Triadic Supervision and Its Impact on the Role of the Supervisor: A Qualitative Examination of Supervisors’ Perspectives

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Although triadic supervision has been the subject of little empirical research, perspectives of supervisors in this form of supervision have received even less attention. This qualitative study examined 6 doctoral student supervisors’ experiences of triadic supervision and the demands it placed on them in their role as supervisors. Data collection involved use of in-depth, open-ended interviews, and a whole-text analysis resulted in 2 major categories. These categories address various ways in which triadic supervision increases or decreases the demands placed on the supervisor. Implications of the findings for supervisory practices and future research are also addressed.

In 2001, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs added triadic supervision as an approved modality and as an alternative to individual supervision in counselor training programs. Triadic supervision is a modality that pairs two supervisees with one supervisor simultaneously, creating a supervision structure that is relatively new in the counseling profession. This new supervision structure, however, has received little attention in the supervision literature to date, but even a cursory examination of the structure suggests that there is a significant impact on the supervision relationship and process when another member is added. This article reports the findings of a qualitative study that sought to address this lack of research on triadic supervision by examining doctoral student supervisors’ experiences of triadic supervision and its impact on them in their role as supervisors.

Two unpublished dissertations were among the first empirical studies of triadic supervision. More specifically, Nguyen (2004) examined the differences between individual supervision and two forms of triadic supervision, single focus and split focus. In single-focus triadic supervision, the entire hour of supervision is focused

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on one of the supervisees (with the following week then focused on the other supervisee), whereas in split-focus triadic supervision, 30 minutes of each supervision meeting are allotted to each supervisee. Using an instrument that measured level of counselor effectiveness, Nguyen found that there were no differences in supervisees’ levels of effectiveness across type of supervision received. On the basis of the results of a measure of counselor development, differences were found in supervisee development, with supervisees who received the split-focus form of supervision showing significantly greater development than those who received either single-focus or individual supervision. However, on a questionnaire that measured the supervisee’s level of self-awareness and awareness of his or her impact on others in the counseling relationship, supervisees who received single-focus triadic supervision showed significantly greater development than those who received individual supervision.

A dissertation by Bakes (2005) examined the supervisory working alliance between supervisees and supervisors who participated in either individual or triadic supervision. Supervisees who received triadic supervision scored higher than those who received individual supervision on a measure of the extent to which supervision increases the supervisee’s understanding of the client. Supervisors who provided triadic supervision scored lower than those who provided individual supervision on a measure of the supervisor’s perception of the degree to which the supervisee identifies with the supervisor’s perspective. These findings suggest that triadic supervision can enhance supervisees’ understanding of their clients and minimize their identification with their supervisor.

Newgent, Davis, and Farley (2005) examined the perceptions of 15 students who received combinations of individual, triadic, and group supervision. Participants in their study perceived triadic supervision as being very similar to individual supervision in terms of the working alliance, interpersonal dynamics, leadership style of the supervisor, and level of satisfaction with supervision. Although Newgent et al.’s study focused on supervision of supervision rather than clinical supervision of counselors-in-training, it suggests that supervision participants experience individual and triadic supervision as being very similar.

This review of the empirical literature reveals that research on triadic supervision has been limited and that no qualitative studies have been conducted on the perspectives of either supervisors or supervisees. Therefore, our goal in this study was to investigate clinical supervisors’ experiences of triadic supervision and its impact on them in their role as supervisors. We chose qualitative methodology because of its focus on the actuality of participants’ experiences and the process of meaning making as it relates to those experiences. Such findings can provide important insights into the phenomenon and serve as an important complement to quantitative research. The research question that we pursued in this study, then, was as follows: What are doctoral student supervisors’ experiences of the demands that triadic supervision places on them in their role as supervisors?
Context for the Study: Triadic Supervision in One Counselor Education Program

The triadic supervision described in this study is used in the counselor education program of a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic region. This particular form of triadic supervision, which is structured and single focus in nature, was developed by faculty in the program and has been the primary mode of supervision for students since 2002. Master’s students can complete a specialization in community counseling or school counseling, and each of these requires completion of a 100-hour practicum and a 600-hour internship. For both the practicum and the internship, students participate, on a weekly basis, in group supervision with a faculty member and in triadic supervision with a doctoral student, who, in turn, receives supervision from the faculty member. During the internship, the student is also provided with on-site individual supervision by a site supervisor. It should be added that all of the doctoral student supervisors in triadic supervision also have experience providing individual supervision, which occurs as part of a required clinical supervision course.

The doctoral students who are selected to be supervisors for triadic supervision vary considerably in their personal and professional backgrounds, as well as their areas of counseling strength. A range of counseling orientations or models is apparent in their own clinical work, but the model used in their training as supervisors is strongly developmental. Moreover, they are trained in different aspects of the triadic supervision structure used, as well as specific counseling strategies, so as to make the supervision process maximally beneficial to both supervisees. As a way to further enhance the doctoral student supervisors’ effectiveness, they receive weekly supervision of supervision, in which their videotaped work with supervisees is evaluated by faculty members and other doctoral student supervisors.

Faculty match supervisees using a variety of developmental factors; personality characteristics; and, at times, practical concerns such as academic schedule, geographical location, and particular training track. Personality characteristics are assessed both formally, through use of the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, McCaulley, Quenk, & Hammer, 1998), and informally by faculty. The resulting pairs of supervisees are then matched with a doctoral student supervisor by considering developmental factors, area of specialization, particular strengths of the supervisor, and supervisee needs.

Triadic supervision occurs weekly during the practicum or internship and is 60 to 90 minutes in length. A clear structure has been developed for the supervision, which begins with a brief check-in period for one of the supervisees. This check-in period serves as an important follow-up for the supervisee who presented a videotaped counseling session during the previous supervision meeting (discussed later), allowing him or her to provide updates on various counseling sessions that occurred during the intervening week, discuss feedback that was received during the previous supervision meeting, or process
any other concerns. The second supervisee is then the priority for the rest of the meeting, which focuses on approximately 15 minutes of a videotaped counseling session that he or she has chosen to present. The structure used requires that supervisees choose a counseling session in which they considered themselves as either working effectively or not working effectively as a counselor. Before the meeting, the presenting supervisee also provides the other supervisee and the doctoral student supervisor with context for the counseling session in the form of a handout of basic client information, prior counseling interventions used, additional information about the videotaped counseling session, and specific forms of feedback sought about the counseling session (Getz, 1999).

In the supervision meeting, the doctoral student supervisor will often assign specific tasks to each supervisee, both during and after the viewing of the videotape (e.g., using role play to facilitate supervisee development). As part of the structure of the supervision, the doctoral student supervisor and the second supervisee respond to the presenting supervisee’s requests, as outlined in the aforementioned handout, and give feedback during and after the viewing of the videotaped session. Normally, there is also more discussion of various issues that arise from viewing the videotape or the feedback given. This structure for the supervision meetings is repeated each week, with supervisees alternating in the roles of presenter and nonpresenter.

Method

All of the participants in this study were doctoral students in the counselor education program described earlier. To be considered for inclusion in the study, a person needed to have served as a supervisor in triadic supervision for no less than 1 complete semester. After the study was approved by the university’s institutional review board, all of the doctoral student supervisors whom we were able to contact were sent a recruitment e-mail. The e-mail included a brief description of the study and asked that the person contact the first author if interested in volunteering to participate in the study. All 6 of the doctoral student supervisors who were contacted indicated that they were interested in participating.

In qualitative inquiry, there are no universally agreed-upon standards concerning sample size; sample size is determined by a number of factors, but a common one involves the achievement of redundancy during the data collection or saturation during the data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; M. Q. Patton, 2002). That is, in interview-based research, participants are often sampled until repetition emerges in the descriptions that they offer during the interviews (i.e., interview data no longer provide any new insights into the phenomenon) or the categories that emerge during the analysis do not undergo any further change. We considered both of these factors. We found that the descriptions provided by the 6th participant did not add any new insights to the data collected from the previous 5 participants, and similarly, the categories and subcategories that emerged were not modified any
further after analyzing the data for the 6th participant. The sample consisted of 5 women and 1 man, and their ages ranged from 30 to 58 years (average age = 41 years). Five participants were White, and 1 was African American. At the time of the interviews, their level of supervisory experience with triadic supervision was 2.7 semesters, on average, and the range was 2 to 4 semesters. Three participants had emphasized community counseling in their doctoral studies, 1 had emphasized school counseling, and the remaining 2 indicated that they had chosen a more general focus in counselor education.

The data collection for this study consisted of in-depth, individual qualitative interviews. This was accomplished using a general interview guide approach (M. Q. Patton, 2002), which involves developing a list of relevant aspects of the phenomenon to be examined during the interview. These aspects of the phenomenon were arrived at using our prior knowledge of supervision and extensive reflection on the various components of the phenomenon. The issues that were ultimately included in the interview guide were considered by us to be critical to understanding triadic supervision and dealt with the following general topics: the doctoral student supervisor’s professional background (e.g., prior supervision experiences, prior counseling experiences), characteristics of supervisees, content of the supervision meetings, the doctoral student supervisor’s interactions with the supervisees (e.g., communication, providing feedback, providing support), personal disclosures by the doctoral student supervisor, ethical issues in using triadic supervision, managing triadic supervision, outcomes for the doctoral student supervisor (e.g., new forms of learning, changes in approach to supervision), and evaluation of triadic supervision (e.g., recommendations for modifying triadic supervision).

By providing an organized list of topics related to the phenomenon of interest, the interview guide served as a checklist for the interviewer. Thus, interview questions were not developed before conducting the interviews, but rather were formulated spontaneously as the interviewer addressed a new topic in the interview guide. This format allowed for a considerable amount of flexibility in the phrasing of interview questions, which was important in developing and maintaining a high level of rapport, while providing a framework that ensured that the same topics were covered with each participant. The topics included in the interview guide were addressed in the same order with all of the participants. Also, each of the interviews was completed in a private setting that was free of distractions and tape-recorded so that it could be transcribed at a later time. During both initial conversations with the participants and the interviews themselves, a priority was placed on developing and maintaining a high degree of rapport. The total interview length for each participant ranged from 100 to 205 minutes (average = 140 minutes), with 2 of the 6 participants requiring a second interview in order to explore fully the phenomenon.

In analyzing the interview transcripts, we used a form of whole-text analysis that is similar to several commonly used analytic procedures (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Segments
of transcript material that consisted of one or more lines of text, and that were revealing of an aspect of the phenomenon being studied, were identified. One or more coding categories were then assigned to each of these excerpts to represent the meaning that it contained. During a later stage of the analysis, these categories were sometimes modified, or subcategories were developed to bring further clarity to the coding categories. Subcategories served to organize and differentiate the material contained in specific coding categories, thereby increasing the level of detail and the richness of the analysis process and the presentation of findings.

It should be noted that peer debriefing and member checks (see Miles & Huberman, 1994; M. Q. Patton, 2002) were also used during the analysis. The first practice, peer debriefing, involved mutual discussion between us about any difficulties experienced during the analysis, including the appropriateness of newly developed categories or subcategories. In all instances, our discussions allowed us to achieve consensus about the specific issue involved. The second practice, member checking, involved getting feedback from each participant about how accurately our discussion of the findings captured his or her experience of the phenomenon. All of the participants responded to our request for feedback, indicating that they were satisfied with the presentation of the findings and had no specific suggestions for revisions.

Results

Two major categories that deal with the demands placed on the doctoral student supervisor in triadic supervision emerged from the analysis. More specifically, all of the participants viewed the structure of triadic supervision as affecting the role of the supervisor and, at times, increasing or decreasing the demands placed on them. Each of the aforementioned categories is also composed of several subcategories that deal with a more specific component of the category.

**Triadic Supervision Can Increase the Demands on the Supervisor**

All of the participants described aspects of triadic supervision that created additional challenges for them as supervisors. New skills or supervision strategies that were unique to working within the triadic structure sometimes needed to be developed to ensure effective supervision. The areas that the participants addressed included the management of feedback dynamics and the management of relationship dynamics.

**Managing feedback dynamics.** Most of the participants viewed feedback processes within triadic supervision as placing additional demands on them in their role as doctoral student supervisors. Some participants focused specifically on the added demands that arose because of supervision peers giving feedback to each other. More specifically, a supervisee’s feedback to a peer could be limited by the former’s developmental level, lack of clinical experience, mode of
presenting the information, or personality. Thus, when a supervisee was giving weak or even unsound feedback or presenting feedback in an unusual or harsh way, the doctoral student supervisor needed to reframe or modify the feedback so as to improve its delivery or make it clinically sound. The participants recognized that when they invited supervisee feedback, they needed to be prepared to work with whatever they received. In the following description, Linda makes clear how her restructuring of a supervisee’s feedback so as to make it clinically sound was both challenging and time consuming, resulting in deviation from the normal course of the supervision process:

That particular supervisee, developmentally, wasn’t where many of her peers were. . . . And so I would spend more time, you know, kind of, trying to structure that person’s feedback to the supervisee who was presenting the tape. . . . It can be a real challenge trying to figure out and take that feedback and make it meaningful. You know, so it’s like you’re spending more time structuring the feedback rather than, um, working with the supervisee who’s presenting the tape.

Thus, for these participants, their role as doctoral student supervisors involved serving as a filter for the feedback provided by the supervision peer and being sensitive so that what was communicated was useful to the presenting supervisee and in the best interests of the client.

Some of the participants also described how giving their own critical feedback to supervisees created other challenges. All of these participants experienced difficulty giving critical feedback to supervisees as a result of the second supervisee’s presence. This involved phrasing the feedback in a way that would avoid added discomfort or other negative consequences for the recipient, given the circumstances, and, for several of the participants, it involved explicit concern about how the supervisee would feel about the other supervisee hearing the feedback. Some participants described how they dealt with the difficulty of phrasing feedback by being careful or diplomatic in what they said. Gail, for example, stated,

I think that for me to give the constructive criticism, um, based on the personalities of the supervisees . . . one person might just feel much more uncomfortable about me doing that. And me trying to be, you know, careful not to—or to give them what they needed to hear but to say it in a way that’s going to be helpful versus hurtful.

Some participants also emphasized how more general feedback processes in triadic supervision resulted in greater demands on them. More effort was needed during the feedback process to manage supervisees who differed in performance or who were otherwise low in compatibility. In such circumstances, feedback intended for one supervisee might not be appropriate for the other supervisee, and additional effort was needed to ensure that both supervisees understood for whom the specific feedback was intended. From the participants’ perspectives, such efforts helped prevent supervisees from developing the impression that “one size fits all” in counseling. Also, even when
supervisees were highly compatible, keeping the second supervisee involved in the supervision process could sometimes be difficult when giving feedback to either supervisee. Regan, for example, stated,

If I had to give this person feedback, sometimes it would be difficult to always include that other person. Um, again, if I’m being clear, concise [in my feedback], either you have this great person [i.e., second supervisee] that jumps in and says, “Oh, I understand.” And they can kind of add to it [i.e., doctoral student supervisor’s feedback]. Or I can say, “Well, what do you think about that?” And try and pull them in. But sometimes in a triad situation if you’re providing feedback just to this one person, it can be difficult to include that other person in. And so you have to kind of constantly work at that. . . . So I think that’s kind of sometimes tough with triadic, keeping everybody always involved.

**Managing relationship dynamics.** Most of the participants also found that managing various aspects of the relationships among all three members of triadic supervision was challenging. Most of these participants described how triadic supervision placed greater demands on them in requiring them to monitor and respond to two supervisees. The triadic structure meant that two supervisees needed to be kept involved, focused, and supported during the supervision process, and this often required the doctoral student supervisors to develop new skills. Trish, for example, expressed this issue in the following way:

Well, I mean it’s, it’s a whole new skill set. I mean, dealing with triad is very different than one-on-one [supervision]. I mean, learning how to appropriately involve a third person in discussion and how to field comments and how to support someone else’s opinions—a third person’s opinions—those are all skills. . . . So I’d say I’m much more skilled in sort of being all-inclusive in keeping everyone involved and making sure that we’re staying on track. And, um, being very supportive of everyone in the group. Those are all things that I sort of got to learn. It’s much harder when you’re not just dealing with one person.

Moreover, the need to think quickly and respond effectively to supervisees, while also considering the supervisees’ developmental level, was compounded in triadic supervision. Situations in which supervisees exhibited low compatibility or were unreceptive to the doctoral student supervisor’s feedback also required continual monitoring of supervisees and more effort to adhere to the structure laid out for the supervision meetings.

Some of the participants who described added challenges associated with managing relationship dynamics also focused on other issues. When supervisees aligned with each other to the exclusion of the doctoral student supervisor, it was often accompanied by a lack of receptiveness to feedback, and the alignment could be difficult for the doctoral student supervisor to overcome. Also, in situations in which supervisees were reluctant to challenge each other, these participants experienced difficulty in trying to encourage them to do so. For example, Brian provided the following description of a supervision
situation in which both supervisees were unwilling to provide each other with critical feedback:

To, almost to a tee, they were very respectful of each other. Um, they almost to a tee were too respectful of each other, to the point where they tried to avoid stepping on each other’s toes. And I didn’t expect them to be the heavy with the other person but, uh, getting them to challenge each other was a challenge, if you will, . . . Um, so I tried to, while not discouraging respectfulness, of course, tried to encourage a sense of, you know, “Don’t be afraid to challenge them. They won’t break. If you’re not gonna do it with them, you know, how are you gonna do it with clients?”

More generally, even when triadic supervision involved supervisees who were well matched, the inclusion of a second supervisee was viewed as creating a greater cognitive load for the doctoral student supervisor.

Triadic Supervision Can Decrease the Demands on the Supervisor

Most of the participants also described ways in which triadic supervision decreased the demands placed on them as supervisors. Those aspects of supervision that were addressed included the management of feedback dynamics and the management of relationship dynamics.

Managing feedback dynamics. Some of the participants regarded triadic supervision as making the process of giving feedback to supervisees easier. All of these participants viewed the triadic structure as allowing them to “buy time” to formulate their own feedback to the presenting supervisee. More specifically, by having the nonpresenting supervisee provide feedback first, they were afforded more time to develop their own feedback. This extra time was sometimes needed to develop the feedback in its entirety or, in less extreme circumstances, to phrase the feedback so that it was presented in a clear and tactful way. Regan, for example, described a situation in which she was at a loss to provide positive feedback to a supervisee after viewing her videotape. Having the second supervisee provide positive feedback first, however, was crucial in allowing Regan to develop her own positive feedback.

So when we’d get done watching the tape, I would ask my other supervisee and I’d say, “Well, let’s talk about some things that she did well.” And I’m sitting there thinking, “I can’t think of one thing, Regan, you have to think of one thing this person did well.” You know? ‘Cause we always start with positives. They would give a positive and I’m like, “Excellent. That’s fabulous.” I’m like, “Great. And can you be specific with that?” And I’d work with them and then at that point my positive [feedback] is now coming and I can give my positive. And so I really appreciated having that other person there in the difficult situation. It was, it was very beneficial to me.

In some instances, the second supervisee’s feedback not only afforded additional time to formulate feedback but also was instrumental in generating ideas that then served as the basis for the participant’s own feedback. The following description given by Linda is illustrative of this dynamic:
Um, this may sound horrible but I know that there were times where, you
know, I would think, “Oh, gosh, I am so completely stuck” with a particular
client or situation. Or that it’s like, I’d watch a tape and like, “Okay, I just don’t
know where to go with this.” And it was always nice to kind of, um, maybe in
terms of . . . starting with the [laughs] other supervisee, you know, to give their
feedback. I’m like, “Oh, my gosh. Somebody just needs to throw me a bone.”
[Laughing] Versus when you’re one on one, you know, you’re the only one with
the bones. You know, if you don’t have them, they can’t be thrown.

A final aspect of feedback for some of the participants concerned
how supervisees were sometimes able to provide more open and honest
critical feedback to their peer than they (the doctoral student supervi-
sors) could. Some of these participants explained how they were less
comfortable than supervisees in giving such feedback because of a
desire to maintain harmonious working relationships or because of
personal discomfort with giving critical feedback in general. The fol-
lowing excerpt describes how a supervisee provided direct feedback
to a peer that Wanda would have been reluctant to give:

Well, I can think of a situation where . . . I showed it [i.e., a video of a su-
 pervision session] in our SOS [supervision-of-supervision meeting], where
we watched the video, [in which] we’re giving the feedback. And the person
who’s not presenting gives feedback to the person [i.e., presenting supervisee].
And I mean it was very direct. I mean, it wasn’t, she wasn’t attacking her or
anything but it was very direct. And then we [i.e., doctoral student supervi-
sors] are all kind of amazed that she would be able to say these things. And
so the other person [i.e., presenting supervisee] accepted it because we had
established that kind of relationship. And I may not have been able to do that
[as the doctoral student supervisor].

Managing relationship dynamics. For some of the participants, triadic
supervision also allowed them to be less directive with supervisees
and to take a less central role in such areas as providing feedback,
responding to supervisees’ comments, and otherwise guiding super-
visee learning. This shift in role occurred largely within the context
of the supervisees’ learning. These participants found that they could
be less directive because the second supervisee’s presence made it
less necessary for them (the doctoral student supervisors) to focus
on and challenge supervisees’ assumptions and other beliefs about
counseling issues. This occurred because supervisees sometimes held
differing views about specific counseling issues and would actively
challenge each other. In such situations, the need for the doctoral
student supervisor to challenge supervisees was removed, and par-
ticipants were free to adopt a less directive, more facilitative role. As
Trish described,

You know, they [i.e., supervisees] could come up with two different ideas and
it’s just, challenge each other. Um, I just think that you don’t always want
to have to be the challenger. It’s nice to have other people be the challengers
too . . . You don’t always want to have to be the person that’s calling the
shots. Sometimes it’s nice to have other people sort of talk with each other
and you just kind of get to observe and see what you—and tell them what
you see, you know?
The triadic structure also resulted in these participants feeling less directly responsible for supervisees’ learning in general. In this regard, their role became a more facilitative one, and the supervisees assumed greater responsibility for finding their own answers to various counseling issues. For Gail, this process was beneficial in validating the supervisees’ own thoughts or perspectives on specific counseling issues:

I learned that [i.e., being less directive] through triadic. So, you know, I think—facilitating or processing for them but I don’t think I have to be as directive. I think that I like the component of, let them—helping to find the answers themselves. And even if they, you know, it doesn’t have to be my answer. . . . And I don’t have to, I don’t have to be the expert. . . . So, I like that because it’s, to me it’s giving the students—it’s helping them validate their own thinking and validate their own voice on how to counsel.

Discussion

A number of findings emerged from our study, and when viewed as a whole, they capture both advantages and disadvantages of the triadic structure as they relate to two important components of supervision: the supervisory relationship and various feedback processes. The significance of the findings, then, is considered from both of these perspectives.

The findings reveal that the addition of a third member to the relationship alters supervision dynamics significantly, and participants often found that the triadic structure could either increase or decrease the effort required to manage these relationships. It is interesting, but perhaps not surprising, that two of the empirical studies reviewed earlier (Bakes, 2005; Newgent et al., 2005) included the supervisory working alliance as a focus of inquiry. The supervisory working alliance is a concept that grew out of Bordin’s (1983) work, and it conceptualizes the relationship between supervisor and supervisee as influenced by their agreement on goals and tasks and by the bonds between the participants. M. J. Patton and Kivlghan (1997) highlighted the importance of this concept in emphasizing that the supervisory working alliance is predictive of the counseling alliance between supervisees and their clients. Moreover, Holloway (1992) noted how the supervisory relationship is affected by—and, in turn, affects—all other elements of supervision.

Many participants regarded the triadic structure as more demanding because of the need to monitor and respond to two supervisees rather than one. Thus, there were added challenges in monitoring supervisees; responding appropriately, including considering their developmental level; and keeping both of them involved, focused, and supported during the supervision process. Moreover, in situations in which there was low compatibility or a lack of receptiveness to the other supervisee’s feedback, the magnitude of these tasks was increased considerably. Watkins (1997) highlighted the importance of the aforementioned tasks in suggesting that “the supervisor-supervisee relationship appears to be a necessary ingredient to the making, doing, and being of the super-
vision process itself and seemingly facilitates or potentiates whatever takes place with that process” (p. 4). In triadic supervision, however, the supervisor carries an even greater responsibility for making sure that the relationships among all three members are sound and capable of supporting the work of supervision.

More specific relationship dynamics in triadic supervision also created new challenges for some of the participants. Supervisees sometimes aligned with each other, to the exclusion of the doctoral student supervisor, and directed the supervision process in unproductive ways. Also, occasionally, supervisees did not form a supportive or cooperative relationship with each other, or they developed a tacit understanding to not challenge each other during supervision. A dynamic similar to this final one has been identified in the group supervision literature (Linton, 2003), whereby supervisees in a group supervision setting noted that their peers would often hold back or cushion the feedback, rather than be frank. Whether this omission is due to concerns about group cohesiveness, respect for privacy, or a lack of awareness of how to handle such an intervention is less clear. Addressing each of the situations mentioned earlier, however, would mean an increase in the supervisor’s workload.

The structure of triadic supervision could also result in participants feeling less directly responsible for supervisees’ learning. One of the surprising advantages of triadic supervision was that some participants were able to be less directive and more facilitative in their interactions with supervisees, particularly when supervisees had different perspectives and were willing to challenge each other. It was therefore easier for participants to accommodate supervisee needs, and supervisees’ sharing of perspectives and challenging of each other may have signaled that supervisees were assuming more responsibility for their own learning.

Supervisor feedback is another important element of supervision that was affected, in both positive and negative ways, by the inclusion of a second supervisee. Effective feedback in the context of clinical supervision is essential to protecting clients, ensuring the quality of clinical services provided, and monitoring and stimulating supervisees’ growth and development (Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, 1995; Bernard & Goodyear, 2004). Supervisees value supervisor feedback, viewing it as one of the most important components of clinical supervision (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004), and it is one of the factors contributing to supervisees’ satisfaction with supervision (Lehrman-Waterman & Ladany, 2001). Without effective feedback, supervisees may not make necessary adjustments, which could result in outcomes such as allowing positive counseling behaviors to lapse, failing to correct mistakes, or making poor judgments or false assumptions about clinical issues (Westberg & Jason, 1993).

The process of providing feedback with two supervisees present often placed additional demands on the participants. Most generally, attention needed to be paid to keeping the peer engaged while giving feedback to a supervisee. When supervisees were at different developmental
levels or otherwise lacked compatibility, more effort was also required to formulate and present feedback so that the intended recipient of the information was clear to both supervisees. Along similar lines, it was sometimes difficult for participants to be entirely candid with a supervisee because of the second supervisee’s presence. This meant extra work for the participants in formulating the feedback so as to minimize discomfort or self-consciousness for the recipient.

The process of triadic supervision provides supervisees with opportunities to learn by observing the peer’s work and providing feedback, but the ultimate responsibility for giving feedback still lies with the supervisor. As discussed earlier, at times, supervisees and doctoral student supervisors were unwilling to challenge one another through critical feedback, often in an effort to avoid discomfort for the recipient or to avoid disrupting relationships. Hillerbrand (1989) found that supervisees actually preferred to receive feedback from novices, as opposed to expert supervisors, and the triadic structure seems to be advantageous in this regard. One of our findings, however, was that some supervision peers were unable to give appropriate feedback, often because of their developmental level, lack of clinical experience, manner of presentation, or even personal biases. These situations were an added demand on the doctoral student supervisors, who were then required to spend time and energy to filter and reframe the feedback so as to make it clinically, and sometimes ethically, sound.

Alternatively, the supervision peer could also be an asset to the doctoral student supervisor, assisting the latter’s efforts to generate feedback. The peer’s feedback could afford the doctoral student supervisor valuable time to formulate his or her own feedback. In more extreme circumstances, participants were sometimes at a loss to develop feedback, and the supervision peer served the vital function of providing feedback that was a source of new ideas, which allowed the doctoral student supervisor to offer additional assistance in helping supervisees. The second supervisee’s value to the doctoral student supervisor in these ways seems hard to overstate. At times, the supervision peers’ feedback was also more direct than that of the participants, who, in such instances, were motivated by a desire to preserve relationships or by a desire to minimize discomfort with giving critical feedback. In this way, the peer’s feedback can again be regarded as a valuable contribution to the supervisor in his or her responsibility to provide feedback.

**Implications for Supervision Practice**

Although the participants described aspects of supervision that were made either more or less challenging for them in triadic supervision, it seems that, overall, triadic supervision increased the demands that they experienced as doctoral student supervisors. A major contributor in this regard seems to be that working in the triadic structure results in a greater cognitive load for supervisors, requiring them to monitor, respond appropriately to, keep engaged, and support two people. There seem to be a number of implications of our findings for
maximizing the likelihood of success when using the triadic supervision structure. First, given the added demands that the triadic structure places on supervisors, it is important that they be adequately trained and proficient in a variety of supervisory skills. We should emphasize that most of these skills are not required in individual supervision and, as a result, may otherwise be overlooked or underemphasized when supervisors are trained. Explicit training should be provided in areas such as reframing supervisee feedback, providing helpful yet challenging feedback, monitoring and responding effectively to multiple supervisees, keeping supervisees engaged and supported during the supervision process, and adopting a facilitative (i.e., less directive) role to promote supervisee learning. Acquiring these skills during training may decrease the demands placed on the supervisor and may increase the overall effectiveness of triadic supervision.

Second, an issue that seems to underpin the effectiveness of the supervision relationship and in-session interventions is the goodness of fit between supervision peers. An effective match that is based on developmental level may minimize difficulties in giving appropriate feedback, reframing supervisee feedback, and monitoring supervisee interactions and allow the supervisor to challenge both supervisees in a similar way. When supervisees are well matched in personality and motivation, they may be more comfortable with challenging each other and more open to feedback, thereby allowing the supervisor to be more flexible and creative with interventions. In these ways, triadic supervision becomes more manageable for the supervisor. Producing a good supervisee match clearly involves consideration of a variety of factors, but what seems clear is that it should be a deliberate process that is informed by the dynamics of the triadic structure that we have discussed.

Third, it seems important to introduce supervisees to the triadic structure—and, more specifically, to the expectation that they challenge each other and provide critical feedback—at an early stage in their training. Faculty and supervisors should reinforce the idea that by withholding critical feedback, supervisees are doing their peer a disservice. Finally, supervisors should seek out ways to actively include both supervisees in the triadic structure so as to maximize supervisees’ strengths. In doing so, however, supervisors should be mindful that there will be occasions when one supervisee will require greater attention or individualized feedback. In those instances, sensitivity is important in delivering feedback, so as not to embarrass a supervisee. Remedial or gatekeeping issues, however, should be handled individually, outside of the triadic structure.

It should also be noted that the findings of this study emerged from one counselor education program at a particular university. In addition to the characteristics of the participants in our sample, the nature of the particular form of triadic supervision used, the supervisees, and the counselor education program in general may limit the transferability of our findings to other settings. Such judgments, however, are normally made by the reader (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; M. Q. Patton,
2002). The findings also suggest several key areas for further research. Specifically, it is important that future research explore participants’ experiences of the supervisor role in other counselor education programs, triadic structures, and types of supervisors (e.g., faculty or practicing clinicians). Research should also investigate whether other aspects of the supervisee relationship, apart from supervisee compatibility, alignment of supervisees against the supervisor, or failure of supervisees to challenge each other, affect the supervisor’s workload. Understanding the nature of the supervisory challenges that remain when supervisors have been trained in the skills that were discussed earlier would also be of value.

Our findings have revealed ways in which the triadic form of supervision can either increase or decrease the effort required of the supervisor. They also suggest that, overall, triadic supervision demands more of the supervisor, and we have identified a number of strategies for addressing these new challenges. Given the emergence of this supervision modality and the benefits that it seems to offer, identifying and addressing the new challenges faced by supervisors seems to be important.

References


