationship.

It is also possible that with increased development, the supervisor–supervisee relationship becomes less didactic and more collegial. The change in the relationship allows the focus of supervision to evolve from being centered on the supervisee to broader aspects of supervision, such as the client–therapist relationship and the supervisor–supervisee relationship. Furthermore, supervisees may exhibit less anxiety and may need less structure and encouragement, which would allow greater emphasis on transference issues and higher level counseling skills (McNeill et al., 1985). The evolution of the relationship may engender a higher level of trust, create more self-awareness on the part of the supervisee, and create a greater opportunity for development of the supervisor–supervisee relationship.

Attachment and Supervision

The next question examined the association of trainee attachment style to supervisory alliance and satisfaction with supervision. Descriptive data showed that 83% of the sample described themselves as secure, 6% as fearful–avoidant, 3% as preoccupied, and 8% as dismissing–avoidant. This distribution of attachment styles contrasts with previous research that used nonclinical, middle-class adult populations, which generally shows much higher percentages of insecure attachment styles (55% secure, 25% avoidant, and 20% anxious-preoccupied). Because of a profound

bias in sampling, further analyses were not appropriate with attachment and the other variables in the study; results would have been neither useful nor valid.

Negative Experiences, Supervisory Alliance, and Satisfaction

The final research question attempted to determine whether negative experiences in supervision were associated with supervisory alliance, satisfaction with supervision, and other training experience at the training site. To reduce error, we conducted a multivariate analysis of variance with the two primary variables and the five consequence items, with negative experience in supervision (i.e., whether the individual had a negative supervisory experience) as the independent variable. The primary variables were the Working Alliance Inventory and satisfaction with supervision. The five items measured consequences for supervisee's training, relationship with supervisor, relationship with clients, and future career decisions. Participants who reported a negative experience scored significantly lower on each item than participants with no negative experience. Results, along with means and standard deviations, are shown in Table 1.

The qualitative data analysis also produced interesting findings regarding negative events in supervision, as shown in Table 2. Twenty-seven respondents (21.4% out of a total sample size of 126) indicated having a negative event in supervision, and 24 of these events were described. The negative events described by participants were coded into the following four categories: interpersonal relationship and style; supervision tasks and responsibilities; conceptualization and theoretical orientation; and ethics, legal, and multicultural issues. Responses could receive multiple codes and could be placed into more than one category depending on differing types of negative events within the same response. The interpersonal relationship and style and the supervision tasks and responsibilities categories accounted for the majority of the negative events ($ns = 14$ and 12, respectively). Findings support previous literature on negative events in supervision, suggesting that these events could be attributed to both the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee and the actual process of supervision itself.

Table 1

Univariate Results With Negative Experiences in Supervision

	Negative experiences				
	Mean		Standard deviation		
Dependent variable	Yes	No	Yes	No	$F(1, 120)$
Supervisory alliance	4.44	5.74	1.52	0.74	37.27*
Satisfaction with supervision	3.84	6.07	2.07	0.89	66.45*
View of training	4.19	5.78	2.07	1.18	25.77*
Relationship with supervisor	4.15	6.05	1.86	0.95	55.80*
Training	4.38	5.75	1.76	1.11	23.33*
Relationship with client	4.48	5.55	1.47	1.04	17.83*
Career goals	4.11	5.31	1.45	1.19	18.58*

* $p < .001$.

Table 2
Qualitative Analysis of the Categories for Negative Experiences

Category	Definitions	Examples
Interpersonal relationship & style[a]	Differing attitudes, personality conflicts, and communication difficulties, including the supervisor's being critical, judgmental, disrespectful, and unsupportive.	"Is generally critical and not conscious of how her way of delivering supervision impacts my therapy and confidence."
Supervision tasks & responsibilities[b]	Issues pertaining to the activities, roles, goals, expectations, and time spent in supervision, including viewing tapes, lack of supervision, and inadequate and outdated knowledge and skills of supervisor.	"Does not spend supervision time supervising" (but instead chatting about various unrelated topics). "'Old school' guy—not up with current theory and practice; very few clinical skills, etc. I only see him because I have to."
Conceptualization & theoretical orientation[c]	Conflicts involving client conceptualization, diagnosis, treatment decisions, and interventions, such as disagreements related to opposing theoretical orientations.	"Orientation differences with my supervisor—I am cognitive–behavioral, and he was dynamic. Therefore, we had some conflict over how to manage certain problematic client issues."
Ethics, legal, & multicultural issues[c]	Ethical and legal considerations pertaining to the professional practice of psychology, including multicultural competence, clinical issues, case management, and professional development.	"Current supervisor has made offensive statements about particular groups . . . [and] misrepresents program content and services to others in the professional community." "Got upset when I asked for physical accommodation for disability."

[a] $n = 14$.   [b] $n = 12$.   [c] $n = 5$.

Not surprisingly, respondents who reported negative experiences tended to have weaker supervisory alliances than did respondents who did not report negative experiences, indicating that these supervisory relationships were characterized by incongruent tasks and goals and by the absence of mutuality, trust, and confidence in the relationship. The breach in the alliance likely led to a supervisee's reporting negative experiences in supervision, particularly in the most frequently reported category of interpersonal relationship and style. For example, one supervisee described a negative experience as a "personality clash—she resents supervising, as she gets paid little and reminds me of this. She is very curt and works to keep supervision as brief as possible." Ethical violations may have also produced rifts in the alliance and may have caused the supervisee to lose trust in the supervisor.

As expected, those respondents reporting negative experiences were found to have significantly lower levels of satisfaction with their current supervisor than were respondents who did not report negative experiences. Again, because a majority of negative experiences reported by participants involved the personality style and interpersonal relationship, dissatisfaction with the supervisor would likely result. Similarly, other types of negative experiences, such as insufficient or inept supervision, would produce dissatisfaction with the supervisor. For example, one participant described an incident of multicultural incompetence in the following manner: "My supervisor imitated one of my [ethnic] clients, which I found pejorative, misogynist, and offensive." Alternatively, dissatisfaction with a supervisor may also precede a negative experience, making a supervisee less willing to communicate or attempt different approaches to resolve a conflict. Because participants reported on current experiences and not on past ones, it is possible that satisfaction would improve if a positive resolution of the conflict were achieved.

As anticipated, respondents who reported negative events also indicated that their current supervision negatively influenced their current training experience, general training experience, and their current supervisory experience significantly more than respondents who did not report negative events. The supervisee–client relationship was also negatively affected by negative experiences. It is clear that negative experiences in supervision could have an impact on a supervisee's confidence level with clients in such a way that he or she feels inadequately prepared to provide therapy to clients and manage cases. A conflict regarding goals for the client, lack of support, insufficient feedback, or harsh feedback from a supervisor may have direct bearing on the relationship a supervisee forms with his or her clients. For example, one respondent wrote the following: "I feel my current supervisor is very unclear and inconsistent with her expectations of me. I feel she does not give constructive feedback but is generally critical and not conscious of how her way of delivering supervision impacts my therapy and confidence." The consequences of these types of experiences may continue to affect supervisees' confidence with clients as they progress throughout their training.

Those reporting negative experiences also reported that their current supervision experience adversely affected their future career goals significantly more than those not reporting negative experiences in supervision. These findings suggest that the impact of a negative supervisory experience is global and long lasting, causing supervisees to question their choice of career and possibly change their career plans. This questioning may be accompanied by feelings of hopelessness, disillusionment, and failure, as supervisees may feel that they are inadequate as therapists. They may also feel so embittered by the lack of support that they consider switching to another area of psychology or to a totally different career. Clearly, the effects of negative supervision events can have

more long-range consequences than anticipated, not just for the individual supervisee but for the field itself.

Implications

Although the findings are exploratory and preliminary, they do prompt possible suggestions that may help to mediate the impact of negative events, if not prevent them altogether.

Although close scrutiny is an indispensable feature of clinical supervision, the current results serve as a strong reminder to all supervisors that harsh criticism and judgmental attitudes can have serious consequences for trainee development. Negative experiences in supervision can have observable effects on supervisees' clinical work, satisfaction with training, and future career decisions. Supervision would benefit from input from both supervisors and trainees in order to ameliorate difficulties in the relationship and prevent future negative experiences.

Because lower levels of supervisee development were found to be associated with weaker supervisory alliances, supervisors working with students in the earlier stages of training may need to pay closer attention to developing a solid relationship. Emphasizing relationship issues with the supervisee to develop this alliance may serve to prevent negative events or to buffer against the damaging consequences of negative events. For example, analysis of the qualitative data revealed that not feeling supported by their supervisors was an important factor in supervisees' descriptions of negative experiences in supervision. It is recommended that supervisors make conscious efforts to build trust, actively support and advocate for their trainees, periodically check a supervisee's feelings about the relationship, and remain open to feedback from trainees.

Qualitative analyses revealed that the relationship between the supervisor and the trainee was one of the most influential factors in the trainee's level of satisfaction with training. This finding suggests that calculated matching of supervisory pairs may be an important tool for enhancing training. By taking into account the preferences and interpersonal styles of both supervisors and trainees, the potential for a positive training experience increases. Directors might request information about the interpersonal styles and preferences of both participants, encourage formal and informal interactions between participants, and generally allow additional time for the participants to develop and express opinions about potential partners.

Given the importance of the supervisory relationship to the training experience, graduate programs can also contribute to successful matches by discussing how to choose a suitable supervisor, explaining the importance of personality matching, examining the effectiveness of concordant theoretical orientations, and encouraging mutually defined goals for supervision. Similarly, a supervision course for graduate students as part of their training is recommended as they prepare to be supervisors themselves. The course could include theories of supervision and supervisor development, case presentations, reviewing tapes of supervision, and hands-on training with practicum students at an earlier level in the program. Thus, students would learn early that supervision will be an ongoing professional responsibility.

In addition, the creation of a screening process may facilitate supervisor–supervisee matches and assist supervisors in identifying their own characteristics and styles that can be applied to goal setting and the encouragement of trainee development. Supervisors could also benefit from ongoing training and consultation in supervision. This could be offered in the form of a supervision of supervision or a consultation group that meets on a regular basis. This type of forum will help supervisors maintain accountability for their relationship with their supervisees. A standard system of supervisor evaluation by the trainee should be implemented and the feedback used to improve supervisor's performance.

Supervisors are also encouraged to explore the trainee's goals for supervision and to clarify their own expectations for the supervisee's performance. Supervisors need to take into account the evaluative nature of supervision and consider how this power discrepancy may affect the supervisee's willingness to express his or her personal goals for supervision. Trainees may need extra encouragement to be candid with the supervisor regarding their anxieties about counseling and needs for a supportive, trusting relationship with the supervisor.

Although less frequently reported in our study than other problems, negative experiences related to ethical, legal, and multicultural issues were strikingly severe in nature. It is also possible that these types of experiences were underreported due to the frequently subtle and ambiguous nature of these violations, which may have created uncertainty about their validity in the inexperienced supervisee. Nevertheless, when these issues were reported, they seemed particularly pernicious and harmful to the supervisee, involving quite blatant violations of our ethical codes. It is recommended that these violations be handled swiftly by the training director or program director who has the authority to help the student and remediate the situation. Some of the incidents reported resulted in removal of the supervisor. Given the perpetuating nature of the modeling process and power differential that exists in the supervisory relationship, it is especially crucial to prevent or immediately curtail any violations of this type.

Because increased knowledge of self is often a benefit or outcome of psychotherapy, it is reasonable to expect that psychotherapy would result in increased self-awareness of the supervisee. This increase in self-awareness is a critical dimension of development that is linked to the supervisory alliance. We recommend that graduate students seek therapy while they are in training to expand their self-awareness, foster their development, and enhance the supervisory relationship. We believe that this will help to ameliorate the deleterious consequences of negative events in supervision or prevent them from occurring.

It is apparent that the profession and consumers would be best served by supervisees having a strong supervisory relationship. Overall, it can be inferred that development of supervisees is contingent upon a good supervisor, a strong supervisory relationship, and a swift, effective response to negative events that may occur in supervision.

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