

Insecurely-attached Supervisees’ Perspectives of Attachment in Supervision

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Professional counselors are called upon by the American Counseling Association (2018) This narrative research study examines the experiences of counselors in training and how they engage with their supervisors through an attachment lens throughout their first practicum course. Three participants were identified as having an insecure attachment style. Each participant shared their experiences in supervision through semi-structured interviews and a photo elicitation journal writing project. Seven narrative categories emerged from the data which detailed how participants’ personal history and attachment style influenced their relationship with their supervisor. Implications for supervision include utilizing the emergent narrative categories to guide interventions to meet the attachment needs and influence the development of their supervisees.

Keywords: counseling supervision, attachment, practicum course

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A counseling supervisor serves as an attachment figure to a supervisee (Watkins & Riggs, 2012). Novice counselors face anxieties about beginning practice (Gibson et al., 2010; Howard et al., 2006; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 1993; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). They can experience performance anxiety, concerns about evaluation and gatekeeping, poor emotion regulation, unclear views of self and their role as a helper, and a need for positive mentors (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). As a result, their attachment behavioral system (ABS) can become activated by these perceived threats, leading them to use a primary attachment strategy: seeking proximity with their supervisor (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

According to Bartholomew (1990), individuals with insecure attachment have a negative Internal Working Model (IWM) of self, of others, or of both. Individuals with an insecure attachment style – preoccupied, dismissive, or fearful – may utilize more secondary attachment strategies. For instance, those with preoccupied styles are likely to use hyperactivating strategies (e.g., increased vigilance towards potential threats) and those with dismissive styles are likely to use deactivating strategies (e.g., removing one's attention from signs of threat; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). If insecure attachment patterns are unaddressed in the supervisory relationship, the supervisee's ABS may remain activated which inhibits their learning and development (Fitch et al., 2010) and interferes with supervision and counselor development (Watkins & Riggs, 2012). Attachment processes in supervision influence the supervisory alliance, and supervisee insecurity negatively impacts the emotional bond (Deal et al., 2011; Foster et al., 2007). Supervisee insecurity correlates with less disclosure to supervisors (Gunn & Pistole, 2012).

Significant research gaps remain about these processes. Authors (Fitch et al., 2010; Watkins & Riggs, 2012) called for further investigation of attachment processes in supervision and application of a conceptual framework to such research. Supervisors need more information about attachment to respond to supervisees' attachment cues (Fitch et al., 2010). No study has addressed supervisees' experiences of ABS activation, use of secondary attachment strategies, and their influence on the supervisory relationship. The current study utilized an ABS model (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016) applied to novice counselors with insecure attachment to provide novel insight about ABS activation and deactivation and use of secondary attachment strategies.

Literature Review

Attachment Behavioral System Model

Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) developed an ABS model which outlines three processes and two types of attachment strategies. The first process occurs upon ABS activation when one uses a primary attachment strategy to seek proximity to an attachment figure as a secure base (i.e., a guide in situations absent of threat) and a safe haven providing comfort and soothing when threat is present (Bowlby, 1988). The second process describes any positive outcomes of this strategy to effectively gain support from them. The third process involves secondary attachment strategies in continued pursuit of attention from an unresponsive or unavailable attachment figure. These strategies include unconscious schemas based on previous life experiences: anxious hyperactivation and avoidant deactivation.

An individual's Internal Working Model (IWM) of attachment are their beliefs about attachment figures' responsiveness and availability and beliefs about oneself as a person to whom attachment figures do or do not respond (Bartholomew, 1990). One's IWM can influence how they appraise threat, the availability of their attachment figure, and whether proximity seeking seems feasible, thus shaping the overall functioning of the ABS (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Repeated use of secondary attachment strategies can bias one's ABS activation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). For example, the use of hyperactivating strategies includes increased vigilance toward potential threats, tendency to evaluate a situation as threatening, and rumination about past threatening experiences – actual or perceived. Such supervisees can seek out guidance from supervisors or other professors at inopportune times, attempt to extend supervision time, or express being in crisis frequently (Newald-McCalip, 2001). In contrast to hyperactivating strategies, deactivating or avoidant strategies are attempts to distract from signs of threat or to otherwise suppress activation of the ABS. As a result of these strategies, individuals with avoidant attachment styles tend to detach themselves from threat and stop themselves from thinking of their desire for the comfort and support of an attachment figure. These supervisees can

avoid processing counseling sessions with peers, assert they are “right” in their approach, and be closed to feedback in supervision (Neswald-McCalip, 2001).

Attachment in Supervision

Mikulincer and Shaver’s (2016) model can be applied to supervision to explain attachment processes about: (1) how supervisees seek proximity to the supervisor when their ABS becomes activated; (2) positive outcomes of the primary attachment strategy to effectively gain support from the supervisor as an attachment figure; and (3) secondary attachment strategies utilized in continued pursuit of attention from an unresponsive or unavailable supervisor. Secondary attachment strategies are likely to be utilized in the absence of effective caregiving (Feeney & Collins, 2004) which includes: attentiveness, availability, sensitivity, and responsiveness to the individual’s attachment needs.

Attachment-Caregiving Model of Supervision

The ACMS describes a cycle of processes beginning with the supervisee’s activation of the ABS during times of threat or anxiety, which can be deactivated by the supervisor providing the supervisee with a safe haven to address these concerns. If the supervisee’s safe haven needs are met by the supervisor, his or her exploratory behavioral system becomes activated. If the supervisor provides a secure base to promote the supervisee’s exploration, learning outcomes are increased. The cycle typically repeats multiple times during a supervision relationship as the supervisee encounters new threats or anxieties that reactivate the ABS.

Fitch et al. (2010) noted several strengths of the ACMS model which can add to the literature on attachment in supervision. First, the authors stated the ACMS model provides supervisors with direct means of intervening in response to “establishing, maintaining, and repairing the relationship” (p. 30) including flexibility in responding to various attachment styles. The model describes a framework highlighting the dynamic nature of supervisees’ attachment needs from the supervisory relationship, which fluctuate between safe haven and secure base.

Insecure Attachment in Supervision

Insecure attachment styles among supervisees can be detrimental. Riggs and Bretz (2006) and White and Queener (2003) reported weak or non-significant associations between insecure attachment and negative supervisory alliances, but others found that this style negatively impacts the emotional bond (Bennett et al., 2008; Deal et al., 2011; Foster et al., 2007). Gunn and Pistole (2012) found that supervisee insecure attachment resulted in decreased supervisee disclosure, particularly when supervisors do not address relational elements of supervision. Supervisees' avoidant attachment has the most significant negative impact on the supervisory alliance (Bennett et al., 2008; Dickson et al. 2011; Riggs & Bretz, 2006).

Additional studies on the multi-faceted complexity of attachment in supervision could further explain supervisees' attachment processes within the supervision relationship which seems particularly important for supervisees with insecure attachment. Theoretical case studies illustrate the impact of supervisee insecure attachment (e.g. Neswald-McCalip, 2001; Watkins, 1995), but no empirical evidence based on supervisees' lived experience exists to support these. Watkins and Riggs (2012) argued that attachment processes in supervision reflect an activation of the supervisee's attachment system which can be triggered by context-specific factors in the supervision relationship or with clients, but no published research explores this. McKibben and Webber (2017) noted the dearth of research regarding specific supervisee experiences when their ABS is activated and the potential impacts that activation can have on the supervisory relationship. In the absence of this information, supervisors can unintentionally sacrifice the supervisory working alliance (Bennett et al., 2008; Dickson et al., 2011; Riggs & Bretz, 2006) and prompt supervisees to avoid disclosing critical information in supervision (Gunn & Pistole, 2012). Supervisors could benefit from knowing factors that can activate ABS to recognize supervisees' needs and facilitate ABS deactivation, potentially maintaining and repairing the supervisory alliance toward supervisees' growth and client welfare.

The ACMS (Fitch et al., 2010) offers a guide for supervisor interventions to facilitate a safe haven and secure base for supervisees. Limited empirical research addresses the particular challenges of insecurely-attached supervisees. The current study's

purpose was to examine these supervisees' attachment experiences, feelings, and thoughts during their first supervision relationship. Specifically, we explored narratives during practicum about how their ABS became activated and what strategies they used to manage this activation. The research question was: What stories do insecurely attached supervisees in practicum tell regarding their experiences of attachment-related behaviors, feelings, and ideations within their first supervision relationship?

Methodology

A qualitative, specifically narrative, approach aligns with the research questions and purpose. Narrative research focuses on "experiences as expressed in lived and told stories" (Creswell, 2013, p. 70) and is useful for capturing the detailed life experiences of a small group of individuals (Riessman, 2008). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated that events occur in a temporal fashion that contain a past, present, and implied future. An individual's attachment style is a reflection of their past, which can influence how they navigate their relationship with their present supervisor, and how they anticipate future supervision.

Philosophical and Theoretical Frameworks

In conjunction with narratology, constructivist philosophy and Mikulincer and Shaver's (2016) theoretical framework guided the researcher's role, methods supporting trustworthiness, as well as sampling, data collection, and analysis. Constructivist philosophy involves ideas about the social world that are constructed within the human mind (Heppner et al., 2008). This philosophy supports an examination of supervisees' attachment experiences earlier in life and those within the supervision relationship including their ABS activation and response. Mikulincer and Shaver's (2016) ABS model focuses on events in one's current context and mental representations as meaning created by an individual related to attachment styles, schemas, and strategies. Applying this model as the study's theoretical framework allowed deep examination of the participants'

constructions of reality and to uncover hidden meanings and intentions related to their experiences in supervision from an attachment perspective.

Role of the Researcher

“Narrative inquirers need to reconstruct their own narrative of inquiry histories and to be alert to possible tensions between those narrative histories and the narrative research they undertake” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 46). The first author served as project lead, data collector, and data analyst. I wrote an extended autobiographical narrative with a temporal chronology as it relates to the study’s phenomena, which is summarized here. Childhood experiences influenced me to develop a dismissive general attachment style: I was inwardly focused and self-reliant through emerging adulthood when I pursued a mental health career. When beginning clinical work, I utilized deactivating strategies as I distanced myself from discussions about threat. These supervision experiences may have influenced how I interacted with participants and interpreted their experiences. To address potential biases, an external auditor independently reviewed data sources to check for threats to credibility. They reviewed my researcher journal, interview transcripts, journal entries, interim texts of codes and themes, and all member checks to make sure data was well analyzed and represented in the procedures.

The roles of the other authors varied. The third author served as an auditor. The criteria for the auditor included: participation in a doctoral program in counselor education and supervision, having taken a course in qualitative research, and having received training in supervision practices. Beyond writing portions of the manuscript, the most significant contributions of the second and fourth authors focused on feedback for design and writing.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). For reflexivity, I kept a researcher journal about my own experiences with the participants and reactions to their interviews to provide a rationale for study decisions (Houghton, et al., 2013). My journal housed the audit trail “to record the process of the

research as it is being undertaken” (Merriam, 2009, p. 223) which the auditor used to examine how my interpretations connected to the data (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Triangulation, or the use of “multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251), involved photo elicitation, multiple interviews, and written responses. Member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) occurred prior to and after the second interviews so that participants could verify the description of the developing supervisory relationship and aspects of practicum they considered a psychological threat and to verify the researcher-developed narrative, ensuring data interpretation reflected participants’ experiences. Finally, we use participant quotes as part of a “rich, thick description” about the setting, participants, and findings (Merriam, 2009, p. 227).

Participants

The sample resulted from two rounds of sampling and targeted recruitment. Criterion-based sampling targeted participants to provide a representative sample: students currently enrolled in a master’s in counseling program, enrollment in CACREP-accredited counseling programs, beginning their first practicum, and in an on-campus clinic with live supervision. The latter criterion provided consistency across participants in terms of setting and supervision mode so that the relationship and other factors of interest could remain the focus. Secondary sampling involved completion of the Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) to narrow the sample by attachment style.

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, recruitment involved emails to fifteen practicum instructors at five CACREP-accredited programs that were then forwarded to practicum students. Programs’ were located within driving distance to allow the researcher to conduct in-person interviews. The email included an informed consent document and a link to the RSQ. Nine individuals completed the consent and RSQ, from which three represented insecure attachment styles: preoccupied, dismissive, and fearful. Table 1 shows RSQ scores and demographic information. Two participants participated in

a 16-week practicum and the other completed the course in a condensed format over four weekends throughout the semester.

Table 1.

Participant demographics, RSQ dimension averages, and assigned attachment styles

	Age	Gender	Race	Sec.	Preocc.	Dismiss.	Fear.	Style
Jennifer*	30	F	Caucasian	3.8	3.8	3	2.3	Preoccupied
Miranda**	32	F	Caucasian	3	3	3.4	3.5	Fearful
Ellen*	27	F	Caucasian	3.4	2	3.8	3.8	Dismissing

Note. F = female; Sec. = Secure; Preocc. = Preoccupied; Dismiss. = Dismissing; Fear. = Fearful.

*16-week course.

**4-weekend course.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection included two in-person, semi-structured, 60- to 90-minute interviews and two member checks with each participant. The first interview occurred in the first half of the semester and the second in the last half of the semester to allow data to emerge about participant's unique relationship with their supervisor over time. The first interview contained 16 questions about how they initially experienced attachment constructs in their supervision relationship, such as "Tell me a story about how you interact with your supervisor." and "During times of threat, how do you believe your supervisor should respond to you?" Participants were informed of the concept of threat as defined by Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) to include any internal or external event that produces psychological distress which may activate their ABS.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted that narrative data analysis involves asking questions related to the social significance of data: a complex process of "reading and rereading field texts in order to construct a chronicled or summarized account of what is contained within different sets of field texts" (p. 131). To "narratively code" (p. 131), I analyzed interview data using open and axial coding with a focus on characters, the context of where events occurred, interconnected storylines, emerging tensions, and continuities and discontinuities. Open coding involved identification of major themes. Axial coding

involved sorting and often consolidating previous categories into broader units of a general concept.

One week before the second interview, participants completed the first member check by reviewing preliminary narrative concepts from first interviews and providing any clarification. The second interview occurred towards the end of the-semester and contained 12 questions focused on a critical incident or threatening event that occurred during their semester and how they approached supervision on what transpired such as “What has been the biggest threat you have experienced as you make this transition?”, “Tell me more about your emotional reaction to this threat.”, and “How did you attempt to engage with your supervisor related to this threat?”

The interview concluded with photo elicitation (Harper, 2002) to induce different elements of consciousness of the participant than would not be evoked by words alone. This was intended to confirm initial findings and/or elicit any new data. Participants viewed a set of 28 pictures, chosen by the primary researcher to represent people expressing emotions while alone in the photo or with another person (e.g. distance or closeness). Participants selected the photo(s) that represented their relationship with their supervisor, then left the interview with the photo and completed a written response about how it represented the relationship. The second interviews and photo elicitation responses added more dimension, informing analysis and resulting in concepts and quotes for a three-dimensional narrative represented as a journal written from each participant’s point of view. Participants received these interim texts for the final member check to further elaborate and negotiate their content as co-narrators.

Findings

Narrative findings include seven concepts that formed a *narrative arc*, or storyline, which emerged across participants’ attachment experiences in supervision. These concepts emerged from analysis based on Mikulincer and Shaver’s (2016) model of adult attachment. The seven concepts include: supervisee’s personal history, their internal working model, experience of a threatening event, use of secondary attachment strategies, the supervisee’s perception of the supervisor’s response to the threat, deactivation of the ABS, and relational

transformation. Next, we discuss each concept and provide key quotes to substantiate each concept.

Supervisee's Personal History

Participants acknowledged the impact of their personal history prior to practicum on their relationship with their supervisors. The significance of certain historical factors was unique to each participant. Their personal histories influenced how they entered practicum, how they engaged with their supervisor, and how their ABS became activated.

Ellen discussed a traumatic event from her life that was similar to one of her practicum clients' presenting concerns. She described "spending so many years keeping this a secret" and recognizing that she will "explode if I don't tell him [supervisor]. It's going to be a problem if I don't say something." Jennifer discussed the impact of a role play in a previous class. She had played the part of the counselor, and her peer in the client role said, "I wish you had a couch in here because I'd rather just sit down and take a nap than have this session with you." This event became significant in her supervisory relationship when her supervisor asserted that her client was treating her the same way the peer in the role play had. Miranda described a previous relationship with her undergraduate advisor who "refused to write any letters for grad schools just because I didn't drink the Kool-Aid, didn't join the cult of his research team in the same way that others did." This incident contributed to her distrust in authority figures and a tendency to withhold information, fearing she would be judged.

Internal Working Models (IWM) of Self and Others

Participants' IWM of self included self-doubt and attempts to achieve perfection. Participants also highlighted their IWM of others, namely supervisors. At the onset of practicum she reported, "I didn't have needs. I needed nothing." Her IWM of others included significant distrust and hesitancy: "I feel like why do you deserve to know me? You should earn it and so, I think that even with instructors it's like I am going to test you first."

Jennifer's IWM of self involved beliefs of inadequacy, including self-doubt about becoming a counselor. She described starting practicum facing barriers of "my own self-image." She noted, "I doubt my abilities just because I am so critical of myself." Her IWM of others included her supervisor, whose direct communication style she described as challenging for her:

I would not go to her for comfort because I know that it's going to be like, 'You'll be fine, get over it, wipe your tears and move on.' And maybe that's not what I need in the moment if I'm like, extremely emotionally distraught.

Miranda's IWM also involved self-doubt. She worried, "Are they going to figure out of that I'm just crazy and shouldn't be here?" Her IWM of others included a belief that others "make judgments of people without really knowing anything about them." She imagined feeling hurt if her supervisor responded in that way to her revealing her needs:

if it is somebody that has power over me for them to be judging me or deciding that I am not good enough or unfit to or whatever. If you don't know me, then don't assume that you do, and people do that.

Threatening Event

All participants experienced at least one perceived threat during practicum that acted as the catalyst for ABS activation. Ellen's perceived threat occurred during her first client intake when she discovered that she and her client had experienced a similar traumatic event. Ellen had never disclosed this past trauma to anyone but told her supervisor immediately despite her typical desire to keep others at a distance so as to avoid revealing her true nature. She stated: "To go to a very established and well-known professor and say I was f-ed up like that girl in there [the client] and I need you to tell me whether that's okay or not. ...it was scary."

Jennifer's perceived threat was receiving supervisor feedback that she was too nice and struggled to confront clients. The threat reached its peak when he compared an incident from a previous class to her performance in practicum. She described her response: "My biggest fear is not being an effective counselor. She was essentially saying, 'You're not

being an effective counselor.’ It really hit me and it hurt. You can’t cut me any deeper than that.”

Miranda saw threat as ever-present, constantly fearing judgement from others. She described herself as anxious, very self-critical, and fearful that others might see this and conclude that she was mentally unfit to become a counselor. She approached supervision as: “what people think of me where they are in place of power where they can make or break [me].”

Secondary Attachment Strategies

Participants responded to threats with attachment strategies based on their insecure attachment style and IWM. All three used deactivating strategies to distance themselves from their supervisor. Ellen attempted distance until her supervisor earned her trust. However, once she recognized her client had a presenting concern related to her own past, she made a conscious decision to seek her supervisor. She stated, “Immediately upon meeting the client the very first session, I was like thinking to myself... ‘It’s going to be a problem if I don’t say something.’” After the disclosure she altered her approach and relied more on hyperactivating strategies as she felt “lost” with her client and their supervision was focused on counseling her. This pattern resulted in her supervisor suggesting she receive her own counseling.

Jennifer utilized deactivating strategies in response to her supervisor’s feedback that she should confront her client: “I was defensive and I was mad and I didn’t address that. She gave me the space for it and I didn’t address it.” Jennifer did not tell her supervisor how she felt, but instead sought her own personal counselor. Miranda said as little as possible in meetings with her supervisor since she believed she did not have needs appropriate for supervision and that she would be judged if she exposed what she was experiencing. She intentionally suppressed her emotional reactions to keep them hidden from her supervisor, stating, “I’ll try to just kind of lock it outside and not get too deep into things because they’re not my counselor.”

Supervisee’s Perception of the Supervisor’s Response to the Threat

The participants' narratives highlighted their perceptions about how supervisors responded to their attachment strategies. Even if a supervisor appeared to provide effective caregiving (Feeney & Collins, 2004), it did not always match supervisee expectations. Ellen described her perceptions of her supervisor after her disclosure about her past trauma:

[he was] very, very understanding and extremely appreciative that I told him. He told me, 'You didn't have to disclose that to me and I'm so proud of you for doing that and that must have been very scary and uncomfortable.' After that I felt just immense relief.

Jennifer did not like how her supervisor provided feedback and was hesitant to seek her support: "I don't know if she would have been able to do it in the way that I needed her to, because of her directness and my sensitivity, emotionally." Miranda perceived her supervisor as attentive to her needs, but did not expose parts of herself that she believed are incongruent with being a counselor. As a result, their interactions focused on issues that felt safer to her: topics she viewed as neutral "like just school and she's a cat person" as well as the supervisor's marriage.

Deactivation of the Attachment Behavioral System

Two supervisees perceived effective caregiving strategies from their supervisor or another figure and subsequent ABS deactivation. However, one participant did not receive effective caregiving and remained activated. Ellen experienced recurring deactivation and re-activation of her ABS as she grappled with her own trauma. Ellen perceived her supervisor as providing all elements of effective caregiving throughout the semester and ultimately, her ABS was deactivated when she processed with her supervisor the desire to self-disclose her trauma with the client: "His response was, 'So how is it going to happen?'" Ellen appreciated his support of the disclosure and felt "relief because this is a decision that was hanging over my head for ten weeks and now the decision is made." Jennifer's story revealed that her ABS deactivated as a result of her work with her counselor. After the rupture in the supervisory relationship, she returned to her next supervision session stating,

I didn't want to re-traumatize myself. I'm ready for this week, but I'm not ready to bring that up again because I'm still working on it. I know I'm not going to talk to my counselor one time and this problem is going to be fixed.

In other words, Jennifer perceived her supervisor as being attentive, available, and responsive to her attachment needs but that sensitivity was lacking in terms of how the feedback was delivered.

Due to her belief of not having needs, Miranda engaged with her supervisor throughout the semester in a manner that focused on protecting herself since she feared she would reveal something about herself that would result in dismissal from the program. At the end of the semester she continued to express high levels of self-doubt stating, "I just have to keep trying to build up that confidence that I know what I am doing, listening to my instinct, listening to what is going on in there and trying not to question myself as much as I have."

Relational Transformation

All participants struggled to reconcile beliefs from IWM of self and others within counseling and supervisory context. The two participants who experienced ABS deactivation explored parts of their counseling identity that previously had been a source of uncertainty for them and demonstrated some integration into a more cohesive identity. Over the course of the semester, Ellen began to view herself and her role as a counselor differently. She stated:

My perception of myself has changed in that, in recognizing that I am the tool, that the only reason counseling works is because it's two human beings in a room. It has made me feel like I have the right to request help or to ask for what I need.

Jennifer's work with her counselor increased her personal and counselor self-efficacy to "respond to future situations better and with an open mind." She recognized that her response to her supervisor's feedback was not "dealing with it [the supervisor's feedback] in the healthiest way." At the end of the semester, Jennifer briefly discussed the rupture with her supervisor by telling her, "I was really glad that you did [provide the

feedback] because I wasn't seeing that and it's something that I'm apparently still struggling with. I need to work through that.”

In contrast, Miranda continued to grapple with her self-esteem, confidence, and mental health throughout the semester. She questioned messages from her supervisor: “[I’ve] caught myself at times with the positive things that she would say about me and I’d be thinking, ‘Does she say that to everybody or is she just saying that to make me feel better? Does she really mean it?’” These questions remained unresolved at the semester’s end.

Discussion

The purpose of this narrative research study was to examine the lived attachment experiences of insecurely-attached counseling supervisees who are engaging in their first supervision relationship. The specific focus was their attachment-related experiences, feelings, and ideations. Ideal supervision meets supervisees’ needs by providing them with a secure base to explore in times absent of threat and safe haven that provides comfort when encountering threatening situations (Neswald-McCalip, 2001; Pistole & Watkins, 1995). When insecure attachment patterns emerge in a supervisee, activation of their ABS can influence the supervision relationship and the supervisee’s counselor development (Fitch, et al., 2010). The seven concepts detailed above shaped the narratives of each insecurely-attached supervisee. The findings support attachment literature by providing empirical data to support theoretical suppositions, and findings extend this literature to applications in counseling supervision.

Findings support and extend application of attachment concepts to supervision. Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) argued that activation of one’s ABS can result from psychological threats and that activation depends on the subjective appraisal of threat, not only the occurrence of actual threat. Activation of participants’ ABS resulted from perceived threats based on personal history as it informed their internal working models of self and others. All participants’ narratives provide detailed descriptions of factors that contributed to ABS activation and dynamics that produced either deactivation or continued activation.

Findings served to integrate an attachment model with supervision research about novice counselors (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 1992; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Many counselor factors (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003) contributed to ABS activation, including poor emotion regulation (Ellen and Miranda), performance anxiety (Jennifer), evaluation and gatekeeping (Miranda), and lack of professional identity in terms of their view of self and helper role (all participants). Supervisee attachment anxiety often concerned fears that their supervisor would question their fitness for the profession if they revealed their personal history to their supervisor.

The narratives align with previous findings that supervisee insecurity can negatively impact the working alliance, particularly the emotional bond (Bennett et al., 2008; Renfro-Michel & Sheperis, 2009) and predict decreased disclosure (Gunn & Pistole, 2012; Ladany et al., 1996). Jennifer did not trust her supervisor to address the threat in a sensitive manner. She engaged in deactivating strategies (e.g., deter attention away from threats) with her supervisor as a result of a relationship rupture. Miranda's fears of being discovered as mentally unstable and instigating gatekeeping actions (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003) were her motivation for withholding information from her supervisor. In contrast, Ellen experienced as her supervisor attended to her attachment needs through effective caregiving (Feeney & Collins, 2004). This resulted in ABS deactivation (Fitch et al., 2010). Their emotional bond improved and she was able to focus on exploratory behavior such as the use of self-disclosure in session.

Implications for Supervision

The results of this study expand on the Attachment-Caregiving Model of Supervision (Fitch et al., 2010) and inform supervision. Supervisors need recommendations for how to address the attachment concerns of insecurely-attached supervisees in the supervisee's first practicum. We provide three recommendations: 1) self-disclosure, 2) initial and mid-point interpersonal reflection, and 3) attachment-informed interventions targeted to caregiving.

The first implication for supervising insecurely-attached supervisees involves supervisor self-disclosure. Supervisee's consistently noted that ABS activation related to

fears their supervisor would view them as unfit for the profession which indicates that supervisor self-disclosure at the onset of the relationship can begin to normalize and validate supervisee's experiences. This self-disclosure process can focus on the supervisor's own attachment style, their experience of psychological threat as a novice counselor, and how this influenced their own relationship with their initial supervisor. Furthermore, supervisors can highlight the integration of their personal and professional selves throughout their career. Ideally, this can lead more open discussion about the supervisee's experiences as they begin the practicum course and how they anticipate the supervisory relationship from an attachment lens.

The second implication for supervising insecurely-attached supervisees concerns engaging in both an initial and a mid-point interpersonal reflection process between the supervisor and supervisee. Supervisors could utilize a photo elicitation intervention similar to the one detailed in this study to prompt supervisees to assess and evaluate their perceptions of the supervisory relationship. The intervention can be utilized again at the mid-point of the semester and lead a discussion that focuses on the attachment and relational aspects of the relationship and how they may have changed throughout the process. Findings of this study indicate that each supervisee was managing different perceived threats at various points in the practicum and supervisors were not always aware of the perceived threat or it wasn't explicitly being discussed. Therefore, supervisors can return to the attachment and relational elements of the relationship throughout the semester to facilitate supervisee disclosure about their attachment needs.

The final implication for supervising insecurely-attached supervisees involves the supervisors use of attachment-informed interventions targeted to caregiving. As detailed in the ACMS (Fitch, et al., 2010), effective caregiving coincides with the provision of a safe haven when supervisees are facing threat or anxiety. In other words, supervisees should employ effective caregiving (Feeney & Collins, 2004) through attentiveness, availability, sensitivity, and responsiveness to the supervisee's attachment needs.

Limitations and Future Research

The study's limitations concern methodology and provide opportunities for future research. The study had variety in practicum timelines and homogeneity in participant demographics. One participant completed a condensed practicum instead of the others' 16-week practicum format; thus, interviews occurred at differing junctures. Future researchers could ensure participants are completing the study with similar timelines. All participants identified as White and female. Sampling and recruitment in future studies can target more diverse samples which may yield different results. Research with more advanced supervisees could provide detail on latter stages of the ACMS model (Fitch et al., 2010). Future studies could offer examination of any connection between supervisees' specific attachment style related to the anxiety that novice counselors experience (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Supervision-specific attachment style may have more predictive value of supervisory outcomes (Bennett & Saks, 2006; Bennett et al., 2008). Studies have shown a supervisor's secure attachment (Riggs & Bretz, 2006; White & Queener, 2003) can have a positive influence on the supervisory working alliance. Therefore, further assessment of supervisors' attachment styles may reveal relationships with their caregiving behavior, the supervisory working alliance, and/or supervisory outcomes.

This narrative exploration of three insecurely-attached counseling practicum students served to uncover how unique contextual factors influenced their attachment relationships with supervisors. The factors that shaped participants' narratives centered on their personal histories, including their general attachment styles, and their internal working models of themselves and their supervisors. The factors also guided how the students endeavored to fulfill attachment needs through their supervisors.

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