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Supervisor Attachment as a Predictor of Developmental Ratings of Supervisees

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ABSTRACT

The attachment of the supervisor was explored as a predictor of ratings of supervisee development. The sample consisted of 90 supervisor-supervisee dyads. Variance due to the psychological reactance of the supervisee and the duration of the supervisory relationship was held constant. Supervisors with a preoccupied style of attachment were more likely to give supervisees low professional development ratings than supervisors with other styles of attachment. This suggests that supervisors who have a preoccupied style of attachment may be unable to provide accurate ratings of the professional development of those whom they supervise. Recommendations are offered for supervisors, supervisees, and researchers.

INTRODUCTION

Attachment theory, as originally formulated by John Bowlby (1969), is a theoretical system that explains the emotional bond between a child and a primary caregiver and predicts later interpersonal functioning in adolescence and adulthood. Attachment relationships are fairly consistent over time; proportions of children in each attachment category are similar to proportions of adults in the same categories (Mickelson, Kessler, & Shaver, 1997). Attachment behaviors are those with the intent of preventing separation from or reestablishing proximity to a primary attachment figure (Paterson & Moran, 1988). The attachment figure serves as a *safe haven*, providing safety and comfort, and a *secure base*, allowing the child to explore the environment and experiment with novel behaviors. Specific parenting behaviors give rise to specific types of attachment. For example, children whose caregivers are sensitive and attentive are likely to develop a secure attachment, while children whose caregivers are sporadically responsive to or rebuffing of their needs are likely to develop an insecure attachment (Bowlby, 1988). Repeated interactions between the primary caregiver and infant in the early stages of life give rise to internal working models of attachment which are mental representations of the self and others that are used as templates to guide future emotionally-charged relationships (Paterson & Moran, 1988).

Within the past 20 years, attachment theory has been applied to adult relationships (Hazen & Shaver, 1987), which has provided the opportunity to examine the degree to which the attachment of the supervisor impacts the supervisory relationship (White & Queener, 2003). The current study used the theoretical model of adult attachment presented by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), which assigns adults to one of four attachment categories based on their view of self and view of others. *Secure* adults, who have a positive view of self and a positive view of others, are comfortable with intimacy and desire to be involved in relationships. *Preoccupied* adults, who have a negative view of self and a positive view of others, are anxious, highly emotionally expressive, have strong dependency needs, and demonstrate low self-confidence. *Dismissive* adults, who have a positive view of self and a negative view of others, avoid intimacy, have low levels of emotional expression, and are highly self-confident. *Fearful* adults, who have a negative view of self and a negative view of others, are socially avoidant, tend not to rely on others, and are subservient in relationships.

Because the supervisory relationship is one of emotional intensity, it provides fertile ground for the expression of attachment feelings and behaviors. The fact that the supervisory relationship has been linked to the overall quality of supervision is a finding that is consistent with this notion (Holloway, 1994; Lanning, 1971; Orlands & Edwards, 1997). Orlands and Edwards (1997) argued that a solid supervisory relationship is prerequisite for learning. Greben (1979) equated good supervision with good parenting, emphasizing the centrality of the interpersonal relationship. Lanning (1971) reported that the quality of the therapeutic relationship influences trainee expectations regarding their ability to forge a strong relationship with their clients. Kennard, Stewart, and Gluck (1987) reported that students most often cite “supportive” supervisor behavior as one of the qualities associated with a positive supervisory experience. Worthen and McNeill (1996) reported that the best supervisory experiences are characterized by empathy, affirmation, and encouragement to explore—concepts that resonate with the safe haven and secure base aspects of attachment theory. It has been observed that a close, attentive

supervisory relationship is central to good supervision (Worthen & McNeill, 1996). Others (Collins, 1993) have suggested that the supervisor may function as something of a professional transitional object whose relationship with the supervisee has a long-lasting influence. Perhaps most resonant of attachment is Bordin's (1983) concept of the supervisory working alliance, which considers the supervisory relationship to be a "rhythmic bond" (p. 36) between a supervisor and supervisee.

Of particular relevance to the current study is the possibility that the supervisor's style of attachment (*secure, preoccupied, dismissive, fearful*) may differentially impact the ratings they give to their supervisees. Previous research has demonstrated that the attachment style of the supervisor is predictive of working alliance ratings from both the perspective of the supervisor and the supervisee (White & Queener, 2003). Researchers have recognized that the supervisor's personality contributes greatly to the quality of supervision. Positive supervisory experiences are associated with supervisors who are supportive and instructional (Kennard, Steward, & Gluck, 1987), while supervisees find unsupportive supervisor behavior to be objectionable (Rosenblatt & Mayer, 1975). Beginning supervisees perceive effective supervision to be a function of the supervisor's effort to establish a positive relationship with them (Heppner & Roehlke, 1984). Worthington and Roehlke (1979) found that supervisors who encourage their supervisees to experiment with novel approaches tended to be more available during crises and more reassuring, and were likely to encourage supervisees to develop self-confidence and their own therapeutic style. One way of explaining these findings is that securely attached supervisors are successful in serving as a secure base for their supervisees. This may allow supervisees to experiment with unfamiliar therapeutic techniques and risk novel behaviors that they would be unable to do in the absence of such support. Examples of the role that the supervisor plays as a secure base are described by Neswald-McCalip (2001).

To the extent that the attachment of the supervisor contributes to or detracts from the quality of supervision he or she provides, the supervisee is likely to respond accordingly. Without ignoring the fact that the supervisory relationship is a reciprocal relationship in which both parties contribute, it is possible that at least some problematic supervisee behaviors occur because of the conditions established by the supervisor (this is particularly likely given that the supervisor serves as an important role model and exerts significant social influence over the supervisee). For example, differences in the frequency of nondisclosure in supervision (Ladany, Hill, Corbett, & Nutt, 1996) may be related to the degree of support provided by the supervisor. Excessive dependency, as observed by Yogev (1982), may be influenced by conditions established by the supervisor that promote or reinforce dependency. Some of the attachment behaviors observed by Neswald-McCalip (2001), Pistole and Watkins (1995), and Watkins (1995), which include refusing help, disparaging the supervisor, expressing defiance, and voicing fears of abandonment or jealousy, may be a reaction to the attachment of the supervisor.

If the attachment style of the supervisor influences how the supervisor evaluates the supervisee, then the validity of the supervisor's evaluation is threatened. Differences among ratings may not so much reflect the professional developmental level of the supervisee but rather reveal important diagnostic characteristics of the supervisor. Given that ratings of supervisee professional development may form the basis of grades in practica and internship courses, job

offers, and recommendations for further training or remediation, this topic is highly relevant to supervisees.

In the current study, two potentially confounding variables were statistically controlled: psychological reactance and the length of the supervisory relationship. Psychological reactance, which is the motivation to react to perceived threats to personal control (Brehm, 1966), was thought to confound developmental ratings in that supervisees who were reactant to the suggestions and advice of their supervisors might engender negative feedback and therefore a lower developmental rating from their supervisors. Research has indicated that individuals with high levels of psychological reactance are self-confident, manipulative and domineering in their relationships; reactant individuals prefer to take risks and engage in activities that do not involve close personal interaction (Buboltz, Woller, & Pepper, 1999). The length of the supervisory relationship was also considered a potential confound because of its covariation with the overall experience level of the supervisee. The longer the duration of the supervisory relationship, the more likely it is that the supervisee will make predictable advancements in professional development.

It was hypothesized that insecure supervisor attachment (*preoccupied, fearful, dismissive*) would be uniquely predictive of developmental ratings of supervisees after controlling for the variability attributable to the psychological reactance of the supervisee and the length of the supervisory relationship. No hypotheses were generated regarding the role of *secure* attachment in predicting ratings of development.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 90 non-overlapping supervisor-supervisee dyads. This sample was used in a previous study which examined hypotheses independent of those in the current study (Author, in press). The majority of supervisors and supervisees were female (70% and 81%, respectively) and Caucasian (87% and 82%, respectively). The mean age of supervisors was 44 ($SD=10.13$), while the mean age of supervisees was 29 ($SD=7.95$). Most supervisors were married (71%), while most supervisees were single (61%). Most supervisors held a Ph.D. degree (63%), followed by those with an MA/MS (22%) or an MSW (15%). Nearly equal numbers of supervisees were seeking an MA/MS (39%) or a Ph.D. (36%) degree, followed by supervisees seeking a Psy.D. degree (11%) or MSW degree (10%); 4% of supervisees did not indicate the degree they were seeking. The majority of supervisees were in clinical psychology programs (56%), followed by those in marriage and family therapy (19%), and programs in counseling psychology (10%), social work (10%), and counseling (5%). Supervisees reported that they had met for a mean of 19.23 ($SD=15.24$) supervision sessions with their current clinical supervisors. Supervisees had completed a mean of 6.82 ($SD=4.31$) semesters of graduate school and had received clinical supervision for a mean of 4.25 ($SD=3.52$) semesters.

Procedure

A non-random, availability sample was solicited via bulk email messages to graduate program directors across the United States in psychology, counseling, marriage and family therapy, and social work. A total of 1109 supervisor-supervisee questionnaire packets were mailed to a total of 54 different training directors who agreed to make the packets available to supervisees conducting psychotherapy under the supervision of an identifiable primary supervisor. The number of packets that were sent to each program was based on the training director's estimate of the number of supervisees currently conducting psychotherapy. Supervisees who agreed to participate were asked to give a matched questionnaire to their current supervisor. Informed consent was obtained separately from both supervisors and supervisees. Data was collected anonymously and questionnaires were returned separately so that supervisors did not have access to the information provided by their supervisees and visa versa. Completed questionnaires were returned from 31 different states. A total of 136 questionnaires were returned from supervisees, of which 90 could be matched to an independent supervisor questionnaire yielding an overall return rate of 12%.

Because the hypotheses pertained to supervisor-supervisee dyads, the unmatched supervisee questionnaires ($n=46$) were not used in the analyses. Independent samples t-tests for equality of means were conducted for all demographic variables and instrument ratings between matched and unmatched supervisees. Alpha was corrected using a Bonferroni correction to control for Type I error. All comparisons were nonsignificant. Matched supervisor-supervisee dyads were not statistically significantly different than unmatched dyads on variables of interest. A multivariate analyses of variance was conducted with professional discipline as the independent variable and psychological reactance and developmental ratings as dependent variables. There were no statistically significant group differences, suggesting that supervisees in different academic programs cannot be differentiated from one another on the variables of interest.

Instruments

Questionnaire for the Measurement of Psychological Reactance. Supervisee reactance was measured by the Questionnaire for the Measurement of Psychological Reactance (QMPR; Merz, 1983). The QMPR is an 18-item, 6-point Likert scale instrument with a range of 18-108. The QMPR has demonstrated good test-retest reliability ($r=.86$, Merz, 1983) and internal consistency ($\alpha=.79$; Dowd & Wallbrown, 1993). Its construct validity has been established based on its relationship to autonomy, dominance, nervousness, emotional lability, insecurity, and depression (Merz, 1983). Internal consistency of the scale in the current study was similar to previous studies ($\alpha=.80$). Two sample items from the scale are, "I react strongly to duties and regulations," and "Suggestions and advice often make me do the opposite."

Supervisee Levels Scale P-subscale. Supervisee developmental level was measured by the Supervisee Levels Scale P-subscale (SLS; Wiley & Ray, 1986). The P-subscale consists of 20 items distributed across four levels of professional development; each level has 5 items which are scored on a 7-point Likert scale. This allows for supervisees to be assigned to one of four levels, the higher the level the greater the degree of professional development. Unfortunately, this scoring procedure also results in tied scores. For this reason and to provide a continuous rating scale, only ratings on the fourth (highest) level were used in the current study, with a

possible range of 5-35. The SLS has demonstrated high test-retest reliability ($r=.86$). Validity has been demonstrated by inter-rater agreement on the congruence between items and developmental ratings (Wiley & Ray, 1986) and in analogue role-play classification of supervisees (Chagnon & Russell, 1995). Internal consistency has not been previously reported, but was high in the current study ($\alpha=.83$). Two sample items from the scale are, "My supervisee has a consistent and firm sense of confidence about his/her counseling skills even when challenged by clients, supervisors, and colleagues," and "My supervisee has essentially completed his/her sense of self as a counselor and integrated it with his/her sense of self as a person."

Relationship Scales Questionnaire. The Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) was used to determine the attachment of the supervisor. This is a 30-item, 5-point Likert scale instrument (with 13 filler items) that yields four subscale scores according to each of four categories of attachment: *Secure*, *Preoccupied*, *Fearful*, *Dismissive*. Subscale lengths differ with a range of 4-20 for *Fearful* and *Preoccupied* subscales, and 5-25 for *Dismissive* and *Secure* subscales (one item overlaps on the *Preoccupied* and *Dismissive* subscales). The RSQ yields scores on all subscales of attachment. As such, participants can be described as having varying degrees of each attachment. Used in this manner, attachment is described as a "style" rather than a category "type." The RSQ has demonstrated fair test-retest reliability over an eight month period ($r=.49$ for men, $r=.53$ for women; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), and adequate internal consistency (ranging from $r=.41$ to $r=.70$; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Construct validity of the RSQ was supported by significant correlations among self-report, friend-report, partner-report, peer interview, and measures of self-acceptance, self-esteem, interpersonal warmth, and sociability (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Internal consistency in the current study ranged from adequate to good ($r=.42$, *Preoccupied*; $r=.45$, *Secure*; $r=.64$, *Dismissive*; $r=.76$, *Fearful*). A sample item from the *Preoccupied* subscale is, "I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like." A sample item from the *Secure* subscale is, "I am comfortable depending on other people." A sample item from the *Dismissive* subscale is, "It is very important to me to feel self-sufficient." A sample item from the *Fearful* subscale is, "I find it difficult to trust others completely."

RESULTS

Data were analyzed using a hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Table 1 includes means, standard deviations, coefficient alphas, and intercorrelations for all variables. Psychological reactance was added first; the total number of supervision sessions between supervisors and their supervisees was added next; the attachment of the supervisor was added last. Supervisee professional development, as rated by the supervisor, was the dependent variable. Psychological reactance was not significantly predictive of supervisee developmental level ($R^2\Delta=.01$, $F(1,88)=.19$, $p=.66$). However, the number of supervision sessions was significant when added in the second block ($R^2\Delta=.12$, $F(1,87)=12.07$, $p<.01$). When supervisor attachment was added in the third block, the $R^2\Delta$ was also significant ($R^2\Delta=.14$, $F(3,84)=5.26$, $p<.01$). The overall model, with all predictors, was significant ($R^2=.26$, $F(5,84)=5.97$, $p<.01$). These results are depicted in Table 2. The psychological reactance of the supervisee did not

predict developmental ratings given by supervisors. However, the number of supervision sessions was predictive of supervisor ratings of development after controlling for the psychological reactance of the supervisee. Also, the attachment of the supervisor was predictive of ratings of development after controlling for both the number of supervision sessions and the psychological reactance of the supervisee. That is, the attachment of the supervisor was uniquely predictive of supervisor ratings of supervisee development. Beta weights for each insecure attachment style indicated that *preoccupied* attachment was the only style of attachment that was uniquely negatively predictive of development (beta=-.28) and that the other insecure styles of attachment were not uniquely predictive of supervisor ratings of development. *Secure* attachment was not uniquely predictive of developmental ratings.

Table 1.

Means, Standard Deviations, Coefficient Alpha, and Intercorrelations for Scores on Independent and Dependent Measures

(*N* = 90).

Measure	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	1	2	3	Measure 4	5	6	7
1. Total Sessions	19.47	14.61	N/A	---						
2. RSQ Secure	18.51	2.56	.45	.10	---					
3. RSQ Preoccupied	9.79	2.09	.42	.05	-.19	---				
4. RSQ Dismissive	15.29	2.75	.64	.03	-.30*	-.19	---			
5. RSQ Fearful	8.63	2.75	.76	-.12	-.62*	.14	.39*	---		
6. QMPR	44.76	8.75	.80	.35*	-.08	.01	-.08	-.02	---	
7. SLS Level 4 Total	18.53	6.41	.83	.17	.20	-.32*	.15	-.20	-.05	---

Note. Total Sessions = Total Number of Supervision Sessions; RSQ = Relationship Scales Questionnaire; SLS = Supervisee Levels Scale; QMPR = Questionnaire for the Measurement of Psychological Reactance.

**p*<.01

Table 2.

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting SLS from QMPR, Number of Supervision Sessions, and RSQ (N = 90).

Variable	<u>R</u>	<u>R²</u>	<u>R²Δ</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>sr²</u>
<u>Block 1</u>	.05	.01	.01		
QMPR				-.05	.01
<u>Block 2</u>	.35*	.12*	.12**		
QMPR				-.07	.01
Number of sessions				.35**	.12
<u>Block 3</u>	.51**	.26**	.14*		
QMPR				-.06	.01
Number of sessions				.34**	.13
RSQ					
1. Secure				-.07	.01
2. Fearful				-.18	.02
3. Preoccupied				-.28**	.08
4. Dismissive				.15	.02
<u>Overall Model</u>	.51**	.26**			
<u>F(5,84)=5.97,p<.001</u>					

Note. QMPR = Questionnaire for the Measurement of Psychological Reactance; RSQ = Relationship Scales Questionnaire; SLS = Supervisee Levels Scale
p*<.01; *p*<.001

DISCUSSION

The current study was an attempt to examine the influence of the supervisor's attachment on developmental ratings they provide to their supervisees. After controlling for psychological reactance and the number of supervision sessions, supervisors with a *preoccupied* style of attachment rated their supervisees as less professionally developed than supervisors with other styles of attachment. To consider possible explanations for this observation, it is necessary to

examine the qualities that comprise the *preoccupied* style of attachment. This style is characterized by a negative view of self and a positive view of others. These individuals seek out intimacy with others yet doubt their own contribution to relationships. They are invested in relationships, but do not consider themselves to be worthy of the attention they receive. This style of relating to others may impact the supervisory relationship in that *preoccupied* supervisors may experience a conflict between the abilities of their supervisees and their own expertise as a supervisor. This internal conflict may lead them to negatively appraise their supervisees. This may be particularly true when the *preoccupied* supervisor evaluates a supervisee who is self-confident and demonstrates solid clinical abilities. The self-doubt of a supervisor with a *preoccupied* style of attachment may increase when the individual being supervised seems to possess skills that may threaten or disarm the supervisor. In order to reduce this tension, the supervisor may provide lower ratings, and in a compensatory measure, boost their own self-confidence. *Preoccupied* supervisors may engage in a process similar to that of downward social comparison (Hakmiller, 1966) in an effort to protect an attenuated sense of self.

Of interest is that the other insecure styles of attachment were not predictive of professional development ratings. This suggests that supervisors who have a *fearful* or *dismissive* style of attachment are likely to provide accurate ratings of their supervisee's professional development. *Dismissive* supervisors, who have a negative view of themselves and others, may be sufficiently detached from supervision that their ratings are unbiased. *Fearful* supervisors, who have a negative view of others and a positive view of themselves, are not as motivated to negatively evaluate their supervisees in order to boost their self-confidence because they already feel adequately self-confident. It is also interesting that *secure* supervisors were not positively biased in their evaluations. While this may initially appear to be contrary to theory, it is actually a favorable finding because it suggests that *secure* supervisors do not artificially inflate the developmental ratings of their supervisees.

In the current study, psychological reactance was statistically controlled because it was thought to share variance with evaluation ratings of supervisees. Results indicated that there was no predictive relationship between psychological reactance and developmental ratings of supervisees. This is another favorable finding in that it suggests that supervisors are not biased in their evaluation ratings by the degree to which their supervisees reject their advice or are hyper-autonomous. The length of the supervisory relationship was also statistically controlled in the current study because of the likely relationship between length of training and ratings of professional development. This hypothesis was supported; supervisees who reported a longer supervisory relationship were more likely to receive higher developmental ratings than supervisees who reported a shorter supervisory relationship.

The results of this study present viable recommendations for supervisors, supervisees, and researchers. For supervisors, it is recommended that they monitor the impact that their relationships may exert on the evaluations they give their supervisees. It is possible that unresolved relational issues may impair their ability to accurately assess the professional development of those they supervise. It may also be advisable to use multiple methods of assessment, such as live observation, to evaluate a supervisee's progress in order to provide a less biased rating. Further, incorporating supervisee input into evaluations may also improve the accuracy of the evaluation process.

Supervisees are encouraged to solicit frequent feedback from their supervisors and clarify its source, to take advantage of multiple supervisors, and to be mindful that negative feedback may not be an entirely accurate assessment of one's abilities. To the extent that supervisees receive regular feedback regarding their performance from more than one supervisor using more than one source of feedback, they will be better equipped to differentiate negative appraisal that is a function of performance from that which is influenced by the attachment of the appraiser.

This study introduces several issues that may guide future research. Given the finding that *preoccupied* attachment may be a liability for accurate ratings of development, it may be beneficial to explore the interaction between the attachment style of both the supervisor and the supervisee. For example, a *preoccupied* style may not be a liability provided that both the supervisor and the supervisee have a *preoccupied* style of attachment. It would also be of interest to explore the longitudinal influence of attachment style on development and other aspects of one's performance or career choices. Because of the findings with regard to the duration of the supervisory relationship, it is recommended that future researchers continue to control for the variability due to this factor, particularly when examining the quality or nature of supervisee progress. The role of psychological reactance should be further explored, as previous research suggests it may impact certain aspects of self-reported development, such as the motivational level of the supervisee (Author, 2002). The null findings in the current study may suggest that psychological reactance is only relevant when supervisees appraise their own development and not when supervisors do.

There are some limits to the current study. The non-random, availability sample limits the internal validity of the findings because of the possibility that the participants were not similar in some important way to most other supervisors and supervisees. A related concern is the low return rate, which is probably attributable to the multiple steps involved in participating in the study. Another caveat is that the sample consisted of a heterogeneous group of supervisors. As such, results cannot reliably be extended to any single professional group. Further, the SLS has limited use as a measure of the developmental level of the supervisee. It would be advantageous for researchers in this area to conduct further validity studies on the SLS and to develop additional measures that assess the supervisee's level of professional development from the perspective of the supervisor. While *preoccupied* attachment was predictive of developmental ratings, the effect size was relatively small (see Table 2), suggesting that the attachment of the supervisor does not account for a large proportion of the variance in ratings of development. Moreover, the internal consistency of the RSQ subscales was less than favorable, suggesting that this instrument is limited in its ability to reliably assess different styles of attachment.

The results of this study hold theoretical and practical implications with regard to the impact that attachment style has on developmental ratings of supervisees. The supervisory relationship seems to be sufficiently emotionally charged to be a vehicle through which supervisors manifest the attachment behaviors that characterize their external relationships. It is our hope that research in this area will continue to elucidate the nuances of the supervisory relationship in an effort to improve its quality and enhance the overall training of mental health providers.

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