The Effect of Learning Styles and Empathy on Perceived Effectiveness of Social Work Student Supervision

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The Effect of Learning Styles and Empathy on Perceived Effectiveness of Social Work Student Supervision

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this research was to examine the impact of two central variables of supervision—empathy and learning styles—on perceived effectiveness of student supervision, as well as to examine the relationship between them. Two learning styles (people-oriented style and task-oriented style) are positively, significantly correlated with two factors of perceived student supervision effectiveness (students’ perception of supervision effectiveness in terms of themselves and their perception of supervision effectiveness in terms of their clients). Among the variables of empathy, significant correlations were found between two of four components—perspective taking and personal distress—and perceived effectiveness of student supervision. The former was correlated with both factors of students’ perception of effectiveness, the latter with students’ perception of effectiveness in terms of their clients only. Suppression and deduction of overlapping (the common variance) of the variables in the regression tests reveals that three of the variables—perspective taking, and both learning styles—have an impact on students’ perception of supervision effectiveness. The people-oriented style affects students’ perceptions of supervision effectiveness in terms of themselves, while the task-oriented style affects their perceptions of supervi-
sion effectiveness in terms of the client. The paper discusses these findings and offers recommendations.

KEYWORDS. Social work, perceived effectiveness, student supervision, learning style, empathy

In social work, student supervision is a learning situation aimed, among other things, at shaping the future social worker's professional personality (Schwaber-Kerson, 1994). In their discussion of worker supervision, Bernard and Goodyear (1993) define supervision as intervention provided by a senior member of the profession (a supervisor) to a younger member of the profession (the supervisee). Schwaber-Kerson (1994) stresses that student supervisors are important for the supervisees' socialization into the profession.

According to Bernard and Goodyear (1993), the role of the supervisor is to improve the supervisees' professional functioning, increase the quality of professional service provided to clients, and serve as a guard of the professional standards (p. 33). For the purpose of fulfilling these roles, the supervisor and supervisee should collect, document, and process information in a way that enables assessment of the results of their respective intervention activity (Munson, 1993).

Mead (1990) refers to the achievement of results in supervision as “effectiveness.” He claims that effective supervision is one that produces skilled supervisees, thereby leading to an improved condition among their clients. In his opinion, the assessment of effectiveness must relate to the supervisees and the clients alike.

Different researchers discuss the problematic aspects and lack of consistency in studying the outcomes of supervision. For example, is the test of effective supervision how well the supervisee functions professionally or the results of their work, namely, a change in their clients’ functioning? Who should make the assessment: the client, the supervisee, or the supervisor? Comparison of the respective assessments of each revealed a lack of consistency among them (Arkova, 1983; Bernard & Goodyear, 1993; Fisher & Bloom, 1982; Mead, 1990).

Most researchers examine supervision effectiveness on the basis of supervisees’ perception of the attainment of the goals, in terms of the effect of the supervision on themselves, their clients, and the success of the treatment.
A survey of the literature on supervision effectiveness reveals attempts to identify which factors are related to and influence it (Munson, 1993). Two variables that are considered central to supervision that are likely to have an impact on its effectiveness are the supervisee’s ability to empathy and learning style. Each of these variables is composed of different components.

The present research examines which of the components of empathy and learning styles influence student supervisees’ perception of supervision effectiveness, in terms of both the students themselves and the clients.

Empathy is perceived as a significant factor in therapy and in effective supervision. Studies of the role of empathy in supervision stress its importance in creating an atmosphere of trust among supervisors and supervisees, enhancing open-mindedness, and facilitating the supervisee’s learning to a maximum (Dean, 1984; Lambert, 1980). Empathy is particularly important in supervision, both in the client’s relations with the supervisee and in supervisor-supervisee relations. The ability of a supervisor to relate to the different aspects of empathy may make it a powerful tool for understanding the client’s case and the supervision (Dean, 1984; Raines, 1990).

Empathy is a person’s reaction to the feelings of another person (Raines, 1990). Some differentiate between emotional empathy, which focuses on a personal, emotional response to the state of another person, and cognitive empathy, which emphasizes the ability to identify and understand the feelings that others experience (Gladstein, 1983; Raines, 1990; Wortman, 1990). In recent years, it has become widely accepted to view the empathy response as a combination of cognitive and emotional abilities (Davis, 1983; Wortman, 1990).

Davis (1983) proposes a multidimensional approach for defining the concept of empathy. He contends that the term encompasses conflicting elements, which complement and influence one another, and are connected to interpersonal relations. The elements he discusses are: perspective taking—a willingness to accept the other’s point of view; fantasy—a willingness to identify with the other’s feelings and traits; empathic concern—the ability to express sympathy and concern for another; and personal distress—a personal perception of psychological tension and stress. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, no research to date has examined the relationship between multidimensional empathy and the perception of supervision effectiveness. Such research may enable identification of the components of empathy that are related to or have an impact on supervision effectiveness, thus indicating desirable foci of supervision in order to increase effectiveness.

The perceived effectiveness of supervision also depends upon the student or supervisee’s learning style (Gray et al., 1989; Munson, 1993; Webb, 1988). “Learning style” is the learner’s preferred pattern when trying to take in, pro-
cess, and assimilate knowledge and information (Munson, 1993; Tasany, 1994). According to Munson (1993), learning style refers to personality traits that the individual applies in coping with problems. The supervisee’s learning style represents part of the adult learner’s personality style, and as such, it constitutes one of the fundamental components that should direct the supervision process. Identification of the student’s learning style is an essential tool for the supervisor, both in selection of the appropriate supervision methods and as a basis for creating channels of communication between the supervisor and the student that will facilitate the conveyance of knowledge and learning. Matching supervision methods and communication patterns to the respective supervisees’ learning styles contributes to a sense of comfort and security, and increases their motivation and effectiveness at work (Fox & Guild, 1987).

The definitions of learning styles can be divided into three groups: those that describe a cognitive process; those that describe a learning process; and those that integrate the two (Middleman & Rhodes, 1985). Most researchers refer to two main styles:

a. the task-oriented style, which is focused on goals, tasks, and thinking;

b. the personal style, which concentrates on interpersonal relations, development of self-awareness, and emotional growth (Munson, 1993).

Hutt, Scott and King (1983) found that both task-oriented supervision and supervision directed by personal style were correlated with effectiveness. Other research has shown that it is the task-oriented style that leads to improved functioning of the supervisee (Christian & Hannah, 1983; Fagan-Wilen, 1995; Mordock, 1990). In the present research, the authors examine which learning styles and components of empathy have an impact on the effectiveness of student supervision.

**METHOD**

The research population consisted of 201 second- and third-year students in the bachelor’s degree program at an Israeli School of Social Work. Most of the students (91.4%) were women; only 8.6% were men. The majority (73.2%) were between the ages of 20 and 30; the rest were over the age of 31. Most of the subjects were religious (56%) and most were unmarried (52.5%); 47 were married and only 28 of the students had children. Fifty-nine percent were in their second year of studies; the rest were in the third year. Of the entire research population, 40% worked in the welfare services, 43% in health and rehabilitation, 10% in the family area; and 6.5% in addiction.
MEASURES

Empathy

In the present research, empathy was examined by means of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) questionnaire, designed and developed by Davis (1983), to study multidimensional empathy. The IRI is composed of 28 statements, divided into four components, each represented by 7 statements. The subject ranks the degree to which each statement describes him or her, on a Likert scale, from 1 (not at all characteristic) to 5 (describes me very well). The components are as follows.

- **Perspective taking (PT)** examines the supervisee’s willingness to take someone else’s point of view. For example, “Sometimes I try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.”

- **Fantasy (FS)** examines the willingness and ability of the individual to identify, through fantasy, with the emotions and traits of characters from films, plays, or books. For example: “I become very involved emotionally with the characters in books.”

- **Empathic concern (EC)** examines feelings towards others, the expression of sympathy and concern for someone else. For example: “Sometimes I feel concern and warmth for unfortunate people.”

- **Personal distress (PD)** examines the personal perception of anxiety and stress due to interpsychic stress. For example: “It scares me to be in a state of emotional stress.”

In the present research, the internal consistency regarding each of the components was examined according to Cronbach’s alpha. The estimated reliability of fantasy was alpha = 0.76; empathic concern, alpha = 0.62; perspective taking, alpha = 0.66; and personal distress, alpha = 0.69.

Learning Styles

To examine learning style, we used Friedlander and Ward’s (1984) Supervisor Styles Inventory (SSI). The questionnaire is composed of 33 items, ranked on a seven-point scale, from 1—the trait does not characterize the subject at all—to 7—the trait characterizes the subject to a great extent. Three judges were asked to divide the 33 items on the SSI according to two predetermined universes of content:

1. task-oriented style, including 12 items, such as: task-oriented, structured, evaluative, scholastic, and concrete;
2. people-oriented style, including 10 items, such as: sensitive, sharing, responsive, supportive, and caring.
Internal consistency was tested by Cronbach’s alpha; a high internal consistency was found in both components of supervision style: people-oriented style (alpha = 0.83) and task-oriented style (alpha = 0.82). The range of correlation was from r = 0.19 to r = 0.60.

Perceived Effectiveness

Perceived effectiveness is defined according to Itzhaky and Lazar’s (1997) questionnaire, in which subjects are asked to rank twelve items regarding their student supervisors. The items are graded on a five-point Likert scale, from 1–not at all–to 5–to a great extent. Three judges were asked to divide the questionnaire items into two universes of content:

1. Students’ perception of supervision effectiveness in terms of themselves. The impact of supervision on the student, including six items, such as perceived competence, impact of the supervision relationship on the supervisee’s therapeutic ability, achievement of goals defined in the supervision, and satisfaction with the supervision.

2. Students’ perception of supervision effectiveness in terms of their clients. The impact of the supervisee on the client and the success of the therapy, including four items, such as: degree of client participation in supervision, client’s understanding of the goals, change in the client due to the intervention.

According to the reliability tests, the estimated internal consistency of the factors of effectiveness are: effectiveness in terms of the supervisee: alpha = 0.81; and effectiveness in terms of the client: alpha = 0.73.

FINDINGS

As a first step in examining the relationship between the components of empathy and learning styles and the factors of effectiveness, Pearson correlations were calculated. They are presented in Table 1.

The table shows significant positive correlations between both learning styles and the two factors of effectiveness. The more the supervisee tends toward either the people-oriented or the task-oriented learning style, the higher his or her perception of supervision effectiveness. Regarding the components of empathy, a significant, positive correlation was found between the component of perspective taking and the component of students’ perception of supervision effectiveness, both in terms of themselves and in terms of the client. A significant positive correlation was also found between the component of per-
In order to examine the extent to which the components of empathy and learning styles together explain the variance in the factors of perceived supervision effectiveness, multiple-stepwise regression analysis was performed. The results are presented in Table 2.

The results of the analysis indicate that 8% of the variance of the component of the students’ perception of supervision effectiveness in terms of themselves are explained by a people-oriented learning style and the “perspective taking” component of empathy. Twenty-two percent of the variance of the component of the students’ perception of supervision effectiveness in terms of the client are explained by a task-oriented learning style and the “perspective taking” component of empathy.

Thus, in general, it may be said that the more students tend toward a people-oriented learning style and develop a high level of perspective taking, the higher their perception of supervision effectiveness in terms of themselves. Similarly, the more their learning style tends toward a task-oriented style and the higher their level of perspective taking, the higher their perception of supervision effectiveness in terms of their clients.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of the present research was to examine the impact and predictive ability of two central variables of supervision—empathy and learning styles—on students’ perceptions of supervision effectiveness, as well as to examine the relationship between them. Among the variables of empathy, signif-
Significant correlations were found between two out of four components—personal distress and perspective taking. The component of personal distress is positively correlated only with the component of students’ perception of supervision effectiveness in terms of the client; the component of perspective taking was found to have a significant correlation with both components of students’ perceptions of supervision effectiveness, namely, in terms of the supervisees themselves and in terms of their clients. Both learning styles are positively, significantly correlated with both factors of effectiveness.

Suppression and deduction of overlapping (the common variance) of the variables in the regression tests revealed that among the components of empathy, only perspective taking has an impact on the perceived effectiveness, and that both learning styles have an impact on the effectiveness (the people-oriented style affects students’ perceptions of supervision effectiveness in terms of themselves, while the task-oriented style affects students’ perceptions of supervision effectiveness in terms of their clients).

How can these findings be explained? The discussion of the broad concept of empathy in the professional literature highlights its importance both for the supervisory relationship and for supervisee-client relations (Dean, 1984; Raines, 1990). Therefore, the authors were surprised by the finding that only one component of empathy—perspective taking—is correlated with and has a significant impact on both components of students’ perceptions of supervision effectiveness.

Perhaps the reason for this lies in the special nature of this component, which differs from the other components of empathy. While the other components of empathy refer to emotional aspects, “perspective taking” reflects the supervisee’s willingness to accept the client’s point of view on the cognitive level, as well as to examine all aspects before making a decision and understanding others. This finding suggests that it is the cognitive dimension of empathy, rather than the emotional one, that influences perception of supervision effectiveness.
The research results reported by Hutt, Scott and King (1983) support the conclusion regarding the relationship between the two learning styles and supervision effectiveness. In the authors’ research, the supervisees’ perception of effectiveness in terms of themselves was found to be influenced by the people-oriented learning style, while their perception of effectiveness in terms of the clients was found to be influenced by the task-oriented style.

Researchers of supervision effectiveness disagree about the perception of effectiveness in terms of the supervisee (Lambert, 1980; Lenihan & Kilik, 1992) and the perception of effectiveness in terms of the client (Nelson, 1996). Effectiveness in terms of the supervisee refers to the level of the supervisee’s competence, supervisor-supervisee relations, and supervisee’s satisfaction with the supervision, while effectiveness in terms of the client refers to the degree of client involvement in the therapy, his or her understanding of the therapy goals, and the degree of success of the therapy (Itzhaky & Lazar, 1997).

The people-oriented learning style, by definition, concentrates on interpersonal relations, supervisee’s development of self-awareness, and supervisee’s emotional growth (Munson, 1993). Thus it seems clear that such a learning style is suitable for and promotes the effectiveness and professional competence of the supervisee.

In contrast, the task-oriented learning style focuses on goals, structure, and definition of objectives for the supervision and the therapy (Munson, 1993). Such a learning style is more suitable for and promotive of all aspects of supervision effectiveness and success of the therapy for the client. Middleman and Rhodes (1985) confirm the relationship between task-oriented supervision and learning styles and supervision effectiveness. They claim that a condition to understanding supervision effectiveness is the determination of predefined goals, standards for performance of tasks, and criteria for evaluating performance.

Most researchers of learning styles refer to the adoption of a single learning style in supervision (Middleman & Rhodes, 1985; Munson, 1993). Itzhaky and Eliahou (1999) found that supervisees adopt different learning styles in order to adapt to their supervisors’ supervision styles. This suggests that learning styles can be changed. The definition of effectiveness in this research refers both to achieving the goals of therapy and to the competence of the supervisee. Therefore the findings suggest the need for an approach that combines adoption of both learning styles, in order to provide an integrative response to effectiveness and promote better supervision. The authors recommend, then, that student supervisors diagnose their supervisees’ dominant learning styles and help them adopt the style they tend to prefer less, in order to increase the effectiveness of the supervision.
The findings of this research shed light on the importance of empathy in supervision and its contribution to the growth of the supervisee and achievement of the therapy goals. In order to achieve the goals of supervision, supervisors should make perspective taking—one of the components of empathy—a main focus in the definition and planning of supervision aims that they discuss with their supervisees.

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