

New Supervisors' Struggles and Successes with Corrective Feedback

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Abstract:

Seven doctoral supervisors described their experiences giving corrective feedback, including events when constructive feedback and confrontation did and did not go well. Findings reveal their thoughts and feelings before, during, and after each event. The authors suggest several specific pedagogical directions for facilitating supervisor development in this area.

Keywords: supervision | corrective feedback | pedagogy | counselor education

Article:

Feedback is a fundamental component of clinical supervision (e.g., Borders et al., 2014; Heckman-Stone, 2003), essential to counselor development and client welfare. In fact, supervisees report they want feedback, including clear, critical feedback (Heckman-Stone, 2003; Ladany, Hill, Corbett, & Nutt, 1996). It appears, however, that delivering critical feedback is a challenge for all supervisors. Ladany and Melincoff (1999) found that 98% of supervisors admitted they withheld some feedback because they were concerned about its accuracy or subjectivity, worried about a defensive response from the supervisee, or feared damaging the supervisory relationship. Even highly experienced supervisors find it awkward to provide difficult feedback, especially around professional and relationship issues (Hoffman, Hill, Holmes, & Frietas, 2005), and express discomfort about confronting supervisees, despite positive outcomes (Grant, Schofield, & Crawford, 2012).

Given the angst of experienced supervisors around difficult feedback, it seems beginning supervisors likely would find corrective feedback even more challenging. According to developmental models of supervisor growth (e.g., Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998; Watkins, 1993), beginners are anxious about their competence, feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities, struggle with the power and authority of their role, and worry about evaluation. They are apprehensive about providing feedback and may avoid doing so or be overly positive or

vague (Stoltenberg et al., 1998). Researchers have echoed these developmental conjectures. Doctoral supervisors reported being concerned about learning to give critical feedback and worried how their supervisees would receive it (e.g., whether it sounded mean or too harsh; Rapisarda, Desmond, & Nelson, 2011). Similarly, Gazzola, De Stefano, Thériault, and Audet (2013) found doctoral supervisors were unclear about realistic expectations for their supervisees and questioned their ability to judge supervisees' counseling competencies. Baker, Exum, and Tyler (2002) found little evidence that doctoral supervisors had developed more advanced skills, such as confrontation, after a one-semester supervision practicum. In contrast, after an 8-month supervision course, doctoral supervisors in Majcher and Daniluk's (2009) study reported increased comfort around providing constructive feedback, even though they still struggled with the best ways to individualize the intervention. These studies, however, were focused on overall supervisor development rather than exploring feedback experiences in detail. More recently, Borders and Giordano (2016) described one doctoral student's epiphany around confronting her supervisee following her supervisor's sequential interventions of validating her assessment of the supervisee's skill deficit, modeling confrontation by confronting her, focusing on the client's experience, facilitating extensive preparation and practice, and offering encouragement and support. They noted, however, that it was not clear whether this approach would be applicable either to other supervisors, given the nuances of supervisor development and supervision-of-supervision, or to situations with less positive outcomes.

Thus, researchers have provided few insights around what helps doctoral supervisors learn corrective feedback skills and overcome their reluctance to use them. Their experiences with two types of corrective feedback—constructive feedback (i.e., information regarding a skill, attitude, or behavior needing improvement; cf. Hoffman et al., 2005) and confrontation (i.e., information regarding behavior that is either self-defeating or harmful to others; Borders & Giordano, 2016)—seem particularly important to study, as both reflect critical developmental tasks of new supervisors. Needed at this point are up-close accounts of beginning supervisors' experiences as they prepare for and deliver corrective feedback, as well as the factors that enable them to do so.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to reveal doctoral supervisors' experiences while planning for, delivering, and evaluating their use of constructive feedback and confrontation, and how their perceptions of these types of corrective feedback changed across a supervised supervision internship. To achieve depth in understanding their experiences, we chose to analyze interviews using the consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, 2012) approach. CQR seemed particularly appropriate to use as it facilitates researchers in analyzing specific events, such as providing corrective feedback. In addition, the specificity of the iterative, multirole coding procedure enhances trustworthiness by ensuring discussion and shared conclusions about themes. To capture a variety of experiences providing corrective feedback, we asked supervisors to describe events they characterized as effective as well as those they characterized as less effective. We hoped to contribute to the emerging pedagogy of supervision education by exploring which factors supported their development of corrective feedback skills.

Method

Context and Participants

The study was based in a counselor education program at a midsize university in the southeastern United States. The program was accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). The seven doctoral students, who constituted their entire doctoral cohort, were in their fourth semester of full-time study. The students were all female, six were White and one was international, and they ranged in age from 26 to 52. Five had post-master's work experience as professional counselors of 4 to 21 years; two had no post-master's work experience. One had supervised an intern while working full time and described it as a challenging and negative experience. None had previous supervision training. The students reported a range of theoretical orientations to counseling (e.g., cognitive behavioral, gestalt) and viewed supervision primarily based in the discrimination (Bernard, 1997) and developmental (e.g., Stoltenberg et al., 1998) models. They had completed a clinical supervision course and brief practicum (10 hours) with the first author the previous semester.

The study was focused on the students' experiences in their supervision internship (150 hours). They were each assigned two master's practicum students for individual/triadic supervision and were paired to serve as cofacilitators of group supervision for their combined four master's students. Given the uneven number, one student was paired with a third-year doctoral student for group supervision. In line with the 2016 CACREP Standards (CACREP, 2015), the master's practicum students were required to clock 40 hours of direct contact with clients and receive 1 hour of individual or triadic supervision and an average of 1.5 hours of group supervision per week. They saw volunteer undergraduate clients in the in-house clinical facility. All counseling and supervision sessions were video recorded.

Doctoral students met weekly in peer-group supervision and received biweekly individual supervision from the first author, who also reviewed all case notes for their supervision sessions. For individual supervision, they completed a video review form for a supervision session of their choice; the first author watched the supervision session beforehand, giving attention to students' requests for feedback. During group supervision, one or two students presented a supervision session, including a portion of the video.

Procedure

Institutional review board approval was obtained. Three months after the supervision internship ended, the doctoral students in the cohort were invited to participate in the study, which was described as an opportunity to reflect on their experiences with constructive feedback and confrontation. We hoped the three months (summer) had allowed them time to gain some perspective on their experiences (salience) while retaining vivid memories (recency; see Hill, 2012). All agreed to participate. The second author conducted the 1-hour interviews in a private space. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional service.

The first two authors created the interview questions based on their knowledge of the supervision literature, especially conceptual and empirical literature on supervisor development; experience as supervisors and supervision educators; and experience conducting supervision research, including CQR studies. Interviews began with questions around students' general thoughts and

feelings about beginning the supervision internship, followed by questions about how they defined constructive feedback (CF) and confrontation (C) before and after the internship. We did not define the terms given our interest in learning how the students' conceptualizations might change across their supervision internship. Next, students were asked to describe four events: (a) a time they gave constructive feedback to a supervisee that went well (CF+) and (b) a time it went less well (CF-); and (c) a time they used confrontation with a supervisee that went well (C+) and (d) a time it went less well (C-). Students identified events based on their own perceptions of whether they were positive or negative. For each event, they reported how they prepared, what happened during the supervision session, and how they processed the event afterwards.

Data Analysis

All interviews were conducted prior to data analysis to ensure consistency (Hill, 2012). We followed the three steps of CQR by (a) grouping the interview data into domains, (b) deriving core ideas to summarize the essence of the domains, and (c) conducting a cross-analysis to construct common categories and subcategories across participants (Hill, 2012). First, the two coders (first and second authors) reviewed each transcript independently to identify domains. Then, through discussion and consultation with the two external auditors (third and fourth authors), the team came to consensus on three domains: Before, During, and After. In line with Hill's (2012) guidelines, we independently constructed core ideas for each domain using data from three interviews and reached consensus. Then, each coder took lead responsibility for constructing core ideas for two of the last four interviews; these were discussed to reach consensus. Finally, we conducted the cross-analysis, determining common categories and subcategories across the interviews and reaching consensus. External auditors reviewed the coders' work at each stage and suggested revisions; the coders discussed these and made changes accordingly. In line with Hill, categories were labeled as *general*, *typical*, *variant*, or *rare* based on their frequency of occurrence (see Table 1). To add context, we tagged which events (e.g., CF+, CF-, C+, C-) were represented within each category. When one event was predominant in a category, we noted this in the findings; if not noted, the category included multiple events.

Table 1. Domains, Categories, Subcategories, and Frequencies of Constructive Feedback and Confrontation Events

Category and Subcategory	Frequency
Before	
Self-efficacy	
Initial thoughts/feelings	
Excitement	Typical
Self-doubt and insecurity	Typical
Initial conceptualization of constructive feedback	
No clear definition	Typical
“Normal”	Variant

Initial conceptualization of confrontation	
No clear definition	Variant
More directive than constructive feedback	Typical
Motivation	
Lack of supervisee change	General
Impact on client	Variant
Preparation	
Lesson/game plan	General
Emotional preparation	Variant
Supervision of supervision	Typical
During	
Topic	
Counseling skills	General
Personal issues	Typical
Supervisory relationship dynamics	Variant
Professional behavior	Rare
Multicultural feedback	Rare
Interventions	
Use of video	Typical
Direct statements	Typical
Metaphor/analogy	Rare
Humor	Rare
Supervisor emotions	
Excited/successful/confident/determined	General
Uncomfortable/unresolved	Typical
Frustrated/regretful	Typical
Self-management strategies	Variant
Supervisee reactions	
Positive	General
Negative	General
After	
Impact on supervisory relationship	
Productive	General
Hampering	Variant
Supervisee response	
Growth	General
Minimal or none	Variant
Supervisor debriefing	
Individual supervision	Typical
Peer/group supervision	Typical
Self-efficacy and conceptual growth	
Types of growth	
Self-growth	Typical

Increased understanding of counselor development	Typical
Increased understanding of the complexity of supervision	Variant
Importance of self-reflection	Variant
Conceptualization of constructive feedback	
Minimal or no change	Variant
Changed definition	Typical
Conceptualization of confrontation	
Minimal or no change	Variant
Changed definition	Typical

Note. General = six or seven cases; typical = four or five cases; variant = two or three cases; rare = one case.

Trustworthiness

The research team was primarily female, in line with the findings of Hill et al. (2005). All team members were faculty members; none had evaluative relationships with each other. The first two authors, both White women, coded the interviews. The second author had completed her doctoral supervision internship with the first author, but had no prior interactions with participants before conducting the interviews. Based on their experience working with doctoral supervisors, the first and second authors believed most new supervisors, especially females, found constructive feedback and confrontation challenging and needed specific guidance and support in developing corrective feedback skills and willingness to use them. During the supervision course and practicum, the first author had observed some heightened anxiety and pushback around feedback and evaluation issues, and thus anticipated she would need to be both supportive and challenging around these during the supervision internship; she anticipated specific efforts around convincing students of the need for and power of corrective feedback, as well as focused instruction and preparation for delivering corrective feedback. The coders were curious to learn how participants described their experiences, with the hope of informing their future supervision work. They recorded and discussed their pre-existing beliefs before and throughout the study.

The third and fourth authors, both White, one female and one male, were selected to serve as external auditors because of their content expertise (providing supervision, supervising doctoral supervisors) and experience with qualitative research, including CQR studies. In line with Hill's (2012) guidelines, they were involved in all aspects of the study, from review of interview questions through each stage of data analysis. Based on their feedback, several core ideas were clarified, categories were revised, and several subcategories were combined. All four members of the research team utilized bracketing to protect against the imposition of biases and preconceptions.

Trustworthiness was enhanced by use of two researchers who coded data independently and then came to consensus on the codes, and the subsequent use of two external auditors who independently reviewed each stage of the coding process (cf. Hill, 2012). Finally, member

checking was conducted at two points in the study. First, participants were invited to review their own interview transcript and revise as needed. Second, they were invited to review the findings and provide feedback regarding how well the findings reflected their experiences and protected the confidentiality of supervisors, supervisees, and clients. Triangulation across four members of the coding team and each of the seven transcripts increased the trustworthiness of the study. We addressed transferability by interviewing a homogenous sample who could speak in detail about the experience under study, and by reporting the typicality of the results (Hill, 2012).

Findings

Findings are reported by domain below. Under each domain, findings are presented by category and further delineated by subcategory (all shown in italic type).

Domain: Before

Participants described initial self-efficacy around their role as supervisors, especially regarding providing constructive feedback and confrontation. Around the specific events, they reported their motivations and how they prepared to give feedback to supervisees.

Category: Self-efficacy. Typically, the supervisors reported feelings of *excitement* about their new roles as well as some *self-doubt and insecurity*. They did not trust that they could accurately assess their supervisees' skills or needs and provide the appropriate feedback, and even wondered if they had something to offer their supervisees. Some had specific concerns about giving constructive feedback and confrontation, such as noting a tendency to "sugarcoat" feedback and hoping to give confrontation "in a gentle, firm manner," while others hoped they did not have to use confrontation ("a last resort") or said confrontation was not even "on my radar." Those with post-master's counseling work experience tended to express less worry; although one noted later that, in hindsight, "I was not aware of my growing edges" around corrective feedback.

When asked about their *initial conceptualization of constructive feedback*, there was a clear distinction based on post-master's work experience. Those without experience provided no clear definition; they only described their feelings about giving constructive feedback or gave brief responses (e.g., "fuzzy," "pretty simple, something is not happening so you talk about it"). Those with relevant work experience saw constructive feedback as "a normal part of the process" that was necessary for growth. Two further stated that constructive feedback was about "options" and "exploration," and another characterized constructive feedback based on supervisee openness to the feedback.

Similarly, those without work experience did not provide a clear *initial conceptualization of confrontation*, speaking only to their feelings about it. Those providing definitions described confrontation as more directive ("firmer," "more aggressive," "more forceful," "stern") than constructive feedback. They also placed confrontation in the context of a "resistant" supervisee ("defensive," "negative," "less open to the feedback"), thus requiring the supervisor to "push harder" on the issue, essentially saying, "This is what you have to do."

Category: Motivation. All supervisors noted a *lack of change* in their supervisees' performance as a motivation for preparing to give either constructive feedback (most often) or confrontation.

Usually this involved a skill deficit (e.g., reflections of feelings, open-ended questions) that had been addressed previously, but supervisees either had not implemented the feedback (“still not doing it!”) or were inconsistent in doing so. For other supervisees, the lack of change was related to late case notes, ineffective communication, or personal issues.

Less frequently, the *impact of supervisees' behavior on the client* was the catalyst that pushed supervisors past their fear of giving constructive feedback or confrontation. They reported feeling emotional as they watched the client's experience of not being heard or saw the supervisee impose personal values on the client. One said, “Just watching her [supervisee] not do the same thing again and again and again on the tape, just, the client's crying, expressing feelings, and her talking about something else or changing the subject or that kind of thing. It was painful to watch.” Another said she felt she had to be an advocate for the client. Finally, one supervisor was motivated by tension in the *supervisory relationship* that she wanted to understand and resolve.

Category: Preparation. Generally, supervisors reported creating a *lesson/game plan* for their sessions, more often for constructive feedback or confrontation events that went well rather than those that did not go as well. Most commonly, to prepare, the supervisors intently watched the counseling session videotape, taking detailed notes, and highlighting examples they could use in the session to illustrate the feedback. Other preparation included planning how to phrase the feedback, outlining a step-by-step scaffolding exercise, reflecting on their own behaviors in previous sessions (“I need to slow down and use the tape to help the supervisee reflect frame by frame”), identifying an analogy to illustrate feedback, and taking notes of peers' suggestions during group supervision.

Additionally, three supervisors specifically spoke to *preparing themselves emotionally* (CF+ and C+). One did this twice; for the constructive feedback that went well, she got past her nervousness by creating a script, reminding herself to stick to it, and remembering that the feedback “was not personal.” For her confrontation that went well, she re-watched a supervision session in which her supervisee said she liked it when the supervisor used the word “challenge,” which gave her “permission to challenge”; she also was ready to show that video if needed during the session (if the supervisee became defensive). Similarly, the second supervisor was “freed up” when she remembered her supervisee saying, “I can take it” when she was “talking around” feedback in a previous session. The third supervisor reported contacting friends and family for support and then praying that morning, adding, “So I really, I very much relied on my faith and spirituality to have some peace about what I was doing and just asking for wisdom.”

Typically, supervisors said their preparation was discussed during *supervision of supervision*. Most often, they participated in role plays that helped them anticipate and be ready for supervisees' potential responses, create backup plans, and practice how to word some statements. Three supervisors noted the importance of getting affirmation and support around their assessments and plans from the faculty supervisor. In three cases, the faculty supervisor urged stronger action than the doctoral students had planned, including a contract around professional behaviors and an explicit statement that without change the supervisee would not pass the

course. In one case, however, the faculty supervisor was not helpful because she could not see the relationship dynamic the doctoral student tried to describe.

Domain: During

The doctoral supervisors described topics addressed and interventions used in delivering constructive feedback and confrontation, their inner experience during the events, and supervisees' immediate reactions.

Category: Topics addressed. All supervisors addressed a *counseling skill* during one of their events, including open-ended questions, reflections of feelings, inadequate assessment of suicidal ideation, and session time management. Typically, they also addressed supervisees' *personal issues* (CF+, CF-, C+), often values that got in the way of their work. Other events highlighted supervisees' lack of awareness of their own feelings or overidentification with a client. Two events addressed *supervisory relationship dynamics*; neither went well (CF-, C-). Rarely, *professional behaviors* (e.g., late paperwork, CF+) and *multicultural feedback* (not willing to take client's perspective, CF-) were the focus.

Category: Interventions. Typically, supervisors used preselected portions of the counseling session *video* (all but one for CF) to illustrate their feedback or help supervisees practice different responses, sometimes followed by a role play. Two supervisors employed interpersonal process recall (CF-, C+) with the video (Kagan & Kagan, 1997). When not using video, supervisors typically provided direct statements of their feedback, sometimes in a less forthright (and ineffective) way and sometimes in a straightforward manner ("I'm issuing you a direct challenge"). Direct feedback occurred twice during midevaluation sessions. Rarely, supervisors used metaphor (CF+) or humor (CF-) in feedback. Twice, events that did not go well when one intervention was used evolved into events that did go well when a different intervention was used (CF, personal issues, from talking about it to the supervisee role-playing client; C, skills, from talking around it to stating directly and illustrating with video and interpersonal process recall).

Category: Supervisor emotions. All supervisors reported feeling *excited/successful/confident/determined* during at least one of their events (all but one CF+ or C+). One said her experience was "enjoyable" and "powerful" because she could see change happening. Typically, they reported feeling *nervous/uncomfortable/unresolved*, or even *frustrated/regretful*, during events that did not go well. Occasionally, they reported using in-session self-management strategies around their emotions (e.g., CF+ = "stick with the script," "Don't rescue!"; CF- = "stick with it" despite supervisee pushback).

Category: Supervisee reactions. All but one supervisor reported *positive* supervisee reactions of openness, usually combined with some degree of agreement with the feedback; one supervisee even apologized. For three constructive feedback events that went less well, supervisees were open but unconvinced or failed to make changes; one initially agreed and then expressed disagreement the next week. All supervisors also reported *negative* supervisee reactions during events that went less well, ranging from disagreement, anger, and defensiveness (including dismissive humor), to confusion, discouragement (e.g., hard to hear, disappointed in self), and

feeling overwhelmed. One reported a sequence of supervisee reactions of defensive, confused and overwhelmed, to some openness (C+).

Domain: After

Supervisors reported event outcomes related to the relationship and supervisee change. They also described their own growth as well as changes in how they defined constructive feedback and confrontation.

Category: Impact on supervisory relationship. Generally, the supervisors reported that the event (six CF+, one CF-, one C+) had a *productive impact* on the supervisory relationship. They said the event “strengthened,” “enriched,” and “deepened” the relationship, allowing more attention to self-awareness issues and yielding more supervisee disclosures. In fact, later in the semester several supervisees expressed deep appreciation for the constructive feedback or confrontation. Several supervisors reported giving specific attention to the relationship during the constructive feedback or confrontation event (e.g., checking in with the supervisee about emotions, saying “I know this is hard to hear”).

For three supervisors, however, constructive feedback that went less well *hampered the relationship*. For one, the supervisor attributed a defensive response to the supervisee being tired. A second supervisor described an event that made a weak relationship even worse. She said, “We never connected, there was never a rapport between us,” and she was anxious and nervous about giving the feedback (about a counselor-client relationship dynamic). This situation evolved into a confrontation event that went less well involving a lower-than-expected midterm evaluation rating around self-awareness (“I thought there weren't going to be any surprises”). For the third supervisor, the confrontation that went less well was about tension and miscommunication in the relationship; ironically, the supervisee responded, “I don't know what you're talking about.”

Category: Supervisee response/change. Generally, the supervisors reported *growth in supervisees' skills* (e.g., reflecting feelings, seeing patterns) after the constructive feedback or confrontation event, even for two events that did not go well. Sometimes, achieving marked changes took a few more weeks and further practice. For nonskill events, supervisees became more open to self-awareness work.

Occasionally, progress was *minimal or none* following constructive feedback or confrontation that went less well. Around cultural issues one supervisor brought up, the supervisee insisted, “I just don't see that as an issue.” For the second, constructive feedback that went less well evolved into confrontation that went less well around skill (open-ended questions; supervisee asked only about content). However, some progress was made later in the semester when, based on feedback in supervision of supervision, the supervisor worked from the counselor role (Bernard, 1997) and learned about personal issues that were affecting the supervisee's ability to be with clients' feelings.

Category: Supervisor debriefing and processing. Typically, the supervisors discussed one or more of their events during *individual or peer group supervision*. Most often, they received

welcome validation and support; showing a constructive feedback or confrontation event during group supervision sometimes was a celebration of their progress. Three reported receiving corrective feedback around an event, including being confronted in individual supervision about their need to be stronger in their constructive feedback or confrontation, or repeatedly being challenged about interfering personal beliefs (e.g., need to be liked, inappropriate to be directive) in both individual and group supervision.

Category: Self-efficacy and conceptual growth. Typically, the supervisors reported *self-growth*, including feeling more confident and competent as well as gaining increased self-awareness around their interfering issues and continued areas for growth. One described her path as starting with concern for herself as a new supervisor, then gradually relaxing as she gained confidence and, as a result, was better able to be present with supervisees. Another talked about how she initially overprepared (e.g., selecting numerous examples from video to show as proof), then with growing confidence became less structured and more flexible during her sessions. The supervisors also typically reported *increased understanding of counselor developmental tasks*, more realistic expectations based on that understanding, and awareness of individual variations (e.g., pace of learning, learning styles, personality dynamics) within developmental challenges.

Occasionally, supervisors noted the *complexity of supervision*, saying they now “really understood” concepts like the balance of challenge and support, adding that supervision “was a lot harder than I thought!” Two supervisors also highlighted the importance of *self-reflection* for their growth.

We asked students how their *conceptualizations of constructive feedback and confrontation* had changed because of their supervision internship. For constructive feedback, those with relevant work experience reported no or minimal changes (“just got more clearly defined”). The others described more ease in delivery than they initially expected, saying, “It *is* feedback” that helps supervisees grow, it can be about “positive and tougher” issues, and it means the supervisee is open to a different viewpoint. One student said, “It’s not about you with them”; rather, it’s something that the supervisor can express from the client’s perspective.

Similarly, some students with work experience reported minimal or no changes in their thoughts about confrontation (“No change, just have to consider the supervisee’s personality” in wording confrontation; “very stern” but less so than initially described). The others emphasized the relationship as they described their changed views of confrontation, either distinguishing constructive feedback and confrontation, with constructive feedback about content (e.g., skills) and confrontation about the relationship, or noting the importance of attending to the relationship when delivering confrontation. As one suggested, “And you don’t have to be ... rude when you give a confrontation. You can be kind. You can give a very strong piece of feedback, and it’s to be kind and be supportive and make the person know that you care, that you just want them to grow.” Confrontation might be about a different perspective or something a supervisee did not want to hear, even evaluative, but confrontation also was “valuable” and “necessary” for supervisee growth. In fact, one noted her confrontation experiences were parallel “turning points” for both her and each supervisee, while another said it was a “transformative” growth

experience for her. One referred to confrontation as a “process,” as supervisees might not realize the importance of the confrontation for several sessions.

The supervisors' biggest *challenges around giving constructive feedback and confrontation* across the semester primarily were in trusting their assessment of supervisees' needs and performance and framing delivery of the feedback (e.g., being clear, concise, balanced, well-timed). One said she was always challenged to maintain the relationship while giving feedback, while another spoke to her realization that some of her specific beliefs about giving feedback got in her way.

Discussion

Analysis of seven doctoral supervisors' reflections on their corrective feedback experiences yielded insights around both their successes and their struggles. The supervisors' reports of their initial self-efficacy around constructive feedback and confrontation were consistent with conceptual (e.g., Stoltenberg et al., 1998; Watkins, 1993) and empirical literature (e.g., Gazzola et al., 2013; Rapisarda et al., 2011). Most of the doctoral supervisors initially felt insecure, doubting their abilities to assess their supervisees and provide appropriate feedback. Although work experience gave some participants an advantage conceptually (i.e., clearer definitions of constructive feedback and confrontation, and a perspective that both are a natural part of the supervision process), over the semester they still experienced self-doubts and frustrations within this context; they still could readily describe those feedback events that went well and those that went less well. Similar to Majcher and Daniluk's (2009) participants, the supervisors in our study also were excited about taking on this new role. In defining constructive feedback and confrontation, they initially differentiated them by supervisee reactions: if the supervisee is open, it is constructive feedback; if the supervisee is not open, it is confrontation. Some hoped they would not have to use confrontation, although those with clinical work experience were more accepting of the need for both constructive feedback and confrontation. Supervisors were motivated by several sources to overcome their uncertainty and reluctance about giving challenging feedback. When supervisees did not make needed changes, supervisors were motivated by adverse impacts on clients; for a few, the faculty supervisor provided a push when their feedback was not specific or strong enough. Planning seemed key to more successful constructive feedback and confrontation events, as supervisors gained confidence by gathering “evidence” from the videos and obtaining validation of their concerns and feedback plans from supervisors and peers. Sometimes they also engaged in self-talk to bolster their confidence. Supervisors most often addressed counseling skills and personal issues during constructive feedback and confrontation events, which went well as often as not. The few times they addressed supervisory relationship dynamics and multicultural issues, they perceived these events did not go well; they often, however, stated that their own lack of direct and concrete feedback was the reason for not achieving the desired responses from their supervisees.

Among the supervisors, there was a strong, sometimes palpable, underlying sense of responsibility for supervisee learning. One supervisor expressed her fears around her supervisee's uneven growth in multicultural competencies, stating, “Somebody's going to get her in internship and say, ‘I can't believe her supervisor didn't address this in practicum.’” This intense sense of

responsibility to create change was both motivating and stressful for the supervisors, requiring some deliberate attention from the faculty supervisor (e.g., “What was your level of multicultural competence when you first started seeing clients? How did you get to where you are today?”).

When events went well, supervisors reported a positive impact on the supervisory relationship, and they wanted to share, even celebrate, their successes. When events did not go well, the supervisory relationship suffered. Nevertheless, over the semester, the supervisors grew in confidence and self-awareness around how they approached constructive feedback and confrontation, and gained more certainty around realistic expectations of their supervisees' work. They also realized that feedback needed to be individualized based on supervisee personality and learning style. They now reported that constructive feedback was easier to deliver and was an expected component of supervision. Some differentiated constructive feedback as being about content (e.g., skills) while confrontation was connected to the supervisory relationship in some way—it was either about the relationship or there was a need to attend to the relationship during the feedback. They no longer defined confrontation in terms of supervisee resistance per se. Confrontation could be about something “the supervisee does not want to hear,” but it was something the supervisor had to address. They now focused on being confident and worked to reframe confrontation as a message that was not personal but was shared because it was necessary for supervisee growth and clinical effectiveness. This attitude toward confrontation resembles Grant et al.'s (2012) conclusions about the work of expert supervisors: “The mix of confidence, authoritative, and nondefensiveness is a model for good management of supervisory difficulties” (p. 539). In fact, the supervisors in our study reported that confrontation could be powerful in terms of growth for both their supervisees and themselves. Similarly, one expert supervisor in Grant et al. noted that “a very good session sometimes is the most discomfiting ... where the most learning occurs, despite the discomfort” (p. 536). Although some of their fears were realized, in the end our participants focused on the value of constructive feedback and especially confrontation, even though confrontation was still hard to deliver.

Implications for Supervision Educators

Our results offer some direction for supporting new supervisors' growth around corrective feedback. First, helping supervisors provide effective feedback seems to require a three-pronged approach: teach the skills, help shape delivery to the individual supervisee, and assist supervisors in getting past their reluctance. In line with previous researchers (Borders & Giordano, 2016; Gazzola et al., 2013; Johnson & Stewart, 2008), it seems clear that new supervisors need explicit training on how to give corrective feedback, especially how to be clear, concrete, and concise. One supervisor stated, “The more clear I was in my confrontive feedback, the less I had to confront.” The tendency for beginning supervisors to deliver difficult feedback tentatively or indirectly (e.g., “I'm wondering how you feel about your reflections”) has been found in other studies (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2005; Ladany & Melincoff, 1999) and thus should be proactively addressed in supervision training.

Supervisors also need practice in individualizing (cf. Majcher & Daniluk, 2009), or “particularizing” (Schön, 1987, p. 163), feedback based on an understanding of supervisees' personalities, learning styles, and pace. The supervisors in our study said that over time they

made plans more specific to the supervisee, such as the extent to which they broke down (scaffolded) the learning experience, used metaphors and humor, or employed the supervisee's own words (“You said you like a challenge. Well, I'm throwing down the gauntlet!”). Such nuanced feedback reflects the complexity of supervision that some of our participants described and that other researchers (Gazzola et al., 2013; Majcher & Daniluk, 2009) have highlighted.

In addition, attention must be given to supervisors' reluctance to give corrective feedback. Their concerns and struggles certainly can be normalized and their need for validation addressed (even experienced supervisors appreciated affirmation that their concerns were valid in Hoffman et al., 2005). At the same time, they also must be challenged to discover the source of their own reluctance and fears (e.g., perhaps the same around confronting clients?), which varied among the supervisors in our study. Similarly, focused attention must be given to what can propel them past their fears. In this study, supervisors were willing to give corrective feedback when they became frustrated with lack of supervisee change or when they prioritized client welfare over their own fears. They also at times required validation of the need to provide the feedback from peers or their supervisor. In some instances, the validation seemed to come in the form of permission, whereas in other instances they were only moved to action after a direct challenge from the faculty supervisor. At the same time, it often seemed the supervisors were experiencing a conundrum of wanting to maintain the supervisory relationship above all else (a message from the supervision literature they had read the previous semester), yet needing to provide corrective feedback that could (and sometimes did) negatively impact the relationship. It seems important to acknowledge this conundrum in training—as well as the lack of a clear, easy answer to it.

Second, it may be important for supervision educators to teach in-session self-management strategies and, perhaps even more importantly, to encourage in-session reflection, especially for sessions that do not go well. Nelson, Barnes, Evans, and Triggiano (2008) found their “wise” supervisors used “self-coaching” to talk themselves through conflicts. This self-coaching included questioning what they were doing in the moment and whether they should try something different. Reflecting on their experiences over time helped the wise supervisors build up “dependable interpersonal and behavioral strategies” (p. 181) for addressing conflict. Expert supervisors also have emphasized the importance of self-reflection, including in-session reflections about adjusting an approach to the supervisee or context (Grant et al., 2012; Kemer, Borders, & Willse, 2014). Such reflections helped experts “gently move under or around resistance, rather than just pushing at it” (Grant et al., p. 538). Supervision educators might model such self-management strategies and “reflection-in-action” (Schön, 1983) through “thinking aloud” (Borders & Brown, 2005) their own in-session thought processes. Attention to reflection-in-action, as well as reflection-on-action (after the event) and reflection-for-action (preparing for the event), seem important avenues for supervisor growth around corrective feedback (and other developmental tasks), especially if supervisors are to learn from events that do not go well. Such reflections are a key part of the “deliberate practice” that, over time, contributes to development of expertise in a domain (Ericsson, 2002).

Third, it seems increasingly clear that, although supervision feedback skills may be taught in a classroom, effective implementation of these skills requires supervised supervision—both

individual and group supervision across time with multiple supervisees. Doctoral supervisors in our study and others (e.g., Borders & Fong, 1994; Majcher & Daniluk, 2009; Rapisarda et al., 2011) consistently noted that peer modeling and support as well as supervision-of-supervision are essential catalysts in their development. Researchers also have suggested more than one semester of supervised practice is necessary for supervisors to gain a clear sense of and confidence in their role and to begin to grasp the multifaceted, complex, and nuanced nature of effective supervision practice, including complexities of corrective feedback (cf. Baker et al., 2002; Gazzola et al., 2013; Majcher & Daniluk, 2009). Such extended training and supervised practices reflect supervision best practices (Borders et al., 2014) and seem particularly important around feedback that addresses relationship, personal, and multicultural issues, as these topics seemed more difficult for our supervisors to address. Finally, given the growing consensus on the need for extended training and supervised experience in corrective feedback as well as other supervision skills, deliberate attention to developing these skills in master's-level site supervisors and supervisors of prelicensure counselors seems warranted (see Motley, Reese, & Campos's [2014] description of one feedback training workshop). Although some didactic instruction is required (Borders et al., 2014; CACREP, 2015), evidence is mounting in support of more extended training and supervision of supervision.

Limitations and Future Research

The experiences described by the supervisors in our study do not necessarily represent the experiences of others; participants were in one specific all-female cohort in one doctoral program and were supervising the work of master's students in an in-house counseling clinic. The nature of the doctoral program and the faculty supervisor's view of supervision, particularly constructive feedback and confrontation, and her feedback during supervision of supervision, certainly influenced their experiences. The sample was smaller than recommended by Hill (2012) but within the range of other studies employing CQR (Hill et al., 2005). To provide context for their growth, participants were asked to recount their thoughts and concerns from the beginning of the internship. The accuracy of their recollections cannot be ensured (see Hill, 2012). Finally, participants chose only two examples of confrontation and constructive feedback, which may not represent the full range of their confrontation and constructive feedback experiences during the internship.

Future research with a narrower focus on specific types of constructive feedback and confrontation events and specific supervision dyads, such as Burkard, Knox, Clarke, Phelps, and Inman's (2014) study of difficult multicultural feedback in cross-racial dyads, could be even more instructive. A sample that includes novice, experienced, and expert supervisors in and outside of academe could reveal insights into development of corrective feedback skills that could inform supervision education. Closer examination of doctoral students with relevant work experience (clinical or nonclinical, such as teaching or life coaching) also could be instructive, given the greater initial comfort with corrective feedback voiced by some of our participants. In addition, longitudinal studies seem particularly relevant, as the constructive feedback and confrontation often were not truly discrete events but part of a sequence of supervisors' observations, attempts, and adjustments over time. Similarly, supervisee change often was not

immediate but evolved over several sessions. In addition, supervisees' perspectives on feedback events might provide additional depth to our understanding.

Although our study provided the first in-depth examination of doctoral supervisors' experiences with corrective feedback, even greater insights could be gained from studies that track feedback events within and across supervision sessions. Transcribed sessions, perhaps augmented by interpersonal process recall of the thoughts and feelings of both supervisor and supervisee, would further enhance our understanding of how and why corrective feedback events do and do not go well. Parallel studies of supervision-of-supervision could provide insights around the pedagogy of teaching corrective feedback skills.

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