PERCEPTIONS OF PRIMARY SUPERVISOR INTERPERSONAL SKILLS: A CRITICAL INCIDENT ANALYSIS*

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ABSTRACT: This study surveyed a randomly selected group of Approved Supervisors of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (n = 280) and their supervisees (n = 266) on their perceptions of the primary supervisor interpersonal skill used in supervisory incidents that had a positive effect on supervisee development. Supervisor directiveness was the most identified skill by both supervisors and supervisees.

Little has been published regarding supervisor interpersonal skills in the family therapy literature. Schwartz (1988) states that the trainer-trainee relationship must be attended to for effective supervision to take place. This is quite logical since relationship skills of family therapists have been shown to be related to keeping families in treatment (Shapiro & Budman, 1973) and have been associated with positive treatment outcomes (Alexander, Barton, Schiavo, & Parsons, 1976; Burton & Kaplan, 1968).

Related research from counseling psychology and social work...
shows that supervisor interpersonal skills appear to play a role in supervisees' evaluations of their training and in their behavior during the supervision session (Holloway, 1982; Rosenblatt & Mayer, 1975; Worthington & Roehlke, 1979). While these studies may be helpful to family therapy supervisors, it is unclear if those interpersonal skills considered important by supervisors and supervisees in related fields are the same for family therapists.

In an initial study of family therapy supervisors' and supervisees' perceptions of effective supervisor interpersonal skills, Wetchler (1989) found that both groups rated “Respects the supervisee,” “Helps supervisee assess own strengths and growth areas,” and “Encourages development of personal style” as most effective. Unfortunately, these results were derived from their perceptions of what was effective and may have resulted due to a social desirability factor (Wetchler, 1989). A more objective measure of effective supervisor interpersonal skills is needed.

The present study examines the effectiveness (The ability to help the supervisee improve as a therapist) of family therapy supervisor interpersonal skills based on reports from both supervisors and supervisees about critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954) in supervision that had a positive effect on trainee development. The identification of primary interpersonal skills during critical supervisory incidents, while still perceived, is based on the report of an actual situation.

**METHOD**

**Subjects**

The sample was comprised of 280 AAMFT Approved Supervisors and 266 of their supervisees who responded to a national mailing (a 39% response rate as explained below). The supervisors' ages ranged from 30 to 70 years with a mean age of 42.2 years. They had an average of 9.8 years supervising family therapists with a range of 3 to 40 years. Males comprised 60.7% (n = 170) of the sample while females accounted for 38.6% (n = 108). One hundred and eighty-eight held doctoral degrees (67%) and 92 held masters degrees (32.9%).

The average supervisees' age was 39.1 years with a range of from 23 to 65 years. They had practiced family therapy an average of 4.3 years with a range of from 1 to 28 years. Females comprised 62.4% (n = 166) of the sample while males accounted for 36.8% (n = 98). Two hundred and eleven held masters degrees or lower (79.3%) and 53 held doctorates (19.9%).