

The Impact of the Supervision Relationship on the Behaviors  
of School Counseling Interns

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### Abstract

This study investigated the onsite supervision relationship and the behaviors of ninety-seven school counseling interns in a Midwestern state. Results indicated that the supervision relationship was related to the behaviors of school counseling interns. Within the supervision relationship, decreased role ambiguity was found to be a strong predictor of engagement in appropriate school counseling internship behaviors. Findings support the importance of counselor educators, school counseling interns and onsite school counseling supervisors attending to the supervision relationship.

## The Impact of the Supervision Relationship on the Behaviors of School Counseling Interns

Appropriate supervision relationships have been shown to contribute to school counselors' general skill development (Agnew, Vaught, Getz, & Fortune, 2000; Benshoff & Paisley 1996; Crutchfield & Borders, 1997; Henderson & Lamp, 1992; VanZandt & Perry, 1992). School counseling interns need increased supervision as they encounter issues of violence, teen pregnancy, suicide, death, poverty, homelessness, and substance abuse (Borders, 1991; Carone, Hall, & Grubb, 1998; Christman-Dunn, 1998). Unfortunately, some of the skills needed to manage problems faced by onsite school counseling supervisors may have not been taught in counselor education programs (Crutchfield, Price, McGarity, Pennington, Richardson, and Tsolis, 1997). While the competencies needed to practice as a school counselor are increasing, Page, Pietzrak and Sutton (2001) found in a national study of 267 school counselors that many are not receiving the amount or type of supervision desired. A combination of increased behavioral responsibilities with less than ideal amounts of supervision may produce negative results for school counselors. Without appropriate supervision school counselors may experience increased stress (Crutchfield & Borders), increased ethical violations, decreased counseling skills (Crutchfield et al., 1997), and relinquished professional responsibilities (Magnuson, Normen, & Bradley, 2001).

One of the most promising lines of research in supervision is the investigation of the supervisor-supervisee relationship (Reichelt & Skjerve, 2002). Ladany and Friedlander (1995) suggested an investigation of the effects of the supervision relationship variables, namely role ambiguity and rapport, on the behaviors of

supervisees. Counselor education should also examine how the supervisory relationship influences skill development of the trainee (Ladany, 2004), and encourage an examination of how supervision factors influence counselor performance (Holloway & Neufeldt, 1995). The current study contributes to the school counseling profession by examining how role ambiguity and rapport in the supervision relationship relates to interns engagement in school counseling behaviors. The primary research question guiding this study was: Does the level of rapport and role ambiguity in the onsite supervision relationship impact the relative frequency school counseling interns engage in school counseling-related behaviors while controlling for the dispositional optimism?

#### Role Ambiguity, Rapport, & Dispositional Optimism

Role ambiguity refers to school counseling intern's unawareness of the behaviors expected of them during internship. This may involve school counseling interns receiving little direction for the types of duties they should be accomplishing and minimal feedback on duties they have completed. The result is a lack of understanding by school counseling interns on what they should be doing and how well they are performing. When supervisees report high levels of role ambiguity in the supervision relationship, they may experience (a) decreased self-confidence (Kahn, Wolf, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964), (b) difficulties working with other school personnel (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Mitchell, 1990), (c) increased anxiety and decreased job satisfaction (Olk & Friedlander, 1992), (d) uncertainty about the type and frequency of behaviors in which to engage (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998), (e) restricted supervisee development (Ladany, Lehrman-Waterman, Molinaro, & Wolgast, 1999), and (f) increased confusion regarding appropriate behaviors (Reichelt & Skjerve, 2002).

Rapport experienced by interns with onsite supervisors can involve school counseling interns feeling comfortable when working with their supervisors. Efstation, Patton, and Kardash (1990) found that the existence of rapport in the supervision relationship may be more important to new supervisees compared to more advanced counselors. Supervisory working alliance theory maintained that supervisees' strong relationship with their supervisor was related to (a) increased ability to learn new skills (Enyedy, Arcinue, Puri, Carter, Goodyear, & Getzelman, 2003), (b) increased ability to master skills (Bordin, 1983), (c) increased disclosure to supervisors regarding client issues, and (d) increased satisfaction with supervision (Ladany, Hill, Corbett, & Nutt, 1996). A strong supervisory working alliance characterized by rapport (Ladany, 2004), contributed to increased multicultural competencies, self-disclosure, supervisee satisfaction, role certainty, and productive events in supervision. Although the majority of the research on rapport and role ambiguity has been conducted with community counseling or psychology supervisees, the findings provide a reasonable base on which to investigate the school counseling supervision relationship.

While role ambiguity and rapport have been studied, dispositional optimism has not been examined in the field of counseling. Dispositional optimism refers to the expectancies of school counseling interns that good things, rather than bad things will happen. Dispositional optimism has been studied in the field of physical and mental health. Individuals who had higher levels of dispositional optimism experienced better outcomes (Affleck, Tennen, Zautra, Urrows, Abeles, & Karoly, 2001; Creed, Patton, & Barton, 2002; Chamberlain, Petrie, & Azariah, 1992; Durakovic-Belko, Kulenovic, & Dapic, 2003; Gibson & Sanbonmatsu, 2004; Shepperd, Maroto, & Pbert, 1996; Stillel,

Miller, Manzetti, Marino, & Keenan, 1999). There was an absence of research that investigates dispositional optimism in the supervision relationship. The authors chose to utilize dispositional optimism as a variable to moderate the supervisee's perception of rapport and role ambiguity in the supervision relationship.

## Method

### *Participants*

Ninety-seven school counseling interns in a mid-western state were sampled. Fifty-four percent of the respondents were from CACREP accredited programs. Of the respondents, 90.7% were female and 93.8% were white. This sample was consistent with the majority of ASCA's membership who were Caucasian and female (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The mean age of the participants was 31 years of age and over half of the respondents (54.6%) had previous teaching experience. The participants were split among the different school levels with 33.0% at the elementary school level, 35.1% at the middle school level, and 29.9% at the high school level. The respondents reported accruing a mean of 336 internship hours.

### *Procedures*

The accessible population was school counseling interns enrolled in internship courses in 13 school counselor training programs in a mid-western state. The researcher used Dillman's Total Design Method to prepare and deliver the survey (Salant & Dillman, 1994). Since a comprehensive assessable population list was not available, the researcher proceeded with Salant's and Dillman's recommendation and administered the instruments in a face-to-face format. Six of the 13 programs were purposefully selected to include CACREP and non-CACREP accredited programs and

to regionally represent all parts of the mid-western state. The interns were purposely sampled at the mid-point of their internship. This provided the interns an opportunity to participate in many school counseling related behaviors and develop a relationship with their onsite supervisor. The researcher collected data from 13 separate school counseling internship classes from six different counselor education programs. The researcher visited the sample of the school counseling internship programs, provided verbal and written informed consent from the participants and administered the instrument to school counseling interns in the classroom environment. Of the 100 school counseling internship students available, three were not included in the analyses due to choosing not to complete the survey. This resulted in ninety-seven participants in the study. The high rate of response from the participants in the school counseling internship class may be due to having the support of the classroom instructor and administering the survey in a face to face manner.

### *Measures*

The instruments used in this study included the Rapport Scale from the Supervisory Working Alliance Inventory (SWAI; Efstation et al., 1990), the Role Ambiguity Scale from the Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity Inventory (RCRAI; Olk & Friedlander, 1992), the Life Orientation Test – Revised (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994), and the Performance Standards and Appraisal Self Report Scale (PSASRS).

The Supervisory Working Alliance Inventory (SWAI; Efstation et al., 1990) was created to measure the working alliance between supervisor and supervisee. The SWAI supervisee form has 19 questions. Respondents reply to the questions using a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from (1) almost never, to (7) almost always. An example of a

question from this scale included, “I feel comfortable working with my supervisor.” A higher response to the question indicated that the supervisee viewed a stronger working alliance between him/herself and his/her supervisor. Based upon the results from the pilot study, this research study utilized the 12 rapport subscale questions from the supervisee form. The subscale was used as originally developed with the exception that the word “client” was changed to “student” to more accurately reflect the terminology used by school counseling interns. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was used to measure the internal consistency of the rapport scale in the study. Alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .95$ , which indicated a high level of reliability for the instrument. The reliability coefficient was almost identical to  $\alpha = .90$  reported by Efstation et al.

The Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity Inventory (RCRAI) created by Olk and Friedlander (1992) measured the role conflict and role ambiguity experienced by the supervisee in the supervisory relationship. The RCRAI consisted of 29 questions that are answered by supervisee self-report. Respondents reply to the questions using a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from (1) not at all, to (5) very much so. An example of a question from this scale was, “My supervisor’s criteria for evaluating my work were not specific.” A higher response to the question indicated that the supervisee viewed a greater level of role ambiguity in the supervisory relationship. The Role Ambiguity subscale was used as originally developed with the exception of changing the word “client” to “student” and changing the word “therapist” to “school counselor” to more accurately reflect the terminology used by school counseling interns. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was used to measure the internal consistency of the role ambiguity scale. Alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .95$ , which indicated a high level of reliability for the instrument

in this study. The reliability coefficient was similar to  $\alpha = .91$  reported by Oak and Friedlander.

The Life Orientation Test – Revised (LOT-R) was created by Scheier et al. (1994) to measure dispositional optimism. The LOT-R consisted of a 10 question self-report form. All respondents replied to the questions using a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from (0) strongly disagree, to (4) strongly agree. An example of a question from this scale was, “In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.” A higher response to the question indicated that the respondent was more dispositionally optimistic. Scheier et al. found a correlation between the LOT-R and the original Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier and Carver, 1985) was .90. The alpha coefficient for the LOT-R found in this study was  $\alpha = .80$ , which indicated a similar level of reliability of  $\alpha = .78$  reported by Scheier et al.

The Performance Standards and Appraisal Self Report Scale (PSASRS) was created as a criterion-referenced instrument used to compare school counseling interns’ behaviors to a predetermined performance standard. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) 2001 standards provided a description of the minimum knowledge and skills competencies in which school counseling interns should develop during their training. Competencies in knowledge and skill requirements included: program development, implementation, and evaluation; counseling and guidance; and consultation and collaboration. Appropriate behaviors for school counseling interns can be determined by examining other sources such as the ASCA National Standards (Campbell & Dahir; 1997), Missouri School Counselor Evaluation System (Bunch, 2002), Connecticut Best-Practices School Counselor

Evaluation System (CSCA, CACES, & CDE; 2002), the Omaha Public School System Evaluation (Maliszewski & Luther, 2000), and the Ohio Performance Standards and Appraisal Inventory (OPSAI; Sears, 2003).

The development of the PSASRS included modifying the Ohio Performance Standards and Appraisal Inventory (Sears, 2003) from an open-ended questionnaire to a Likert scale self report survey instrument. The content of the 31 items on the PSASRS instrument were constructed to match the knowledge and skills of school counselors as identified by CACREP (2001). On the PSASRS, respondents replied to the statements using a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from (1) never to (5) always. An example of a question from this scale included, "I provided individual counseling to students to address academic development." A supervisee who provided a higher response to the question indicated that behavior as more frequently characteristic of his or her work during the internship. Benshoff and Thomas (1992) reported that self-report scales are desirable for the experience they provide the supervisee in assessing their own skills and behaviors. The PSASRS self report scale was consistent with previous instruments used to evaluate the behavior of school counselors. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to measure the internal consistency of the Performance Standards and Appraisal Self Report Scale. The alpha coefficient for the scale was  $\alpha = .86$  ( $p < .01$ ), which indicated an acceptable level of reliability for the instrument.

## Results

School counseling interns reported an average level of rapport with their onsite school counseling supervisors as measured by the SWAI rapport scale ( $M = 5.91$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ), and an average level of role ambiguity with the onsite school counseling

supervisors as measured by the RCRAI role ambiguity scale ( $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = .86$ ). The school counseling interns reported higher than average levels of dispositional optimism as measured by the LOT-R ( $M = 17.58$ ,  $SD = 3.42$ ). School counseling interns reported engaging often in the CACREP knowledge and skill school counseling related behaviors during their school counseling internship as measured by the PSASRS ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 0.4$ ).

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to evaluate how well supervision relationship factors of rapport and role ambiguity predicted school counseling behaviors while holding dispositional optimism constant. An alpha level of .05 was used for all tests. The linear combination of supervision relationship factors was significantly related to school counseling behaviors. The model as a whole was significant,  $F(3, 93) = 4.26$ ,  $p < .01$ . The sample size was sufficient and resulted in a medium effect size  $d = .5$  (Cohen, 1988). After the effects of optimism of the participants were held constant, the multiple correlation coefficient for the sample was .35, indicating that approximately 12% of the variance of the behaviors of school counseling interns can be accounted for by the linear combination of onsite supervision relationship factors. The bivariate correlation between role ambiguity and the school counseling behavior scale was negative ( $r = -.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This indicated that as role ambiguity increases, engagement in school counseling behaviors decreases. However, the bivariate correlation between rapport and school counseling behavior scale was relatively-non directional and not statistically significant ( $r = .06$ ). The standard beta coefficients for role ambiguity ( $-.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and for rapport ( $-.20$ ,  $p = .10$ ) indicated that role ambiguity makes a stronger and significant contribution to the prediction model. The results indicated that there was

a significant relationship between the level of rapport and role ambiguity in the onsite supervision relationship and school counseling intern behaviors.

### Discussion

This study contributes to the school counseling field by the making the connection between the onsite supervision relationship and the behaviors school counseling interns. The findings are consistent with previous research that identified the importance of the supervision relationship (Bordin, 1983; Enyedy et al., 2003). The relatively small amount of variance explained suggests that the behaviors of the school counseling interns were impacted by variables in addition to role ambiguity and rapport. These may have consisted of other supervision relationship variables not examined in this study such as role conflict, interaction patterns between supervisor and supervisee, self-presentation of supervisee, dynamics of power, gender, or supervision theory (Borders & Brown, 2005). The authors identified that role ambiguity in the onsite supervision relationship was a stronger contributor to the prediction model than rapport. While rapport with an onsite supervisor was important, it was more significant for the school counseling intern to have a clear idea of their role as an intern.

Implications and conclusions of this study were restricted by the inherent limitations. While an appropriate research design, the ex post facto design of the study restricted the interpretation of the results from implying causation. The study was based on the school counseling interns' perceptions regarding the supervision relationship and the school counseling behaviors. Onsite school counselor supervisors, as well as independent third party observers, may have different views of the supervisory relationship and school counseling intern behaviors. Finally, the ability to generate a

random sample of current school counseling interns in a mid-western state was limited by a lack of an accessible population list. The researcher sampled the school counseling interns from the individual school counseling programs located throughout the state. Although this method was adequate for the current study, true random sampling of participants is ideal.

The results of the study have several practical implications for school counselors. This study emphasizes the importance of school counselors recognizing their significant role as onsite supervisors and how they may contribute to interns learning and practicing school counseling behaviors. It is concerning that while supervision is critical to the internship, practicing school counselors are not required to take a course or have continuing education on supervision. Since many school counseling supervisors do not receive training in supervision skills, reducing the role ambiguity in the supervision relationship may be challenging.

As previous research found (Bacharach et al. 1990; Kahn et al. 1964; Ladany et al., 1999; Olk & Friedlander, 1992) failing to address role ambiguity may lead to difficulties in the school counseling internship (e.g. decreased self confidence, difficulties with school personnel, anxiety, decreased job satisfaction, increased anxiety, and restricted supervisee development). Ronnestad and Skovholt (1993) and Osborn and Davis (1996) suggested the use of a supervisory contract to decrease the ambiguity in the relationship and increase the supervisees understanding of their role. Onsite supervisors can reduce role ambiguity in the supervision relationship by (a) communicating to the supervisee the structure of supervision, (b) providing feedback on the performance of school counseling behaviors, (c) explaining the criteria for how he or

she will be evaluated, and (d) providing specific examples of how to perform school counseling related behaviors (Olk & Friedlander). Due to the power differential between supervisee and supervisor (Borders & Brown, 2005), the onsite supervisor, rather than the intern is in a position to resolve difficulties in the relationship. It may also be beneficial for the school counseling internship coordinator to intervene if there are unresolved difficulties in the onsite supervision relationship.

Counselor educators can support appropriate supervision relationships between supervisees and onsite supervisors by having an open relationship with onsite supervisors to discuss difficulties in the supervision relationship. A discussion of supervision skills and techniques could be incorporated into a school counseling course such as internship. In addition, a course on supervision for school counselors could be offered in the masters programs. It may be beneficial for counselor education programs to provide training for school counseling supervisors prior to placing interns at their site. Counselor educators can help onsite supervisors understand how to structure the supervision experience, provide feedback, and discuss the criteria for evaluating the supervisees' performance. This training could be provided as a workshop for all new school counseling supervisors at the beginning of the school year.

Researchers could broaden the study to obtain the perspectives of the onsite school counseling supervisors regarding their relationship with the school counseling intern. Utilizing random sampling and including school counseling interns from across the country could improve the generalizability of the study. Future studies could broaden the research by incorporating other supervision relationship variables beyond rapport and role ambiguity in the supervision relationship. These supervision relationship

variables could include supervisee anxiety, attraction to the supervisor, cultural transference, or power in the supervision relationship. Researchers could also examine how school counseling supervisors negotiate the supervision role of establishing a working alliance, while also providing evaluative feedback. Finally, researchers could use qualitative methodology to examine the unique experience of school counseling interns who are experiencing difficulties in their relationship with their onsite supervisor.

This study explored the connection between the onsite supervision relationship and the self-reported school counseling-related behaviors of interns. The findings of this study provided additional support to the perspective that the onsite supervision relationship has a significant impact on school counseling interns. Continued research in this area may provide additional findings to strengthen the school counseling internship experience and provide practical guidelines for the supervision of school counselors.

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