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## Lessons from Triadic Supervisors: Maximizing Effectiveness

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# Lessons from Triadic Supervisors: Maximizing Effectiveness

## **Abstract**

Through this hermeneutic-phenomenological qualitative study, 10 supervisors of a CACREP accredited program identified emergent themes and challenges of triadic supervision: relationship dynamics, feedback, time management, contextual learning, and matching of supervisees. The researchers offer specific methods to approach these challenges within triadic supervision to maximize effectiveness.

## **Author's Notes**

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## **Keywords**

Supervision, Triadic, Effectiveness

As an essential aspect of counselor preparation, supervision calls for models that demonstrate consistent effectiveness (Borders, 2012; Kemer, Borders, & Willse, 2014). As of 2001, the standards of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016) have endorsed triadic supervision as a suitable training and supervision practice. With greater numbers of state counseling licensing boards accepting triadic supervision as an alternate to individual supervision (Oliver, Nelson, & Ybanez, 2010), researchers continue to explore this model which consists of a supervisor and two supervisees meeting simultaneously (Goldberg, Dixon, & Wolf, 2012; Hein & Lawson, 2008). As triadic supervision receives growing attention in the literature, guidelines for how to make best use of this model are critically needed. Although the model itself seems clear, the overarching structure and process of triadic supervision appears to vary widely in practice. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate and understand practicing supervisors' experiences, with a goal of identifying commonplace challenges faced in triadic supervision, and offering pragmatic ways to address those challenges

### **Background**

Since the 1900's, mental health professionals have recognized clinical supervision as crucial for their professional development and effective work with clients (Kemer et al., 2014; Tomlin, Weatherston, & Pavkov, 2014). Across social work, psychology, and counseling as well as couples and family therapy, various supervision modalities are used (Hein & Lawson, 2009). Researchers carefully investigate core components, and new structured models are brought forward to enhance supervision practice (Oliver et al., 2010).

Several promising models of triadic supervision have emerged in the counseling field (Goldberg et al., 2012; Lawson, Hein, & Getz, 2009; Stinchfield, Hill & Kleist, 2007). Lawson

et al. (2009) drew on group supervision techniques to structure triadic supervision identifying collaborative relationships as central for supporting appropriate feedback exchanges. Goldberg et al. (2012) emphasized structuring sessions to pay particular attention to relationship dynamics, the ability to be vulnerable and understood, among members of the triad. According to Nuttgens and Chang (2013), differences in attitude and behavior that may be most likely to affect relationship dynamics revolve around ethics, gender, sexual attraction, power differentials, strength of skills, and emotional maturity. Stinchfield, Hill, and Kleist (2007) also concentrated on structure, using reflecting teams as a basis for feedback and understanding. Thus, similarities exist across models, most particularly related to the focus on thoughtful structuring of relationship dynamics, feedback and time management.

Overall, several empirical studies (Borders et al., 2012; Goldberg et al., 2012; Stinchfield, Hill, & Kleist, 2010) have identified a number of advantages, although challenges also exist in triadic supervision. Stinchfield et al. (2010) discovered triadic supervision fostered a degree of trust among the participants that often led to meaningful and productive working relationships. As a result, members of the triads were able to understand the perspectives of the others and did not have to defend or explain themselves. Triadic supervision generally has resulted in insightful, valuable, challenging feedback while supportive to the growth of supervisees (Borders et al., 2012; Goldberg et al., 2012). Triadic supervisors have noted that feedback between and among the triad often complemented each other and created a dynamic synergy that enhanced learning and fostered a sense of community within the time constraints of a supervision session (Oliver et al., 2010).

Another benefit of triadic supervision is peer role-modeling (Borders et al., 2012). Lawson, Hein, and Stuart (2010) found the additional perspective of another supervisee helped

bring forward ideas that neither supervisors nor the other supervisee had considered or tried. This diversity of views, along with the potential for indirect learning and peer support, are advantages found in group supervision (Lee & Everett, 2004), leading Borders (2012) to recommend that triadic supervisors recognize and understand the relationship dynamics and issues pertinent to group work. However, Lee and Everett (2004) noted that group supervision, with the greater number of supervisees, suffers from increased challenges to develop a safe climate, and to provide significant time and focus for each supervisee. Triadic supervision may avoid some of the drawbacks inherent in a group format, while still retaining some of the benefits.

Recent studies have also identified some challenges with triadic supervision. Triads of supervisees with disparate skills and personalities might fail to build sufficient trust and inhibit feedback, thus impeding progress and stifling the potential of both supervisees (Hein, Lawson & Rodriguez, 2011). With mismatched supervisees, power differentials also emerged as a concern. Specifically, the supervisor's power, combined with the social or academic power potentially held by a higher-functioning supervisee seemed to affect relationship dynamics and the balance of time spent focused on each supervisee (Hein & Lawson, 2008; Hein et al., 2011; & Stinchfield et al., 2010).

However, the primary challenge may be role confusion and uncertainty affecting supervisors who attempt to apply the norms and philosophy of traditional individual supervision to a triadic supervision model (Borders et al., 2012). As such, numerous researchers (Borders et al., 2012; Goldberg et al., 2012; Hein & Lawson, 2008; Hein et al., 2011; Stinchfield et al., 2010) identified overall structure as a major concern among the majority of supervisors and

supervisees. It appears crucial that participants create an effective structure that clarifies roles, process and goals in triadic sessions.

The current study was guided by two related questions: 1. What challenges and opportunities do triadic supervisors experience in the shift from individual to triadic supervision? 2. What guidelines for successful triadic supervision emerge in the meaning of those experiences?

## **Methods**

### **Research Paradigm**

Since our goal was to understand supervisors' experiences and derive meaning from those experiences, a hermeneutic phenomenological frame (Packer, 2011) guided our data collection and analysis. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows for close examination and illumination of experience through interpretation of meaning in participants' narratives (Newman, Cashin, & Waters, 2010). In their review of Paul Ricoeur's work as it pertains to hermeneutic phenomenology, Charalambous, Papadopoulos and Beadsmore (2008) rejected the idea of researchers as objective, passive recipients of knowledge. Rather, knowledge or meaning is constructed at the intersection of the participants' narratives and the researcher's own prior knowledge and setting. The focus shifts from merely understanding others' experiences, to understanding the meaning of their experiences.

According to Doyle (2007), Heidegger believed that the researchers' perspectives are integral to understanding the meaning of phenomenon, and so analysis seeks convergence between the perspectives of the participants, as well as the reflections of the researchers. In doing so, researchers must identify their own prior experiences, context and expectations of the data as these will influence their reflections (Wojnar & Swanson 2007). We acknowledge that

each of us had experience with triadic supervision and believe triadic supervision offers valuable training experiences but recognize that other modalities are also important. Contextually, we are located within a university counselor preparation program that makes extensive use of triadic supervision, as well as some individual and group supervision. Thus, we are aware of some bias in favor of the triadic approach. With this study, we expected to learn both positive and challenging experiences to help us identify meaningful suggestions for other professionals.

Given the subjective nature of qualitative analysis, attention to issues of trustworthiness are critical. Morrow (2005) noted that trustworthiness reflects the credibility of the collection, analysis, and interpretation of qualitative data. To enhance trustworthiness, we sought participants who represented our intended audience – supervisors in counselor preparation programs who were engaging in triadic supervision. Additionally, we employed a prolonged immersion with the data using a hermeneutic cycle, two rounds of member checks with all participants, and researcher self-reflection. Further details of these efforts to support trustworthiness are given below.

## **Participants**

Following IRB approval, 10 individuals who provided both individual and triadic supervision in a CACREP accredited counseling program and adhered to The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision best practices in clinical supervision (ACES, 2011) at a medium-sized Rocky-Mountain university were invited to participate in the study. These participants were recruited because they were recently integrating the triadic model to supervise practicum students at the university training clinic. All 10 agreed to the full data collection process. Participants were eight women and two men. Four were advanced doctoral students (all women), and the other six were program faculty (three each associate and assistant professor

rank). One participant was African-American, two were of mixed Hispanic and Native American heritage, while the remaining seven were White of European-American descent. Ages of participants ranged from the mid-20's into the mid-50's.

Six participants were new to triadic supervision, having never received it and only having provided it in the semester prior to data collection. The other four (who were all faculty members) had varying previous experience: one had only provided triadic supervision a few times in previous semesters. One had received triadic supervision in graduate school and also had several years of experience providing it. The final two had over 15 years of experience including both receiving and providing triadic supervision. All participants provided triadic supervision at 1.5 hours per week in the semester prior to data collection. We did not differentiate participants by any theoretical approach or individual style. Although we are certain such differences did exist, these were not the focus of the current study. Our focus was on how supervisors experienced the triadic format and we believed that the natural variation among participants' style would give us a broader perspective from which to build our understanding.

## **Procedure**

Data were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews conducted and audio recorded by a research associate who was neither an author nor a participant in the study. This individual was a counseling professional who also had training in supervision and data collection and who was instructed to follow the interview protocol we established, while also having flexibility to use her counseling skills and research understanding to help participants clearly articulate their thoughts and experiences. Drawing upon the literature and personal experiences, we designed seven initial questions to invite participants to reflect on the unique opportunities



and challenges of triadic supervision as compared to our usual program experiences of individual supervision. These initial questions were as follows: 1) Please describe your format/process for individual compared to triadic supervision. 2) Talk to me about your satisfaction with individual supervision as compared to triadic supervision. 3) What do you think of the effectiveness of individual compared with triadic supervision regarding the clinical success for the supervisees? 4) How about the demands on you as a supervisor during individual as compared to triadic supervision (for example, managing feedback and relationship dynamics)? 5) Please compare individual and triadic supervision regarding challenges for you as the supervisor. 6) Let me hear about advantages of individual as compared to triadic supervision. 7) What else would you like to offer related to individual and triadic supervision? Follow-up questions emerged within each interview to clarify and expand participants' responses.

### **Data Analysis**

We employed a hermeneutic circle (Rennie, 2012) in our data analysis, which began with the raw transcriptions, incorporated our experiences and ideas as well as the literature, and returned to the data itself to begin again. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the interviewer, and each participant reviewed her/his transcribed interview to verify that the transcription accurately conveyed the participant's words and intended meaning. We then immersed ourselves in the transcriptions over the course of several weeks, with multiple readings. In a line-by-line analysis, the lead author identified key words and phrases that appeared to capture the meaning of participants' experiences as triadic supervisors (based on repetition, participant emphasis, or apparent salience to participants). These were grouped according to similarity into initial themes with representative quotations for each. To improve the trustworthiness of the initial coding, the second author independently coded a randomly

selected transcript, and this analysis was compared to the first author's coding of the same transcript. There was a high level of agreement between both versions, and the reflective discussion among all three of us about the few minor differences as well as points of agreement improved our thinking about the data, and our awareness of the meaning that we were bringing to the process based on our own experiences.

We met together several times during the data analysis as an intentional part of the hermeneutic circle. These discussions extended analysis beyond participants' words and transcript themes to include the existing literature on triadic supervision and the contribution of our own experiences and biases to our understanding. From these reflective discussions, we found new meaning emerging at the intersection of the transcribed interviews, the literature, and our own experiences. This circular process continued through data analysis and later writing. Themes and quotes were reflected upon, considered in light of our own experiences and the literature, and then the full transcripts were reread to make sure that the emerging meaning was consistent with the overall interviews. With each successive transcript, both convergence and divergence in emerging themes and meaning was sought. There were multiple iterations of this circular movement from participants' interviews and themes to the literature, our experiences, and back again.

Once a draft of the manuscript was completed, we shared it with all 10 participants in an additional member-check used to close our hermeneutic circle back with participants themselves. Each was asked to reflect on the results, discussion and implications, and to share with us any omissions, misinterpretations or additions they wished to make. Only five chose to respond to our invitation, and none of them suggested any substantive changes to our interpretation of the

data. Some minor wording changes and editorial suggestions were offered, which were incorporated in the text to the extent possible.

## **Results**

Similar to the literature, supervisor-participants in the current study identified relationship dynamics (Borders, 2012; Hein & Lawson, 2008), feedback (Borders et al., 2012), time management (Borders et al., 2012; Hein et al., 2011), and matching supervisees (Hein et al., 2011) as challenges that required thoughtful adjustment in the shift from individual to triadic supervision. In addition, the theme related to contextual learning, which was not found in previous literature, arose from the interviews. We explore these challenges and themes and present representative participant quotes in the following sections.

### **Relationship Dynamics**

One clear theme emerging from the interviews was the shift in relationship dynamics from the addition of another supervisee, and that this change presented both benefits and challenges. Participants reported a distinctive new “energy” in providing triadic supervision, which came from the change in relational dynamics compared to an individual approach. Supervision became more of a collaborative experience which several participants found “refreshing.” Participants also felt more at ease in triadic supervision because of the presence of the second supervisee. The additional person affected the power in the room such that relationships felt less hierarchical, and the atmosphere was more collegial. One participant shared:

The three of us working together, takes away one piece of working with individuals that I didn't realize...the potential for tension that I'm the 'all knowing' supervisor and that the student is not...the student is simply there to be conferred of your wisdom. What I

discovered was that it was so much easier for me in triadic to abandon that position and to hand over power to the students...they could actually grow [from] each other.

At the same time, however, participants saw the additional relationships as a challenge, with the potential to constrain both the process and content of supervision. A participating faculty member with several years' experience providing triadic supervision stated: "I think relationship building is the most important piece...If the relationship [between the two supervisees] is not a strong one, it may actually impede a person's ability to share the situations that they need assistance on." Another faculty participant who was new to triadic supervision agreed that attending to the relationship is different in triadic supervision.

I think the triadic experience for a mindful supervisor is going to be more intense than the individual, because you're dealing with the dynamic of the client, two supervisees, and the process that's going on between two supervisees... So you have a lot more variables going on, a parallel process to couples counseling vs. individual counseling.

A junior faculty member who was experienced in triadic supervision suggested that supervisors must attend to these expanded relationship variables with intentionality – remaining aware of how the relationships are evolving and working to nurture their development and health. Such extra effort is required to insure that the relationships promote supervisee competence and clinical development.

## **Feedback**

A second theme that emerged from our analytic process was that feedback also changed in triadic supervision, again with some benefits and some new challenges. Several participants indicated that they may find themselves more willing to offer challenging feedback in a triadic format. Participants saw the additional supervisee as a co-witness to the skills and development

of the other, and thus as someone who would validate and support an appropriate challenge. A very experienced faculty supervisor offered a strategic idea: “It’s easier in some ways [for the supervisor] to give challenging feedback in triadic because in most cases, the other person is going to concur. So it’s not just my opinion, and the other person can offer the same things I am.”

Participants also noted that addressing a supervisee’s personal vulnerabilities in triadic supervision was problematic. Each suggested that exposing a supervisee to a peer in a very vulnerable way might violate the supervisee’s confidentiality and right to consent. The participants, even those who strongly favored triadic supervision, believed it would be most appropriate to address more personal supervisee concerns in an individual session. A faculty member experienced in using triadic supervision in mental health agencies remarked: “I think that individual over triadic might be more beneficial if you have a person who is at an impasse, or who might have an impasse, or they need more of that one-on-one assistance.” When the focus is not so personal, participants agreed that the different perspective of the additional supervisee in triadic supervision greatly enhanced feedback. Participants were also in agreement that supervisors must use professional judgment to determine what feedback is most appropriate in triadic sessions and when an individual session would be warranted.

### **Time Management**

The biggest challenge noted by participants in the current study was effective management of time in triadic supervision. Because individual supervision is typically an hour, and the triadic model followed by participants was one hour and thirty minutes, supervisors were faced with balancing their time and attention between two supervisees with less time per supervisee. One faculty participant who was providing triadic supervision for the first time

stated, “You know, the clock sort of becomes an entity in the session itself, because you want to make sure that everyone has addressed what they want to address.” Another faculty participant shared, “There seems to be a sense of hurry...I’d probably look at a two hour triadic session in the ideal world.”

Meeting supervisees’ needs, providing equal time and transitioning between supervisees were common concerns noted by participants. Furthermore, participants identified having larger caseloads, additional paperwork, and reduced time per supervisee as potential threats to adequate time for reviewing video, discussing cases, and focusing on clinical skill development. A faculty participant member expressed the following:

I believe the time got sacrificed in having two people in a 90 minute period for the level of feedback that I would like to give both in watching the tape, doing check-in, doing the various topics they’re focusing on, theory, well-being, client progress, note taking. And in that time period when you’ve got two people, you’re also looking at signing the charts and all those pieces.

Participants agreed that supervisors needed to be intentional in their balance and management of time but were somewhat stymied about how to best accomplish this. Some suggestions offered by participants include alternating which supervisee received attention first, dividing the time equally in half, or alternating the focus each week between supervisees. Although participants varied in their approaches and recommendations for managing time, they agreed that any strategy should remain focused on insuring that supervisees’ clinical and professional development needs are being met. A doctoral student participant stated: “...my challenge as a supervisor is to structure my time enough so my supervisees are getting the clinical help they

need from me” showing the difficulties that come with managing time and focusing on clinical development.

### **Contextual Learning**

Although participants encouraged the use of individual supervision for addressing supervisees’ personal concerns, they also recognized how triadic supervision offers learning opportunities not found in individual models. In particular, participants believed that supervisees in triadic supervision benefit from exposure to additional clinical cases and client presentations, various ways to conceptualize cases, and different treatment approaches that they would not receive in individual supervision. Participants added that this exposure allowed supervisees to consider their own approach and interventions, examine the skills of a colleague, and explore additional options with a supervisor and fellow counselor to help assure proper, ethical services for clients. An experienced triadic supervisor and faculty member shared how learning is ongoing in triadic supervision.

Triadic is probably better for clinical skill preparation than individual just because you get the opportunity to process not only your own cases and your own dynamic, but you get the opportunity to be an observer... While we’re talking about someone’s case, the other supervisee is thinking, ‘Well, what would I do in that situation? How would that look? I can learn and do that as well.’ So I think they just get an extra layer of learning.

Another experienced faculty member who was relatively new to the triadic format compared this extra layer of learning to the expansion of opportunity and complexity present in counseling sessions with more than one person. She said that in triadic supervision

...you have a lot more variables going on, a parallel process to couples counseling vs. individual, or family counseling vs. individual counseling... At the same time, as a

clinician or a supervisor, you've got to be dynamic, aware, and mindful of all the factors that are going in the room.

Participants noticed that the triadic format offered some expanded learning experiences that did not occur in individual supervision. Several noted that the triadic format might be ideal for supervising co-counselors who worked with couples or families, particularly to work on the relationship between the counselors. The faculty member with triadic experience in mental health agencies reported how in triadic supervision with co-counselors "...you get a lot of parallel process conversations – so what's going on here and what's going on in the couple or family."

Furthermore, triadic supervision invites supervisees to come together, collaborate, and support one another, further enriching their personal growth and clinical development. The experienced faculty member albeit new to triadic supervision offered:

The relationship building and the camaraderie and the insight provided in triadic has the supervisees feeling a little bit more confident and supported, and they maybe move a little faster in their personal growth which makes their clinical effectiveness move a little faster.

This collaborative experience allows for "peer modeling" and "peer supervision" which creates a new learning dynamic for personal and professional growth. The peer supervision that occurs in triadic supervision, as noted by a very experienced faculty member, "can help prepare masters' students for a future role as a supervisor...a role many will likely take at some point in their career."



## **Matching Supervisees**

One final theme consistently mentioned by participants was the need for intentionality in pairing supervisees for triadic supervision. Participants expressed how the matching of supervisees can play a significant role in the success or struggle of a triad. A new faculty member stated:

I worry that sometimes, with their peer there, they may be less willing to share... So I think that's really choosing the supervision pair in triadic very intentionally...think intentionally about the relationship that those two people will have and pair them up in a way that's most helpful for them.

Two participants, one a doctoral student and the other a faculty member, both suggested that all supervisors in a counselor preparation program could meet together to work on matching supervisees. However, in many cases those doing the matching may have only limited knowledge and experience with the supervisees on which to base their decisions. This may result in a poor match, complicating the balance of time and attention to each supervisee, or in which supervision attention shifts away from professional development to address the difficult relationship between the triadic partners.

## **Discussion**

As illustrated by our study, supervisors realize both advantages and challenges in triadic supervision. Participants in the current study echoed many of the obstacles found in previous research including relationship dynamics (Borders, 2012; Hein & Lawson, 2008), feedback (Borders et al., 2012), and time management (Borders et al., 2012; Hein et al., 2011), and matching supervisees (Hein et al., 2011). The theme of additional learning opportunities, which has not been discussed in previous literature, also emerged as an important component in our

study. Participants not only drew attention to these issues but consistently shared a belief that success in triadic supervision requires awareness and intentionality when addressing these components.

### **Triadic Relationships**

Results from the current study support the findings of Borders et al. (2012) that the centrality of relationships is an important variable in triadic supervision as well as the unique relationship challenges posed by this supervision format. Participants identified the need to attend mindfully to the relationships in triadic supervision. Gazzola, De Stefano, Thériault, and Audet (2013) noted that supervisors who are unable to effectively nurture supportive connections may spend a disproportionate amount of time and energy vigilantly overseeing sessions and working to resolve relationship issues. Participants' experiences also support the idea that familiarity with group dynamics or couple's counseling (Borders, 2012; Gazzola et al., 2013; Oliver et al., 2010) may help triadic supervisors avoid potential problems and maximize the potential benefits from the additional supervisee in triadic supervision. Several participants seemed to suggest that merely applying the skills, organization and thinking that they used in individual supervision failed to take full advantage of the possibilities offered in the triadic format. Understanding relationship dynamics among individuals is a fundamental element of supervisor training for group supervision (Borders, 2012; Hein & Lawson, 2008), and similar training will benefit triadic supervisors. Preparation in small group work and/or couples counseling may help supervisors incorporate the benefits of supervisee diversity across age, gender, religion, ethnicity and other factors (Hein & Lawson, 2009). However, much like the findings by Oliver et al. (2009), participants believe individual sessions are sometimes warranted to work on personal issues and address major presenting concerns.

## **Matching Supervisees**

Consistent with the findings of Hein et al. (2011), several participants mentioned that a key variable in the success or struggle of a particular triad is the degree of fit or match between supervisees. The same has been true in our experience, and thus we encourage as much intentionality as possible in how triads are created. Involving all supervisors and instructors who have past interactions with the supervisees, as well as those that will be supervising can help in the matching process.

Consideration of supervisees' skill level, emotional maturity, and general psychological well-being is crucial in creating healthy, functioning triads that do not become immersed in power struggles or remediation work that become roadblocks to the goal of successful client work (Stinchfield et al., 2010). In this study, supervisors' experiences show that when triads are not picked with intentionality much of the focus in supervision is solely on relationship building and restoration rather than client care and counselor development. Thus, we emphasize that understanding of supervisees' self-awareness, interactions with peers, classroom presence, and performance practices should be a consideration when assigning triads. Meanwhile, we realize that occasionally some supervisees need individual sessions due to personal issues or circumstances.

## **Feedback and Learning Opportunities**

Building on the supervisory relationships, triadic supervisors can take advantage of unique opportunities for learning and feedback. Findings from the current study parallel past research (Borders et al., 2012; Oliver et al., 2010) in which triadic supervision fostered a sense of community. Through collaboration and shared responsibility, all triadic members may provide enhanced authentic feedback, encouraging supervisees to move forward in their counseling

work. Supervisors that are able to move thoughtfully beyond an individual-supervision paradigm and find ways to incorporate all participants may discover new learning opportunities in triadic supervision.

Despite the potential learning opportunities, some challenges exist in ensuring that feedback from the supervisees is helpful and supportive. Good working relationships, established early on and maintained throughout, can help the triad address these kinds of concerns. Stinchfield et al. (2010) outlined distinctive roles for each member of the triad, providing a structured format for all members to actively participate throughout the process. Lawson, Hein, and Stuart (2009) suggested triadic supervisors may need to check-in with the non-presenting supervisee to identify links between the supervisees' learning processes. If both supervisees have been invited to play an active role in the supervisory process, whether they are presenting or not, they not only develop clinical and conceptualization skills, they begin to develop the skills to be an effective consultant and supervisor.

### **Time Management**

Supervisors using any model must manage time effectively to best support supervisee growth and client services. Many of our participants mentioned how time management took on a prominent role as they provided triadic supervision. CACREP standards (CACREP, 2016) allow both individual and triadic as acceptable for clinical supervision and only stipulate that supervision must average one hour per week. Typically, the time for triadic exceeds that of individual supervision session but is not twice that of an individual session (Lawson, Hein, & Getz, 2009). Thus, triadic supervisors must meet all the supervisory needs of two counselors in

less time than if they were seen individually, including attention to client safety, clinical documentation, clinical skills, theoretical development, and other supervisory tasks. Supervisors must use time carefully in all supervision sessions, especially in terms of addressing priorities and meeting supervisee needs (Borders et al., 2012). However, disparate client needs may also pull the attention, energy, and time balance toward one supervisee over the other. Carefully attending to build supportive relationships among and between participants in triadic supervision can assist supervisors with time management (Hein et al., 2011).

### **Implications**

Our hermeneutic-phenomenological framework allowed us to combine the expertise of the participants, past literature and our own experience and knowledge as researchers. Most importantly, the meaning that emerged suggested pragmatic approaches for addressing the challenges of triadic supervision and capitalizing on its potential. Before discussing specific implications, we want to mention a general one. We are aware that each of the participants, and we as well, approached the study, and triadic supervision itself with an open mind, eager to see possible benefits. Not surprisingly, we found some benefits, balanced with a number of challenges. As we reflected on our findings, we were aware that this positive mindset might have played a role in the experiences participants shared. Therefore, we encourage those who work with the triadic model to keep an open mind themselves to the possibilities it holds. It may be that such openness and flexibility allowed our participants to identify ways to take effective advantage of the model with their own supervisees. We now offer practical suggestions related to the relationships in triadic supervision, feedback and new learning opportunities, time management, and matching supervisee pairs.

## **Triadic Relationship**

We suggest that in the initial meeting, supervisors clearly explain limits of confidentiality and inform supervisees that personal issues and dynamics may be discussed in the triad. This may be included in a contract that is specifically tailored to the triadic model. Additionally, establishing the expectation that both supervisees actively participate throughout each session should be discussed. As such, we recommend that the triad devote time early on to discussing the relationships. We believe this should include identifying the four simultaneous relationships (the supervisor with each supervisee, the two supervisees, and all three together).

Because it is likely that supervisees will compare themselves to each other (Lawson et al., 2009), supervisors should discuss this early on, reminding supervisees that counselor development is individual and varies based on myriad characteristics of the counselors and their unique case-loads. Each should be invited to discuss concerns they have about the relationships, and together make plans for regular evaluation of the relationships, so any needed adjustments can be made.

To help facilitate relationship development, we believe that supervisor familiarity with and use of principles for clinical work with groups and couples can help in managing the relationship dynamics. Supervisors are encouraged to use immediacy and transparency in identifying, acknowledging and working through concerns related to feedback and relationships.

If the triadic supervisor merely applies an individual focus to triadic work, much will be missed. The supervisor must account for and intentionally take advantage of the presence of the other supervisee to improve the outcome for both. With this in mind, we acknowledge the importance of individual sessions under certain circumstances. Although supervisors may request such sessions, we recommend that supervisors make explicit that such sessions are for

work that ethically requires confidentiality and not for avoiding difficult triad concerns or for individualized supervisory attention.

### **Feedback and Learning Opportunities**

As mentioned in the discussion section, Lawson et al. (2009) suggested triadic supervisors check-in with non-presenting supervisees to keep them engaged, however we believe much more can be done to capitalize on the model. Supervisors can check-in at the beginning of each session and invite supervisees to bring up any major pressing issues, including relationship and feedback concerns. Additionally, supervisors can invite the non-presenting supervisee to notice and share observations about client dynamics, about counselor skills, possible interventions and conceptual understanding, and to reflect on application to personal case load and professional development. Differences of opinion become opportunities for additional learning and discussion. Purposefully involving the supervisees in both feedback and in calling attention to concerns may relieve some of the pressure supervisors face. In this way, all three people in the triad are actively participating regardless of who is presenting.

### **Time Management**

Supervisors may choose to conduct weekly supervision sessions of one hour, biweekly of two hours, or weekly of one and one half hours, or some other combination. Some supervisors appear to divide the time of each session equally between the supervisees, and other supervisors choose to focus on one supervisee during one session and the other supervisee the next session. Without any evidence to support any single approach for managing time, we suggest that supervisors adopt three guidelines for managing time.

First, we encourage supervisors to facilitate an open conversation early in the triadic process to discuss how time will be managed equitably. Each should have the opportunity to

discuss needs, desires, and procedures that may help the group effectively allocate time to address each supervisee's needs. The triad should settle on an initial plan for how time will be allocated during each session – who will go first, if time will be divided equally each session, or will alternately favor one supervisee. We found that some supervisees want to get right to business, while others prefer to ease into supervision with a little conversation, a check-in, or perhaps some mindfulness activity. Since those preferences may differ between triadic partners, supervisors should acknowledge different styles and the triad come to some initial agreement about how sessions will begin and end. Second, we believe that flexibility by all three members of the triad should be encouraged in those early discussions and then used over the course of supervision. As the triad works together, one or several may decide that the initial plan for time management isn't satisfactory, and the group should be open to revisiting those arrangements. Client emergencies, other client or supervisee circumstances, and perhaps just a need for change requires flexible management of time. Supervisees should be encouraged to ask for extra time when warranted, while keeping in mind the legitimate needs of the other. The supervisor must then attend to how time is being used, and make sure that both client cases and supervisees are receiving the attention they need. Finally, we suggest that the triad regularly discuss time management to make sure that each supervisees' needs, along with the obligations of the supervisor are being met, and then make adjustments as needed. This kind of check-in can accompany those suggested earlier to review the supervisory relationships.

### **Matching Supervisees**

Supervisors, especially those that have yet to meet the supervisees, may consider a pre-group screening process to further help with the matching process. Some factors that might be considered in matching supervisees include supervisee developmental level. While a less



advanced counselor may benefit from participating in supervision with a more advanced counselor, we believe that the difference should not be so wide that the less advanced supervisee ends up receiving all of the attention.

In addition, supervisees may be matched based on theoretical approach. For those newly identifying with a theory, perhaps a theoretically similar supervision partner will be best. More theoretically secure counselors may experience more personal growth when matched with a supervisee from a different orientation. The same may be true for other counselor demographic variables. In some cases, being paired with a partner who shares gender, cultural, or other variables may help to solidify an insecure identity, while others may benefit from close work with a partner who is different. Some supervisees with unique needs may be served best by a particular pairing.

In making this recommendation, we acknowledge that these decisions may have to be made before much is known about the supervisees and what might best serve their growth. This is true in our own program, where students have only had two courses before they are paired for supervision. Although we have only limited information, we choose to make those decisions with as much intention as possible. Then, after one semester (and additional information about supervisee strengths and needs), triads are changed with the goal of maximizing learning, expanding perspectives and responding to supervisees' needs.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Results of the current study suggest that triadic supervision can be a helpful adjunct to other forms of supervision, and indeed may offer unique benefits for counselor preparation not available through other supervision approaches. However, in considering these results and our suggestions, several limitations must be kept in mind. All of the supervisors interviewed were

faculty or doctoral students of a counselor education program at one mid-sized university in the Rocky Mountain region. It may be that supervisors outside of academia and outside of the Rocky Mountain region may have different experiences. Additionally, a greater number and diversity of supervisors will refine the field's understanding of when and how triadic supervision may best be used. This study did not consider supervisors theoretical approaches to supervision and how that can influence the triadic experience. The current study also did not obtain supervisee perspectives. Finally, our bias toward the potential benefits of this approach led us to focus more on the benefits and to not deeply explore potential disadvantages of triadic supervision. Future research should seek to address these limitations.

In addition, incorporating experienced supervisors using triadic supervision in clinical settings and other geographic regions may provide additional insight into the triadic model. Future research that incorporates both supervisor and supervisee perspectives and experiences can further enrich our knowledge of the strengths and limitations of triadic supervision, and help pinpoint under what circumstances supervisees find it most helpful. With increasing literature supporting the contribution of triadic supervision, we encourage scholars to examine the impact of gender and cultural variables on the process. Both the literature and the results of the current study suggest that there are important parallels between small group and couple dynamics and triadic supervision. Further studies could explore and identify the key elements from each that support effective triadic work and the extent to which these elements provide helpful guidance to triadic supervisors.

We make a number of recommendations here based on the meaning that emerged from participant interviews, a review of the literature, and our own experiences. Further research should seek to validate or correct those recommendations with additional empirical data.

Through the use of case studies, researchers may gather a much richer, yet individualized, understanding of supervisor and supervisee experiences. Additional study through the use of multi-case study or group comparison to identify both the advantages and limitations of each supervision modality (individual, triadic, group) may prove useful to the field. Additionally, attempts to identify best practices supported by empirical data for each can provide direction for supervisors and supervisors-in-training as they seek to best meet supervisee's needs. One possible way of assessing best practices may be to incorporate client outcomes into future research.

### **Conclusion**

Ethically, supervisors must be prepared to use each of the different supervision formats (Gazzola et al., 2013). Results from previous and the current research suggest that the triadic format holds both promise and challenge for supervisors. The supervisors in this study found that triadic supervision offered unique learning opportunities not found in individual or group supervision, particularly related to changes in relationship dynamics and feedback. Participants reported that supervisees in a triadic format have greater opportunities to learn through observation and interaction with a peer. At the same time, our participants noted challenges that must be addressed with this format.

Intentionality in the creation of supervision pairs was suggested but doing so can be challenging. In addition, each triad must negotiate how time is divided, how the non-presenting supervisee can remain engaged in the process, and how personal issues that arise for either supervisee can be addressed ethically. Future research can help pinpoint the specific practices that support supervisee growth and competent practice. When choosing a supervision model, whether it be individual, group, or triadic, supervisors must consider which creates the richest

learning environment and offers the best professional development for supervisees while supporting the client.

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