

## **Individual and Triadic and group? Supervisors' and supervisees' perceptions of each modality.**

By: L. DiAnne Borders, Laura E. Welfare, Paige B. Greason, Derrick A. Paladino, A. Keith Mobley, Jose A. Villalba & Kelly L. Wester

[Borders, L. D.](#), [Welfare, L.](#), Greason, P., Paladino, D., [Mobley, K.](#), [Villalba, J. A.](#), & [Wester, K. L.](#) (2012). Triadic and individual and group? Supervisors' and supervisees' perceptions of each modality. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 51(4), 281-295. DOI: 10.1002/j.1556-6978.2012.00021.x

Made available courtesy of the American Counseling Association: [www.counseling.org](http://www.counseling.org).

**This is the pre-peer reviewed version of the following article: Triadic and individual and group? Supervisors' and supervisees' perceptions of each modality. Counselor Education and Supervision, 51(4), 281-295, which has been published in final form at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1556-6978.2012.00021.x/abstract>.**

### **Abstract:**

In this consensual qualitative research study, the authors explored supervisors' (n= 11) and their supervisees' (n= 31) perceptions of individual, triadic, and group supervision sessions during practicum. Data from supervisor individual interviews and supervisee focus-group interviews revealed several themes regarding the advantages and disadvantages of each supervision modality. Findings suggest the relative place of each modality in terms of goals and impact.

**Keywords:** supervision | triadic supervision | individual supervision | group supervision | counselor education | counseling

### **Article:**

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) in its 2001 Standards (CACREP, 2001) essentially equated individual supervision with triadic supervision, a modality involving two supervisees meeting with one supervisor simultaneously, for meeting clinical supervision requirements (in addition to group supervision). Although some programs have replaced most individual sessions with triadic supervision (Lawson, Hein, & Getz, 2009), there is minimal research available about triadic supervision, particularly in comparison with individual and group supervision.

Using qualitative methodology, researchers to date have sought to demonstrate the experiences of supervisees or supervisors during triadic supervision. Supervisees in two studies (Lawson, Hein, & Stuart, 2009; Stinchfield, Hill, & Kleist, 2010) reported positive experiences of

vicarious learning, universality of learning issues, and multiple perspectives, as well as concerns about peer matching, challenges giving and receiving negative feedback, and having to share supervision time. Some similar themes were found for doctoral supervisors concerning their experiences providing triadic supervision (Hein & Lawson, 2008, 2009; Hein, Lawson, & Rodriguez, 2011; Lawson, Hein, & Stuart, 2010), including the value of a third perspective, negative impact of peer mismatches, and difficulties in meeting the needs of two supervisees during the triadic session. Doctoral supervisors also reported that managing feedback and relationship dynamics was especially demanding. Oliver, Nelson, and Ybañez (2010) similarly concluded that competency in working effectively with relationship disruptions between supervisees was a unique and essential skill for triadic supervisors.

Although researchers have identified similar themes across participants' experiences of triadic supervision, their results are limited in several ways. First, although participants in the aforementioned studies sometimes compared triadic supervision with individual or group supervision, this was not the focus of the studies and thus, their comparative experiences of all three modalities were not fully explored. In addition, direct comparisons of supervisee and supervisor experiences within the same context were not assessed. Finally, triadic supervision in most of the previous studies followed a specific structure (e.g., reflective model, single focused, or split focused), so that the triadic modality per se was not fully explored. Thus, we designed the present study to address the need for descriptions of the perspectives of supervisees and supervisors simultaneously engaged in all three supervisory modalities, with no prescribed supervision structure or procedure for any modality. Our specific research question was the following: What advantages and disadvantages did supervisees and supervisors report for each supervision modality based on their experiences during a semester-long practicum experience?

A qualitative approach was particularly appropriate for this study to illuminate the perspectives of supervisees and supervisors regarding the understudied modality of triadic supervision and its relative place within the practice of counseling supervision. Because we wanted to achieve consensus regarding primary and unique features of each modality in comparison with each other, thus contributing to supervision theory development, we chose to use consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hays & Wood, 2011; Hill, 2012). This approach allowed shared power within the research team and between the team and participants, as well as a rigorous data analysis process (e.g., multiple perspectives, external auditors).

## Method

### Context and Participants

The study was based in a practicum course in a counselor education program in a medium-sized university in the southeastern portion of the United States. In line with CACREP (2009) Standards, master's-level students were required to clock 40 hours of direct contact with clients and receive an average of 1 hour of individual or triadic supervision and an average of 1.5 hours of group supervision per week. Students saw volunteer undergraduate clients in the program's on-campus clinical facility, where all their counseling sessions and supervision sessions were video recorded.

Supervisors included assistant professors (n= 3) and doctoral students (n= 9) enrolled in a counseling supervision course and practicum. Faculty supervisors were assigned four or five master's-level students, and doctoral students were assigned two master's students. Doctoral-level supervisors were paired to serve as cofacilitators of group supervision for their combined four master's students. Given the unequal number of doctoral supervisors, one was paired with a faculty member for group supervision. Doctoral-level supervisors met weekly in peer-group supervision and received individual supervision from the doctoral supervision course instructor.

In addition to a common syllabus covering course requirements, supervisors created an individual syllabus that specified how each supervision modality would be conducted and the schedule for supervision meetings. Supervisors were asked to conduct formal midterm and final evaluations during individual sessions but otherwise were allowed to determine whether weekly meetings were individual only, triadic only, or some combination of the two. Triadic formats per session could include single-focused (one supervisee makes a case presentation), split-focused (both supervisees present a case presentation), or peer supervision (each supervisee reviews the peer's entire counseling session and prepares feedback). Supervisors also were allowed to change their plans over the semester based on their assessment of supervisee needs and in consultation with the course instructor. They could choose to schedule group supervision weekly (1.5 hours) or biweekly (3 hours). All supervisors, regardless of their original plans, provided some combination of individual, triadic, and group sessions.

Supervisee participants were 31 master's-level students, including 22 White women, four African American women, and five White men. Their ages ranged from 23 to 35 years ( $M= 25.23$ ,  $SD= 2.91$ ). Two faculty supervisors (a White woman and a multiracial man) were interviewed for the study. The nine doctoral-level supervisors were all women (six White, one African American, and two international students). The doctoral students were in the second semester of their 2nd year in a 3-year full-time doctoral program.

## Procedure

At the end of the semester (with institutional review board approval), all supervisors and supervisees involved in the practicum experience were invited to participate in a study designed to allow them to provide feedback about the experience (vs. feedback about their particular supervisor; supervisor evaluations were conducted independently of the study). All doctoral and faculty supervisors agreed to participate in individual interviews; one faculty was not interviewed because of schedule conflicts. Of the master's-level students, 31 of 36 participated in focus-group interviews based on their group supervision membership. Although this meant two different interview formats were used, observations of groups across the semester (for supervision purposes) suggested supervisees would not be inhibited by the presence of their peers in sharing their perceptions of the modalities (vs. perceptions of each other's skills).

## Interview Questions

The interview protocol and subsequent analyses followed CQR guidelines (Hill, 2012). Interview questions were created by the first, fourth, sixth, and seventh authors based on their knowledge of the supervision literature and their combined experience conducting supervision research; conducting qualitative research, including CQR studies; and providing supervision in the three modalities.

Most questions for supervisors and supervisees covered the same general topics (e.g., advantages and disadvantages of each supervision modality; modality preference; and requested changes to supervision process, if applicable). Supervisees also were asked their perceptions of how the modalities compared and what they learned from each modality. Not included in this article are doctoral supervisors' responses to broader questions about their development and reflections across the semester. Individual and focus-group interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours each. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by research assistants.

## Research Coding Team

The research coding team was composed of the first three authors, all White women. The first author was the supervision course instructor and individual supervisor for the doctoral-level supervisors' practicum experience and had experience conducting research on supervision. The second and third authors, advanced doctoral students, conducted the interviews. Both had completed a supervision course and several semesters of supervised supervision but were not

involved in the practicum experience reported here. All three came into the study with curiosity about what they would learn about triadic supervision as well as varying degrees of skepticism that triadic supervision would be an adequate substitute for individual supervision for first-practicum supervisees. Acknowledging that these beliefs might bias data collection and analysis, the three recorded their preexisting beliefs and discussed them throughout the study.

## Data Analysis

All interviews were conducted prior to data analysis to ensure consistency (Hill, 2012). Data analysis in CQR follows three steps: (a) Interview data are grouped into domains, (b) core ideas are derived to summarize the essence of the domains, and (c) a cross-analysis is used to construct common categories across participants (Hays & Wood, 2011; Hill, 2012). The first author created an initial list of domains based on the literature and the interview questions (see Hill, 2012). The second and third authors independently coded one whole transcript and suggested edits to the a priori domains. After reaching consensus on the domains, the team coded each interview and then reached consensus regarding the core ideas for each domain. Finally, the team conducted the cross-analysis, including determining common categories across the interviews and reaching consensus on these. Frequencies of categories were labeled as general, typical, variant, or rare on the basis of CQR guidelines.

## Trustworthiness

External auditors are central to enhancing the trustworthiness of CQR studies (Hill, 2012). Two external auditors were selected because of their content expertise (providing supervision, including triadic supervision); in addition, one had experience conducting qualitative research. They were involved in all stages of the study in a sequential manner (e.g., feedback from one auditor was incorporated before the results were sent to the second auditor; see Hill, 2012). They reviewed the interview questions (e.g., order, clarity, relevance), list of domains, core ideas (e.g., not redundant, concise), cross-analysis (e.g., completeness), and the manuscript. Their feedback at all stages was discussed by the research team, with changes made accordingly. Triangulation was checked in two ways: consistency of results across the two groups of participants (i.e., supervisees and supervisors) and multiple researchers who coded data independently and then agreed on the interpretation (Hill, 2012). In addition, seven participants, made up of four supervisors and three supervisees, conducted a member check of the final domains and categories; all reported that the results accurately reflected their perspectives.

## Results

Because of space limitations, only the most frequent categories (general and typical) are reported. Category labels are italicized throughout the following Results subsections. See Table 1 for additional, less frequent categories.

**Table 1. Supervisees' and Supervisors' Perceptions of Individual, Triadic, and Group Supervision**

Perceptions	Advantages, Benefits, and Assets	Disadvantages and Challenges	Desired Changes
<b>Individual Supervision</b>			
Supervisee	Individualized (General) Deeper and safer (General) Confidence building (Typical) Self-awareness (Variant) Supervisor feedback (valued over peer; Variant)	Supervisor behavior (idiosyncratic; Typical) Evaluation sessions (not helpful; Rare)	More individual sessions (Typical)
Supervisor	Deeper, more challenging (General) Individualized (Typical) Supervisor relationship (Typical)	Fewer perspectives (Typical) Time (Variant) Power differential (Variant) Triangulation (Rare)	More individual sessions (Typical)
<b>Triadic Supervision</b>			
Supervisee	More and better feedback (General) <sup>a</sup> More challenging and in-depth feedback (General) <sup>a</sup> More knowledge about peer's clients (Typical) <sup>a</sup> Safer and more comfortable (Variant) <sup>a</sup> More personal (Variant) <sup>a</sup> Vicarious learning (Typical) <sup>b</sup> Learn from peers (Typical) <sup>b</sup>	Time (General) Peer mismatch (Typical) Preference for supervisor feedback (Variant)	More time (Typical)
Supervisor	More challenging and in-depth feedback (Typical) <sup>a</sup> Peer interactions more intimate, collegial, and involved (Typical) <sup>a</sup> Supervisor advantages (Variant) <sup>a</sup> Additional perspectives/learn from peers (Typical) <sup>b</sup> Peer feedback that enhanced supervisor feedback (Typical) <sup>b</sup> Vicarious learning (Variant) <sup>b</sup> Normalized supervisees' experiences	Time (Typical) Session dynamics (Typical) Unsure of supervisor role (Typical) How to keep both peers involved (Typical) Peer	Balance of individual and triadic sessions (General) Session length (Typical)

## Triadic Supervision

(Variant)<sup>b</sup>

mismatch (Variant)

## Group Supervision

1. *Note.* The frequency label *general* was used when 10 or 11 supervisors mentioned the category in their interviews, *typical* for six to nine supervisors, *variant* for three to five supervisors, and *rare* for one to two supervisors for categories where an unusual but notable topic was reported. Determining the labels for supervisees was more complicated because they were interviewed in focus groups. In this setting, nonverbal agreement (e.g., head nod) with a peer's report would not be recorded in the transcription. (In contrast, supervisors could not be prompted by a peer to remember some aspect of their experience since they were interviewed alone.) After some discussion, we determined the following seemed in line with Hill et al.'s (2005) recommendations while also allowing for nonverbal agreements: *general* when 10–15 supervisees mentioned the category in their focus group interviews, *typical* for six to nine supervisees, *variant* for three to five supervisees, and *rare* for one to two supervisees when the topic was notable.
2. <sup>a</sup>Versus group. <sup>b</sup>Specific to triadic.

Supervisee	Multiple perspectives (General) Educational opportunities (Typical) Intentionality of supervisor (Typical) Vicarious learning (Variant) Normalized experiences (Variant)	Limitations on feedback (Typical) Timing issues (Typical)	Time issues, longer or shorter (Variant) More educational opportunities (Variant)
Supervisor	Multiple perspectives, including theoretical orientations (General) Cofacilitators (Typical) Exposure to multiple counselor styles and clients (Variant) Normalized supervisees' experiences (Variant)	Less open and constructive feedback (Typical) Less bonding and trust between peers (Variant) Less client and session information (Variant) Cofacilitators (Variant)	Balance of triadic and group sessions (Typical) More educational opportunities (Variant)

### Individual Supervision Sessions

In terms of advantages, supervisees and supervisors highlighted the individualized attention that was possible in their individual supervision sessions (see Table 1). As one supervisee said these sessions were “me-intensive” and specific to the supervisee's needs. Some supervisees noted the freedom they felt in these individualized sessions. One said, “I felt like I could talk for 45

minutes straight about me and not feel guilty about it. In triadic, I was more conscious of not monopolizing the time. In individual, I was like, this is all about me.”

Similarly, supervisors appreciated the opportunity for individualized feedback, to “just really put all of my focus on one of them” and to “focus more on the supervisee rather than on the client.” In addition, they were able to attend to supervisee patterns of behavior across clients and give their supervisees needed space for learning. One supervisor said, “I was able to ask a question and just kind of sit there and let her sit with it.” Another supervisor explained how the individual session provided an important setting for her supervisee: “Especially because part of her issue was lack of confidence, sometimes having someone else come up with ideas and suggestions may keep her from having the opportunity to do that on her own.”

All supervisees and supervisors emphasized that individual sessions were deeper and more challenging; supervisees said they felt safer and supervisors found them more open as a result. One supervisor noted this theme by saying, “I think there was more safety on their part, so it felt easier on my part to challenge them more. I think some of their defenses were down.”

These interactions often were focused on self-awareness and personal growth, although this was highlighted more specifically and frequently by supervisees than supervisors. One supervisee's statement illustrated this:

In individual, there was more time to go into, you know, “How do you feel about this client; does that bring anything up for you yourself; is there anything about who you are as a person that's coming out in this client; what are your blind spots?”

Supervisees reported that individual sessions bolstered their confidence, especially when they were working with tough clients. One supervisee noted,

It was nice to just kind of go through all of my clients, just to go through all of them and tell her what I was thinking and what was going on—just kind of check in. That made me feel safe—on the right path kind of thing.



Finally, many supervisors said an additional asset of individual sessions was being able to “check in with the relationship” and build rapport with their supervisees.

Few disadvantages of individual supervision sessions were noted by participants. Those they named often were idiosyncratic and specific to the dyad (see Table 1). In terms of desired changes, both supervisees and supervisors wished for more individual sessions, especially at the beginning of the semester.

### Triadic Supervision Sessions

When participants were asked to describe the advantages of triadic supervision sessions, they frequently began by citing benefits of triadic over group supervision sessions (see Table 1). All the supervisees reported enhanced feedback, specifically, that it was more in-depth, challenging, and personal. One supervisee explained, “I liked that it was smaller and so you got more feedback on your stuff. Group, there was not much time for each person to talk about their clients.” Another said, “I think I was challenged and pushed more in triadic than I was in group.” One supervisee reported, “I really liked talking about my peer's clients and being able to really get in there deep.”

Several supervisees related this difference in feedback to feeling safer and more comfortable with their peer. One supervisee explained, “You could bring up concerns that you had that maybe you wouldn't want to bring up in a group as far as your development and things like that. It was maybe a safer place to bring up different things.” Another supervisee explained how the strong peer relationship allowed for enhanced feedback: “We just spent so much time together every week in supervision that we could say, ‘Oh my gosh, what were you thinking?’ and it was okay in triadic to do that, to really challenge each other.”

Supervisees also emphasized the additional knowledge they had regarding each other's clients and counseling work versus the limited exposure they got in group supervision. One supervisee reported,

I know her counseling skills and history, and I know about most of her clients more in-depth than we do in group. So I feel like having a lot of that background helped us be more in-depth because we just knew more.

Similarly, another supervisee said, “I really liked being able to just say, ‘here's what's going on,’ and have them both know what I was talking about.” Some supervisees also reported that having the peer connection was helpful between supervision sessions. One explained,

Even outside of the sessions, my peer and I would talk about a specific client and she could help support me. It helped that she knew my client and I could say, “I had a really tough time with this guy this week.” I didn't have to explain anything to her.

Supervisees spoke about several other means by which they learned from each other, including vicarious learning (e.g., “To see the way she does things, I can get ideas from that”) as well as role modeling (e.g., “It was really really good that we were paired together, because I need to be, show some restraint, and she's very disciplined and reserved in her sessions and I really learned from that”).

Supervisors pointed to similar benefits of triadic over group, including more challenging feedback from peers and supervisors. They also found peer interactions to be more intimate, collegial, and involved (e.g., “I saw a lot more caring of each other in triadic”). Many also pointed to advantages of triadic over individual sessions, such as feeling freer to challenge supervisees and feeling less responsible (e.g., “I would add my two cents but I didn't feel so, ‘Oh gosh, I'm responsible,’ in a way”). Many supervisors specifically mentioned ways that peer feedback enhanced the supervisor's feedback. One said, “And when I was very abstract, she could identify my concept, and she could be concrete and give some examples that explained my concept very well, and I think that was helpful to the other supervisee.” A few supervisors described how they intentionally used this advantage of peer feedback:

I'm thinking of one time in particular where there seemed to be some flirtatious dynamic between a female supervisee and her male client, and she was not wanting to hear it from me, but then her peer was validating me.

I would turn to the peer, before I gave feedback, and say, “What has your experience been?” So that it would help buffer me saying, “This is what you really needed to do.”

In terms of disadvantages of triadic sessions, most supervisees and supervisors mentioned time related issues. Supervisees worried about taking up too much of the hour (e.g., “Like, is this my time, or I don't want to take too much”) and supervisors worried about how to fit two persons' needs into the hour, especially if the supervisee not presenting a tape in that session had immediate needs. In addition, although both groups pointed to peer mismatches as a detriment to learning, this was a greater concern of supervisees. Supervisees emphasized what they lost as a result of a peer mismatch, such as the loss of peer feedback and interaction. One supervisee said, “My peer and I were such a mismatch as far as how we liked to receive feedback and what we would want to hear that it really became more supervisor led.” In contrast, supervisors tended to emphasize the impact of a peer mismatch on their own work in the triadic session: “I thought about how to use the skilled supervisees more to facilitate the growth of the other, but I feared setting up a dynamic where it was like, ‘You're better than her’—and that was already the supervisee's fear.”

Supervisors reported other challenging session dynamics, which, again, had implications for how they worked during triadic sessions. They were particularly concerned about keeping both peers involved in each session (e.g., “I often felt like I was forgetting this other person”). One supervisor pointed to the challenges in giving feedback during triadic, saying, “Like especially when I gave certain constructive feedback for one supervisee, I could tell that the supervisee felt embarrassed before the other person.” Other supervisors described how having the peer present complicated the supervisee's ability to take in feedback. One explained, “Sometimes having a third person diffuses some of the power intensity or challenge for that person to do the work and to sit on things.” Another said, “It's hard to utilize silence when there's three people in the room instead of two, because sometimes that third person will jump in.”

All supervisors had received and provided individual and group supervision before, but, with few exceptions, none had received or provided triadic supervision previously. Not surprisingly, then, most supervisors reported contemplating their appropriate role in triadic sessions (e.g., “just trying to figure this out”). Some began by using individual supervision as their model: “Initially, it felt like I was treating it like I had two individual supervisees. Increasingly, as the semester went on, I thought, how can I use this other person to facilitate the learning of the third?” Others drew from group counseling to help them understand their role: “I think I thought it would have been easier with just two people, but there were still some of the same difficulties of having several people. How, even with triadic, all of those group dynamics come in still.” In contrast, one supervisor drew from her background in couples counseling to think about her role in triadic supervision:

I just knew I wanted to tie the other person in and not leave them hanging. You think about couples counseling, you want to pull both people in and have them communicate to each other and not just turn your back on somebody.

In terms of desired changes, supervisors suggested alternating triadic and individual sessions weekly (balance of sessions) and, along with supervisees, noted the need to extend triadic session length from 1 hour to at least 1 hour and a half (more time).

### Group Supervision Sessions

All supervisees and supervisors highlighted the multiple perspectives present in group supervision sessions (e.g., “the best part of group”; see Table 1). Both groups of participants noted the advantages of the different perspectives of supervisees and supervisors. As one supervisee stated, “The groups were good in that you got different feedback and then different feedback from another supervisor, which was good.” Similarly, one supervisor said,

Well I would say that some of the pros include just having more eyes and ears and perspectives to add to the mix, and ideas. And that's both among the supervisees ... and then also having two supervisors to contribute some perspectives and ideas, and obviously we have different styles and experiences, too.

Both groups mentioned the benefit of having multiple theoretical orientations discussed during group. Supervisees appreciated having supervisors who were theoretically different, and supervisors noted that “different voices from different theories” enhanced their case conceptualization. Supervisors also emphasized the broader exposure to multiple counselor styles and clinical issues. One supervisor explained this point by saying, “They got to learn about, instead of 10 clients, they got to learn about 50 or 60 clients, and sort of learn about the different issues, and test out different things together.”

Supervisees also appreciated the educational opportunities in group to discuss common clinical issues or interventions (e.g., “We talked about motivational interviewing one day, and we talked about grief and loss—topics that came up with our clients”). Finally, several supervisees noted the intentionality of their supervisor in using information learned in triadic to enhance group

learning (e.g., “So really being mindful of what we needed that they learned from us in triadic”), such as assigning roles for peer feedback (see Borders, 1991).

In terms of disadvantages of group, supervisees mentioned various issues that limited helpful feedback, including group dynamics, size of the group, and limited information about the client being discussed. One supervisee said, “It was so strength-based that we didn't challenge each other.” Another explained, “It seemed like there was definitely a norm that was established in our group around saying nice things. Everyone being friendly.” Some supervisees reported that time constraints limited their participation (“I felt hesitant to say personal things sometimes in group because there were so many people to get through, so I never really divulged much”). Other supervisees reported that the brevity of case presentations in group (compared with triadic) limited their participation (“I felt it was hard for me to give really good constructive feedback because we were seeing one clip of a tape that was maybe 5 minutes, and we didn't see the rest of the work with that client”).

Supervisees sometimes compared group with the other modalities, always concluding that group feedback was less personal (limited feedback). One said, “I think we focused less on the person. We focused more on the client. So I think I guess it was less personal than the triadic sessions.” Another supervisee reported that individual and triadic sessions were more conducive to broaching multicultural issues, saying,

And in triadic and in individual, we talked a lot about multiculturalism and racism and how that might be coming out with our clients. And I don't think we could have done that in group. I guess just because it's like a personal issue.

Finally, some supervisees spoke to timing issues around group, especially when group might be held on the same day as individual or triadic sessions. Some found group sessions too long, even when they were 1.5 hours versus 3 hours (“And group was the only one where sometimes I felt like it was going on forever”).

Supervisors also described feedback in group as less open and constructive. In their descriptions, however, they emphasized their challenges in managing peer feedback, such as the following quote:

I really struggled with this group process. There were a lot of times where people in the group were not willing to give each other feedback, or where one person dominated the feedback and other people shut down. I think the disadvantage was that with people with varying skill levels, a lot of them left feeling unsatisfied.

In terms of desired changes, at least some supervisors and supervisees wanted more educational opportunities in group, such as covering skills (e.g., dealing with direct questions from clients, conducting termination sessions) and topics (e.g., self-injury, grief and loss) that were pertinent to all the supervisees. Supervisors tended to want fewer group sessions, suggesting they be replaced by triadic sessions (balance of sessions).

## Discussion

Our aim was to obtain perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of individual, triadic, and group supervision modalities from supervisees and their supervisors within the same context. Participants, based in an on-campus practicum, described all three modalities as both beneficial and challenging, and they often agreed on the specific dynamics that contributed to their perceptions of each modality.

Individual sessions were valued for their person-specific attention, undivided time, and depth of feedback. Participants reported being able to do more challenging work that focused on supervisee self-awareness, supervisory relationship building, and specific supervisee needs. Even when they reported a positive triadic experience in which they received helpful peer feedback, supervisees still valued feedback from the supervisor in individual sessions. Participants reported the fewest disadvantages for individual sessions. In fact, most supervisees and supervisors wished they had scheduled more individual sessions, particularly during the first half of the semester. This seems developmentally appropriate, given that the supervisees were seeing clients for the first time and thus had many questions and focused on details rather than the larger picture (Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982).

The benefits of triadic sessions were often described in contrast with group sessions: more challenging and in-depth feedback, more intimate and comfortable peer interactions, and more information about the peer's clients on which to base feedback and learn vicariously. Supervisees particularly appreciated gaining a more complete picture of their peer's clients as they followed each other's work across the semester, with some supervisees even consulting with each other outside of supervision. Most triads included at least one session for which supervisees watched

the peer's entire session and prepared feedback; this practice likely enhanced their knowledge of each other's clients and their valuing of the insights they gained as a result. In addition, similar to Lawson et al. (2010), participants noted opportunities for role modeling and other supervisory interventions that require additional perspective in triadic sessions. Supervisors also reported instances in which peer feedback supplemented or enhanced their own feedback, also similar to doctoral supervisors in previous studies (e.g., Hein & Lawson, 2008; Lawson et al., 2010).

Several disadvantages of triadic sessions were identified in the interviews. Some supervisors wondered if, on occasion, the presence of the peer interfered with the supervisee being able to take in some feedback. The peer might have felt compelled to respond to an inquiry, protect the supervisee, or diffuse anxiety in some other way. Time was consistently noted as a challenge, centered around how to cover the needs of two supervisees adequately within 1 hour (supervisors) and not feel guilty for taking too much of the time (supervisees). Several of the supervisors reported that around midsemester they decided to extend triadic sessions to 1.5 hours, or they suggested this change for the future, similar to other researchers (e.g., Lawson, Hein, & Getz, 2009; Stinchfield et al., 2010). Peer mismatch was a greater concern for supervisees than supervisors. Peers regretted the feedback they lost as a result of the mismatch, a concern also reported by Hein et al. (2011).

Supervisors were unsure of their role in triadic supervision, which was not surprising because only two supervisors had had any previous experience with triadic and there was limited direction for triadic in the literature covered in the doctoral supervision course. They looked to their existing frameworks to understand the triadic modality. Some started with contrasting how triadic was similar to and different from individual supervision to help define their role. Others seemed to characterize triadic as small-group supervision, the comparison reported most often in the literature to date (Gilliam & Baltimore, 2010; Hein & Lawson, 2008, 2009; Lawson, Hein, & Getz, 2009; Lawson et al., 2010). One supervisor likened triadic to couples counseling, similar to the systemic perspective purported by Oliver et al. (2010). Regardless, the central focus of the supervisors' attempts to conceptualize triadic supervision sessions seemed to revolve around how best to keep both supervisees involved throughout the session, so as to enhance their learning from each other.

Group supervision appeared to be the least popular of the three modalities for participants, who found feedback in group to be less informative and less constructive. Perhaps after experiencing the depth and quality of feedback that is possible in individual sessions as well as in ongoing triadic supervision, participants were disappointed in the comparatively brief and cursory feedback available from peers in group. They also described peer interactions as less open and

trusting in group as opposed to triadic supervision. This perception may be related to the supervisors' observation that the triadic partners often formed a subgroup when combined with others in a group. Nevertheless, participants did highlight some unique benefits of group, including multiple perspectives and theoretical orientations, vicarious learning, normalizing concerns, and opportunities to be educated about common skills and clinical issues.

Overall, our findings formed a continuum suggesting the relative place of each modality in terms of dynamics, goals, and impact: Individual sessions were more supervisee focused, individualized, intimate, and deep; triadic sessions were both supervisee and client focused, yielded quality peer feedback, and were more time pressured; and group sessions were more client focused, more didactic, and less engaged. Although this continuum is at least somewhat specific to our particular context, it does suggest that all three modalities are important to supervisee growth and adds to the ongoing development of supervision theory around the unique contributions of each modality.

### Limitations

Our supervisors and supervisees provided feedback on all three modalities of supervision experienced concurrently. The completeness of the feedback is a strength of this qualitative analysis. Nevertheless, similar to other studies, the participants were from one program with a particular practicum structure that may not represent other programs. Reports of nonparticipants (though few) may have altered the results. Supervisors varied in their frequency of individual and triadic sessions, as well as the structure and procedure for all supervision modalities. Although this allowed them to conduct supervision based on supervisees' needs and make changes based on supervisees' evolving needs, such variation also introduced a good bit of noise into the study. Even so, there was substantial consensus about the advantages and disadvantages of each modality, as well as the potential limitation of using both individual and focus-group interviews. In addition, the supervisees were master's students enrolled in practicum, and most of the supervisors were doctoral students early in their practice of clinical supervision. Additional research with interns or post-master's supervisees and more experienced supervisors, particularly those experienced with providing triadic supervision, also would broaden our understanding of the appropriate use of each modality with supervisees across developmental levels. Finally, participants' perceptions of advantages and disadvantages of supervision modalities are not synonymous with actual effectiveness, a variable yet to be explored in triadic supervision and infrequently measured in supervision research in general.

### Implications and Recommendations for Future Research



When our results are integrated into existing literature (e.g., Hein & Lawson, 2008, 2009; Oliver et al., 2010), it seems that the two most prominent concerns of supervisees and supervisors are the quality of feedback and the impact of various relationships or roles within triadic as well as other modalities. As illustrated in our study, supervisees clearly desired in-depth, personalized, and challenging feedback and were disappointed when that was not a part of their experience, regardless of supervision modality. They connected receiving better feedback with closer, more open relationships. Similarly, supervisors valued opportunities to provide deeper feedback directly or indirectly through facilitating triadic or group interactions, and they found that peer relationships (in triadic and group) had a large influence on their success at achieving in-depth and constructive feedback. It may be that these are two overriding factors that supervisors need to consider when planning for and conducting supervision, regardless of modality. These factors also may need particular attention in educating new supervisors, so that they can anticipate and be prepared for the various challenges involved in facilitating quality feedback and managing relationships across modalities.

There also are important implications for preparing supervisors and supervisees specifically for triadic supervision, because roles for both can be unclear in triadic supervision. Supervisees would benefit from instruction regarding expectations for their contributions to the triadic process, as peers can be both an asset and a barrier to feedback during triadic sessions (see Lawson et al., 2010). Supervisors need help creating a framework for conceptualizing their role as a triadic supervisor; exploring how their experiences in individual and group supervision, couples and family counseling, and other relevant experiences might apply to the triadic context appears to be a useful approach. Supervisors also need to understand the importance of creating a productive relationship in early sessions (Lawson, Hein, & Getz, 2009), as well as methods for structuring peer feedback that encourage honest, constructive, and in-depth feedback. Clarifying supervisor and supervisee roles as best we can, based on current knowledge from limited research, and normalizing the inherent residual ambiguity may help participants capitalize on the unique opportunities for quality feedback that triadic supervision provides.

Research to date indicates that the triadic modality has a place in clinical supervision practice. It seems to have unique advantages that are not found in individual and group modalities. Rather than a substitute for individual sessions, triadic may provide a third modality that can be used to complement learning in individual and group supervision. Nevertheless, it is still unclear when and how often triadic supervision is the most appropriate modality, how it is conducted most effectively, and what learning outcomes specific to triadic should be measured. Process research, which would provide a glimpse inside supervision sessions of each modality, and experimental research, which would allow comparisons of various combinations of individual, triadic, and group sessions, might provide promising avenues of study. Such investigations would further our

insights into the pedagogy of triadic supervision and its legitimate place within the practice of supervision.

## References

Borders, L. D. (1991). A systematic approach to peer group supervision. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 69, 248–252.

AbstractPDF(141K)ReferencesWeb of Science® Times Cited: 19

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2001). CACREP accreditation manual. Alexandria , VA : Author.

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2009). 2009 standards. Retrieved from <http://www.cacrep.org/doc/2009%20Standards.pdf>.

Gilliam, S. L., & Baltimore, M. L. (2010). Triadic supervision. In J. R. Culbreth & L. L. Brown (Eds.), *State of the art in clinical supervision* (pp. 45–62). New York , NY : Routledge.

Hays, D. G., & Wood, C. (2011). Infusing qualitative traditions in counseling research designs. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 89, 288–295.

Hein, S. F., & Lawson, G. (2008). Triadic supervision and its impact on the role of the supervisor: A qualitative examination of supervisors' perspectives. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 48, 16–31.

Hein, S. F., & Lawson, G. (2009). A qualitative examination of supervisors' experiences of the process of triadic supervision. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 28, 91–108.

Hein, S. F., Lawson, G., & Rodriguez, C. (2011). Supervisee compatibility and its influence on triadic supervision: An examination of doctoral student supervisors' perspectives. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 50, 422–436.

Hill, C. E. (Ed.). (2012). *Consensual qualitative research: A practical resource for investigating social science phenomena*. Washington , DC : American Psychological Association.

Lawson, G., Hein, S. F., & Getz, H. (2009). A model for using triadic supervision in counselor preparation programs. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 48, 257–270.

Lawson, G., Hein, S. F., & Stuart, C. L. (2009). A qualitative investigation of supervisees' experiences of triadic supervision. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 87, 449–457.

Lawson, G., Hein, S. F., & Stuart, C. L. (2010). Supervisors' experiences of the contributions of the second supervisee in triadic supervision: A qualitative investigation. *Journal of Specialists in Group Work, 35*, 69–91.

Loganbill, C., Hardy, E., & Delworth, U. (1982). Supervision: A conceptual model. *The Counseling Psychologist, 10*, 3–42.

Oliver, M., Nelson, K., & Ybañez, K. (2010). Systemic processes in triadic supervision. *The Clinical Supervisor, 29*, 51–67.

Stinchfield, T. A., Hill, N. R., & Kleist, D. M. (2010). Counselor trainees' experiences in triadic supervision: A qualitative exploration of transcendent themes. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 32*, 225–239.