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Article 46

A New Approach to Distance Counseling Skill Development: Applying a Discrimination Model of Supervision

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The proliferation of technology assisted distance counseling (TADC) is almost certain to continue expanding and evolving throughout the world. Yet, applicable terminology, ethics, and governance over its use are currently inconsistent and ambiguous. Even with numerous national organizations growing in recognition of TADC within the field, the primary responsibility for providing consistent and clear guidelines of TADC rests on individual professional counselors. To add to the complexity, counselor supervisors are responsible for training supervisees on the professional practice of TADC in order to prepare them for the future. In this article, Bernard's (1979, 1997) Discrimination Model is applied to the practice of TADC and technology assisted distance counseling supervision (TADCS) in order to aid counselor supervisors in providing flexible and necessary adaptations to developing technological advances. This is especially important due to a current lack of any theoretical model for practice (Rabasca, 2000) with TADC and TADCS.

Thomas, a counseling-intern providing services in a community counseling center is faced with a request from a client who will be traveling out of his immediate residency area and wishes to continue weekly counseling appointments while away. Thomas is receiving supervision from Samantha, a seasoned counselor who has been in private practice for many years. Thomas asks Samantha, “May I counsel my client over the Internet?”

According to Internet World Stats, as of October 2010, 77.4% of the U.S. population utilizes Internet services, an increase of 146.3% since 2000. With the proliferation of technology as a source for communications, the aforementioned type of client request is likely to increase. Case in point, 30 years ago the idea of cell phones with video capability seemed like something out of a science fiction movie, yet, today they are a common reality in many areas of the world. In response to the growth in technology, the counseling profession strives diligently to establish guidelines and directives for professional counselors’ appropriate practices of TADC and TADC.

Currently, a litany of vocabulary is used to describe counseling services administered via technological means and numerous terms are used to label and describe specific activities conducted over the Internet for mental health purposes (Barak, Klein, & Proudfoot, 2009). Technology assisted distance counseling (TADC) and technology assisted distance counseling supervision (TADCS) are terms applied by McAdams and Wyatt (2010) to the use of electronic telecommunication technology in providing counseling and supervision, the same terms used in this paper.

The American Counseling Association (ACA), in its most current *ACA Code of Ethics*, (ACA, 2005) addresses best practice guidelines for counselors utilizing TADC and TADCS (see Section A.12. *Technology Applications*). The National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) Code of Ethics and the Standards for the Ethical Practice of WebCounseling (NBCC, 2005), likewise provides guidelines for counselors practicing TADC and TADCS. Additionally, best practice guidelines for TADC and TADCS have been established by the International Society for Mental Health Online (ISMHO, 2000), the American Psychological Association (APA, 2010), and the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT, 2007). While it is not required that professional counselors practice TADC or TADCS, The Center for Credentialing Education, an affiliate of the NBCC, offers Distance Credentialed Counselor (DCC) certification. The American Distance Counseling Association (ADCA, n.d.) was also established to aid and assist counselors practicing TADC and TADCS networking among colleagues.

Although counseling supervisors have a responsibility to familiarize themselves with existing standards of ethical practice in their respective fields (Vaccaro & Lambie, 2007) and although numerous organizational interests exist, state licensing boards have been inconsistent in addressing TADC and TADCS. In a study reviewing U.S. state boards of counseling, McAdams and Wyatt (2010) reported less than one-third of states have existing regulations in place governing TADC and a mere 13% of states have regulations in place governing TADCS. Barak, Klein, and Proudfoot (2009) stated, “Moreover, because of the lack of professional leadership and accepted governing approaches, terminology, professional standards, and methodologies, the area has been described as being inconsistent, diffuse, incoherent, and sometimes even perplexing” (pp. 4-5).

As the counseling profession struggles to provide consistent and clear guidelines for the provision of TADC and TADCS in the absence of clearly defined guidelines, it is the responsibility of counselors and supervisors to familiarize themselves with current practices of TADC and TADCS while weighing the risks of application against anticipated benefits (McAdams & Wyatt, 2010). Bernard's (1979, 1997) Discrimination Model of counselor supervision provides a creative and established framework with which a counseling supervisor can focus in order to clearly assess supervisee needs. In addition, the Discrimination Model provides a means through which some of the risks and benefits involved in TADC and TADCS can be assessed.

Discrimination Model

Bernard's (1979, 1997) Discrimination Model consists of three areas of focus in the development of counseling, teaching, and consulting skills. These three areas include intervention or process, conceptualization, and personalization. Lanning (1986) added a fourth category to the model, referred to as professional behavior. The role in which the supervisor functions is determined by the area of focus, as well as by the supervisee's personality and level of professional skill. Bradley, Gould, and Parr (2001) indicated that the atheoretical structure of the Discrimination Model is one of its major strengths, allowing all three areas of focus more equal recognition.

The first focus area of the Discrimination Model is intervention or process. In traditional settings, a counseling supervisor has the ability to directly observe a supervisee; however, with TADCS, supervision is not usually conducted in the office or face-to-face. This may be beneficial to supervisors wishing to expand their scope of practice by increasing service availability to counselor-interns facing logistical challenges, such as those excluded due to remote locations or limited by transportation challenges (Haberstroh, Parr, Bradley, Morgan-Fleming, & Gee, 2008; Haberstroh, Trepal, & Parr, 2006). TADC and TADCS can also make counseling more attainable and convenient to clients (Layne & Hohenshil, 2005; Ragusea & VandeCreek, 2003) as an extension or supplement to traditional counseling or as a gateway for those who might not otherwise seek counseling (Heinlen, Reynolds-Welfel, Richmond, & Rak, 2003). These challenges require supervisors to creatively apply models for evaluating and developing supervisee skills. This component is especially important as supervisees initially learn how to effectively use TADC.

Effective use of TADC requires an understanding of the restrictions of nonverbal cues (Alleman, 2002; Cook & Doyle, 2002; Rochlen, Zack & Speyer, 2004), of maintaining confidentiality (Alemi, et al., 2007; Ragusea & VandeCreek, 2003), and of specific legal and ethical responsibilities (Andert & Burleson, 2005) such as handling emergency situations and offering TADC over state jurisdiction lines. It is commonly recognized that information transmitted via the Internet may be intercepted by third parties. To minimize this risk, counselors and supervisors need to provide secure sites or encryption software prior to transmitting client information, as well as during counseling sessions. If supervisees are not made aware of these challenges in technology based communication, problems can quickly develop.

Applying Bernard's (1979, 1997) Discrimination Model to the case of Thomas, Samantha, Thomas's supervisor, might take on the role of teacher while Thomas learns

best practice with logistical challenges, TADC restrictions, safety, ambiguous legal and ethical issues, technical issues, and the proper use of Internet language. As Thomas masters the skills needed for TADC, Samantha might also take the opportunity to make use of e-mails between supervision meetings. Clingerman and Bernard (2004) discussed some possible advantages of using email as a supplement to traditional supervision, one of which is increasing the level of personalization experienced by counseling students. Email as a tool allows a supervisor not only to teach a supervisee, but also to model Internet etiquette through the type of communication that occurs while providing services through TADC.

Bernard's (1979, 1997) second focus is on conceptualization issues, which allows supervisees to apply theory-based strategies to client interventions (Koltz, 2008). The use of theory is essential in the TADC client-counselor relationship as developing client interventions may be even more challenging with TADC due to certain restrictions in its therapeutic applicability. Research provides some guidance regarding which clients are suitable for participating in TADC and which clients are not. Those found to be most appropriately served are those diagnosed with mood disorders, such as depression (Christensen, Griffiths, & Jorm, 2004) or anxiety (Rassau & Arco, 2003; Richards, Klein, & Carlbring, 2003); clients with social phobia (Parsons & Rizzo, 2008) or somatic disorders (Strom, Pettersson, & Andersson, 2004); people in remote locations or rural areas (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2007); and those with a medical or physical condition that renders it difficult or impossible to meet face-to-face (Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007). Those found to be inappropriately served by TADC include clients seeking counseling for sexual abuse or those involved in violent relationships; clients with psychiatric disorders that involve distortions of reality (Bloom, 1997); clients with suicidal or homicidal ideations (Stofle, 2001; ACA, 2005); clients with personality disorders; and clients in need of hospitalization (Stofle, 2001). By applying a theory-based approach, supervisees can justify their use of specific TADC methods, which can then assist in more accurate conceptualizations of client cases. In terms of TADCS, the conceptualization process allows a supervisor the opportunity to evaluate supervisees' conceptualizations of their client cases, while monitoring the appropriate use of TADC with specific clients.

The Discrimination Model also allows a supervisor an opportunity to assess supervisee skills and respond accordingly. For example, to assess Thomas's skill development, Samantha may respond as a teacher by reviewing online transcripts between Thomas and his client, evaluating Thomas's ability to properly conceptualize his client's case. If the counselor is more experienced, the supervisor may respond from the consultant role, focusing more on skill development.

Finally, when applying Bernard's (1979, 1997) Discrimination Model to TADCS, a supervisor is better able to assist a supervisee in understanding personalization issues as they occur (Koltz, 2008). Without having access to observations of body language, counselors practicing TADC must develop compensatory strategies for achieving effectiveness. In examining personalization issues, this may involve a supervisor moving into the role of counselor. In the case of Thomas, Samantha could take on the role of counselor while examining situations in which transference or counter transference may occur. In the consultant role, Samantha would be able to help Thomas develop his own

personal counseling style by applying theory, practice, and modeling (Byrne & Sias, 2010) throughout his internship experience.

Koltz (2008) described the Discrimination Model as taking advantage not only of the science of counseling, but also of the art of counseling. For example, supervisors wishing to implement greater creativity into their supervision can apply the model while suggesting supervisees maintain an online reflective journal. Journaling through emails allows supervisees an opportunity to process information, reflect on their development by reviewing past emails, and provides a means through which more frequent contact with supervisors can occur. Email journals also provide supervisees with a method through which to process their reactions while providing supervisors with a more in depth look at supervisees' counseling processes (Clingerman & Bernard, 2004), thereby allowing supervisors to help supervisees develop more advanced skills.

Conclusion

Counselors considering the practice of TADC and TADCS need to familiarize themselves with modalities and technologies commonly utilized. Bernard (1997) indicated that the Discrimination Model, being situation specific, is versatile enough to be used with a variety of modalities. Such modalities may include synchronous methods, which allows for communication to occur in real-time and are helpful in facilitating immediate and direct responses. Synchronous methods include telephone, Webcam, teleconferencing, video conferencing, chat-rooms, and instant messaging. Synchronous methods can enhance social interactions, feelings of presence, spontaneous disclosures, and the inclusion of specific cues (Trepal et al., 2007). By contrast, asynchronous methods have a time lapse or pause between responses (Trepal et al., 2007) and include emails, message board postings, or blog sites. Asynchronous methods provide the advantage of reflection and more purposeful responses (Davidson-Shivers, Tanner, & Muilenburg, 2000). For example, TADC or TADCS utilizing written scripts of counseling sessions that both a supervisor and supervisee can review, can serve as a learning tool for specifying critical learning points for a supervisee. A supervisee, in reviewing scripts, can reflect on a session for their continued growth and development.

As the use of TADC and TADCS increases and evolves, continued emphasis is placed on the training and supervision of counselors who desire to use technology in practice. This requires counselor supervisors to remain current on advances in the field, as well as possess an extensive knowledge base when training supervisees. Advances in TADC and TADCS **affect** not only state statutes and ethical guidelines, but also sustains a need for the application of supervision models for increasing supervisee proficiency with various technology-based modalities. Bernard's (1979, 1997) Discrimination Model is adaptive to technological advances in the field and may be used as a versatile model for supervision.

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