
Seasons of Supervision: Reflections on Three Decades of Supervision in Counsellor Education

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ABSTRACT

This article documents a thematic retrospective of counsellor supervision from two of Canada's most experienced counsellor educators/supervisors, based at the University of Alberta. Guided by prominent motifs in the counselling literature, the third author invited his colleagues to reflect in an interview on themes and issues they faced during their extensive experience supervising counsellors in university-based counsellor education programs. The article concludes with speculations about future directions in counsellor supervision and in their own practices.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit une rétrospective thématique de la supervision des conseillers faite par deux des formateurs-superviseurs les plus expérimentés au Canada, et qui sont basés à l'Université de l'Alberta. Guidé par des motifs importants dans la littérature du counseling, le troisième auteur a invité ses collègues à discuter en entrevue des thèmes et enjeux auxquels ils ont été confrontés au cours de leur longue carrière de conseillers-superviseurs dans des programmes universitaires de formation des conseillers. En conclusion, les auteurs spéculent sur l'orientation future de cette supervision et sur celle que pourrait prendre leurs propres pratiques.

The institutionalized ritual of the "talking cure" was born some time near the outset of the 20th century, but several more decades passed before the emerging counselling discipline began to attend in earnest to the training of practitioners. In the 1960s, counsellor education programs proliferated in universities, colleges, and professional schools across North America, and literature devoted to counsellor supervision expanded significantly.

A review of that literature over the past three decades reveals a number of motifs that mirror developments both within the field and in the social context. Like our ideas about what constitutes the "self" or what promotes "therapeutic change," our conceptions of the task of counsellor supervision have evolved substantially in the past 30 years. In this article, we anchor that evolving story in the professional experience of two of Canada's distinguished counsellor educators/supervisors.

For more than 30 years, Ronna Jevne and Don Sawatzky have taught and supervised several hundred counselling practitioners who now counsel clients, manage staff, and teach students in countless contexts across Canada and abroad. Their shared interest in counsellor supervision and education has led to co-authored research publications and international presentations on the topic. Jevne is a professor emeritus of counselling/educational psychology at the University of Alberta, as well as a founding member and program director of the Hope Foundation of Alberta. She has authored eight books and over 40 professional articles, and is well known for her research into the role of hope in the counselling process. Sawatzky is a professor emeritus at the University of Alberta and was on the faculty there from 1969 to 1997, where he taught in the Department of Educational Psychology and chaired the Counselling and School Psychology Area for roughly a decade. He continues to teach and to maintain a private practice and is an Approved Supervisor with the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.

For three decades, Jevne and Sawatzky have participated as supervisors in widely divergent forms of supervision, from cathartic encounter groups and introspective self-analyses to strategic family interventions and postmodern reflecting teams. For this article, Paré first interviewed Jevne and Sawatzky, after which the text of the transcribed interview was reworked by all three authors as the dialogue continued. To situate supervision historically, we have chosen to organize our discussion in 10-year blocks, while recognizing that themes and issues in supervision are not discrete packages, having no clear starting or ending points. Nevertheless, these reflections provide a glimpse into the social, practical, and theoretical preoccupations of two prominent counsellor supervisors at the University of Alberta over the past three decades.

THE 1970S: HUMANISTIC ENCOUNTERS

David: In the 1970s, the long shadows of Carl Rogers (1961) and Abraham Maslow (1970a, 1970b) lay across the field of counselling. According to the humanistic vision they espoused, persons are un-mined veins of potential and growth, and counselling is primarily concerned with releasing this capacity through authenticity, relationship, and the expression of empathy (cf. Payne & Gralinski, 1969; Tausch, 1978; Tirnauer, 1971). How did these ideas figure in your supervision with counsellors in training?

Don: Rogers' ideas took a couple of different directions at that time. On the one hand, they were converted into what might almost be called "protocols" for counselling. The work of Carkhuff (1969) and Truax (1970) embodied this direction, and called for developing "accurate empathy" and so on. This involved a lot of stopping of tapes and analyzing specific moments. To some degree, it was a sort of behaviourist take on humanistic ideas. There was little attention placed on outcome: process was all.

Ronna: But Rogers' phenomenological view—the experiential and personal growth emphasis—was also very much alive at that time. Encounter groups were seen as a vehicle for “getting real,” and there was a lot of emphasis on confrontation and emotional expression. I spent four days in a room with 100 people; as you can imagine, this was a very intense experience and one focused on personal processing rather than skill development. These sorts of events tended to happen off-campus. In part, I think it was about rebelling against the micro-focus that was prominent in academia.

David: Why do you think there was a split between these two centres of activity?

Don: At that time, the intensely personal emphasis of the off-campus gatherings was seen as inappropriate for academia, which was invested in the notion of the counsellor as scientist-practitioner. The off-campus activities reflected some wider influences themselves—the social upheaval, the questioning and experimenting that was going on in the 1970s. There was a lot of euphoria that came with those gatherings, but in retrospect, I think it was sometimes harmful and destructive of relationships as well.

THE 1980S: SAGES, STAGES, AND SYSTEMS

David: The 1980s saw a proliferation of literature on supervision (cf. Liddle, Breunlin, & Schwartz, 1988; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987; Wise & Lowery, 1989; Worthington, 1987), and group supervision in particular became a widespread approach, especially in the context of family therapy training (cf. Hillerbrand, 1989; Hoese, 1988; Holloway & Johnson, 1985; Tucker & Liddle, 1978). What was your experience with group supervision?

Don: With my background in family therapy and systemic approaches, group supervision processes were a natural development. In my courses, students would cluster behind a one-way mirror and view live sessions with families. It's a very dynamic way to conduct supervision, though I've transformed my approach over the years. The emphasis at that time was very instrumental: identify patterns and sequences, and interrupt them—sometimes by telephoning the room with specific directives for counsellors in session (cf. Wright, 1986).

Ronna: It was the era of the guru: people like Salvador Minuchin, Jay Haley, Milton Erickson. Students tried to emulate these “stars,” and supervisors tended to adopt expert stances. I don't think this contributed to supervisees' sense of self-efficacy. If someone is the expert, someone else must be the underling.

Don: I shared that concern with Ronna. At that time, I often did live practice demonstrations for students. I became uncomfortable with that, though—I felt I wasn't encouraging them to get in touch with their own expertise. I was also concerned then about some of the approaches to family therapy supervision that I was being introduced to. I did some training in the early '80s at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California, where many of the new supervision practices originated. It was an exciting time, and certainly some good work was being done. But it was also a time of backlash against what might be called the

“softer” work of Virginia Satir, one of family therapy’s pioneers. I can remember being the leader of a team behind the glass and going into the consulting room to intervene in a session and frankly being embarrassed about the tone we were setting. Some of what we were doing was simply disrespectful of both clients and students. I had particular concerns about the manipulative tone of some of the discussions about clients behind the mirror. I also had a sense I was going out on a limb when I shared my concerns.

Ronna: There was a certain tyranny to the era. In the ’70s, there was the pressure to fill in the sentence stems (“You feel X because Y”), and in the ’80s the new tyranny was to make the magical intervention that “unstuck” the system. This, to me, raised ethical questions, and ethics were not being talked about much at that time in terms of supervision. Therapy sessions were also being used as teaching seminars, and this raises a number of ethical questions—about both the clients and the counsellors. Reflective practice wasn’t a central concern, especially early in the ’80s.

David: What literature were you drawing on then in your supervision practice?

Don: I remember working with a couple of books at that time: Liddle et al.’s *The Handbook of Family Therapy Training and Supervision* (1988) and Stoltenberg and Delworth’s *Supervising Counselors and Therapists* (1987). The Stoltenberg book placed an emphasis on matching supervisors with supervisees in terms of the level of complexity with which they engaged the work. At the University of Alberta, we worked with that idea by assigning doctoral students to play a role in the supervision of master’s students.

David: Developmental theories of supervision became prominent around that time. Stoltenberg (1981) introduced his influential Counselor Complexity Model and suggested counsellors go through four stages in their development. Loganbill and her colleagues (Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982) followed up with their own supervision model also built on developmental stage theory. Were these ideas useful to you at that time?

Ronna: I became quite interested in that literature—it focused on the person of the therapist, and I had always felt that was a key issue. It tended to get us thinking in terms of where our students were in the unfolding of their own work.

Don: We found that the counsellors in our program tended to follow a less than linear path in the storying of their professional development. We later added to the literature (Sawatzky, Jevne, & Clark, 1994) with our own research that characterized counsellor development more in terms of a helix or spiral, with forward *and* backward motion as they progressed through their training.

David: Would you describe that as your “model” of supervision? Supervision models were all the rage; did you see yourself as working from a particular model?

Ronna: Not really: more like some orienting ideas. I think I discovered that my supervision style and focus was influenced by my own clinical background. I suspect this is largely true of supervisors. I came into academia after five years in a hospital setting, working with people who were dealing with serious illness. I brought a case management focus—managing the illness, managing other issues

that come up—and I think that reflected where I'd been. I think that's true for you, too, Don, don't you?

Don: Very much so. Much of my work had been in the area of family therapy, and I drew heavily on systemic ideas, and group supervision practices derived from family therapy traditions, in working with students.

David: What guidelines for supervision practice were you operating from at that time? How did you chart your way forward?

Ronna: There was still not much in the way of formalized acknowledgement of the role of the supervisor until late in the 1980s. The Canadian Counselling Association first introduced guidelines in 1989 for what was then called Counsellor Preparation—now they're in the Code of Ethics as Counsellor Education, Training, and Supervision (Canadian Counselling Association, 2004). We evolved our approach by responding to our students' needs and observing their development. I became disenchanted with supervisor-centred practice that was largely focused on critique. There was nothing in the literature on finding the proper balance between being supportive versus being specific about other directions. Around that time, Don and I started asking students to supply critical incidents (Woolsey, 1986), which helped us to monitor where they were at in their practice.

Don: The critical incidents provided glimpses into how students were thinking about their work. We invited them to articulate their assumptions and values—this was a change from our earlier practice of asking counsellors for their “theory of counselling,” which we began to discover was really premature. It was more helpful to invite students to break down their beliefs, and the critical incidents provided a chance to examine them.

THE 1990S: POWER, CULTURE, AND DIVERSITY

David: It sounds as though the 1980s were a time of big changes in your own supervision practices, and in the field's orientation to supervision. The '90s brought in a new range of concerns related to, among other things, gender and culture (cf. Crespi, 1995; Nelson & Holloway, 1990; Taylor, 1994). What distinguished the 1990s for you?

Ronna: I think feminism and feminist concerns gained credibility in the '90s in academia, a full decade later than in the world of practice. And there were various implications for counsellor education and supervision.

Don: Gender became a factor at all levels—in terms of the staffing of our counsellor education programs, the demographics of our student bodies, and also in terms of increased attention to gender issues in supervision and counselling. In the 1970s, our students had been mostly male. In the '80s, it was split more or less evenly between males and females. In the '90s, women formed the overwhelming majority of our student population, and that trend continues today.

Ronna: Coming into the 1990s, we had one tenure-track female on staff in a large department at the University of Alberta, while more than half of our students

were female. All the talk about “matching” supervisors and supervisees sounded pretty empty given those disparities. That began to change in the ’90s. We started offering courses on gender, psychology of women, that sort of thing. A few years earlier, these wouldn’t have flown. There was also more awareness of exploitation: a wariness about meeting students of the opposite gender behind closed office doors or over lunch.

David: Social Constructionist thinking became prominent in the 1990s through the writing of people like Kenneth Gergen (1991), Jerome Bruner (1990), Michael White and David Epston (1990), Harlene Anderson and Harry Goolishian (1988), among many others. How did that show up in supervision practices?

Don: Before answering your question, let me suggest that another feminist influence was the notion of empowerment. The word has become a little travel-weary now, but it was a radical idea in the early ’90s. The focus of supervision shifted away from the sort of technically oriented approaches to practice. There was more attention paid to supervisees’ uniqueness and their individual learning styles. An approach that was first introduced to family therapy by Tom Andersen (1987), reflecting teams, was a useful addition to live supervision sessions. This was a movement away from the individualistic phenomenological emphasis—getting to the essence of clients’ (or supervisees’) experience. Social Constructionism promoted more of an interactive view, and paid attention to the input from both supervisor *and* supervisee.

Ronna: Part of that shift was also in the way we viewed supervisees: a movement away from a pathology emphasis that has a longstanding tradition in psychological counselling. We became less interested in identifying counsellor weaknesses or deficits, and more interested in bringing forward strengths, identifying resources, and so on.

David: I wonder if this meant making more space for the supervisee’s point of view, making fewer explicit suggestions, perhaps becoming less directive?

Don: I don’t find the dichotomy of directive/nondirective useful. I think it was more about a movement toward co-construction—a more collaborative orientation.

Ronna: If the 1980s were about change, the ’90s were about choice. There was less emphasis on devising the “right” strategy for making things happen in the session and more on developing your personal style of practice and of supervision. I came to honour my own tacit knowledge at that time, and found that my values fit better with what was going on around me. This was affirming. At that time we began to emphasize reflective practice. We borrowed from Donald Schön’s (1987) ideas and invited supervisees to really explore what they were up to.

David: Cultural and diversity issues as they relate to supervision came to the fore in the 1990s and are now commonly addressed in the literature (Faubert and Locke, 2003; Page, 2003). The Canadian Counselling Association introduced guidelines around stereotyping and discrimination in its revision of the Code of Ethics in 1989 (Canadian Counselling Association, 2004), which have since been

expanded to more explicitly address cultural differences. Multicultural counselling blossomed in the work of Paul Pedersen and Derald Wing Sue in particular (Pedersen, 1997; Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner, & Trimble, 1989; Sue, Ivey, & Pedersen, 1996; Sue & Sue, 1990). Some now call the multicultural perspective a “fourth force” (Pedersen, 1991) in counselling, and certainly the emphasis on cultural issues is still very prominent in the field today. How did those concerns manifest in your own supervision?

Don: The counsellors in training at the University of Alberta have typically not been a particularly diverse group—certainly far less so than at some other sites in the country. But in much the same way as we discussed earlier, we tended to become more open to diverse ways of making meaning, and to experience our students as expressing values and beliefs that were inescapably cultural in their origins.

Ronna: Our growing openness to cultural and intellectual variability in the field reflected the movement toward greater plurality in society in general. Because of the relative homogeneity of our own student population at the time, it was the growth in *theoretical* diversity that became most evident in our work.

Don: I can remember supervising a counsellor who tended to interrupt the children she worked with regularly. My first impulse was to conclude she was doing it “wrong,” and yet as time went on, I came to see she was being effective in her own way. There are many routes to get to a similar place, and I think that’s what theoretical diversity acknowledges.

David: And yet...is there not a limit to the diversity of practices that are acceptable?

Ronna: Absolutely, and of course that aspect of our role as “guardians of the public,” as it were, is a very big topic that we can’t explore in detail here. However, in my experience, the introduction of more rigorous admissions standards and protocols went a long way to reducing the numbers of students with inappropriate boundaries, detrimental personal issues, and so on. While we’re talking of challenges, though, I’d mention the challenge of having the sheer scope of clinical supervision acknowledged by administrations.

Don: That certainly resonates for me: The supervision of counselling practice is absolutely central to any self-respecting professional degree program, but is often held in less esteem than research activities. We need to acknowledge the critical role that supervision and education play in the development of competent practitioners, and the significant time and energy devoted to these tasks by faculty members.

NEW CENTURY, NEW HORIZONS

David: Here we are in a new millennium. What issues do you see for supervision on your radar screens?

Don: I think we’ll see a continuing emphasis on health versus pathology, more of that constructionist influence, that positive psychology thrust (see Schmuck

& Sheldon, 2001; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Diversity and gender issues will continue to be key as our societies become more pluralistic. I think there'll be more emphasis on self-initiated, adult learning, and this will include the use of the Internet in counsellor education and supervision.

Ronna: In my own work, I see myself going deeper rather than broader, as it were. I've been asking supervisees to submit portfolios rather than conventional "assignments," getting them to explore their own stories in a variety of ways. I like what the narrative psychologist George Howard says about how all our experiments should be experiments on self. Congruent with reflective practice, portfolios are tools of exploration rather than assignments to be passed or failed. Each student has three portfolios, one for each of theory, practice, and personal/professional development. Each is designed to guide students to more deeply explore and integrate their own views. This is about becoming a counsellor—all part of becoming more fully human.

Don: I think it's becoming increasingly important—perhaps I should say "expected" by the broader professional community—for counsellors to distinguish between interventions that have research support and those that are largely experimental. This issue is related to expressed concerns about whether treatments are empirically validated. The question of the "efficacy" of particular approaches is of course a very complex one, but nevertheless that's another component of supervision practice that needs additional attention. Supervision should be a process that facilitates increased awareness on the part of supervisees of their competencies in the same way that clients are increasingly supported in doing this. This implies that supervisors need to be aware that the process they utilize with their students will mirror what occurs in interactions between students and their clients.

David: It sounds as though the word "supervisor" may not adequately capture this role.

Ronna: It certainly has its limitations. I've seen a lot of theories come and go over the years, but the enduring part of the work is in the encounter of two (or more) persons. I'm not overseeing the application of "correct technique," but facilitating a much more holistic process.

Don: How about "mentor" or "guide"?

Ronna: That fits for me: supervision is *deep* work, and especially so when we can make space for practitioners to be active explorers of their own experience.

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