SUPERVISEES’ PERSPECTIVES OF POWER USE IN SUPERVISION

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In this study, we examined the use of power in the supervisory relationship from supervisees’ perspectives. Semistructured interviews of 11 supervisees in a Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education training program were conducted. From analysis of interview transcripts, themes about the ways in which supervisors and supervisees used power in the supervisory relationship emerged. Supervisors’ power uses included discussions of power, empowering supervisees, promoting an atmosphere of safety, collaborating with supervisees, imposition of style/orientation, and misuses of power, such as violation of confidentiality. Themes for supervisees’ power uses included supervisee–peer power, supervisees as consumers, and withholding information. Implications for researchers, supervisors, and supervisees are presented.

In the literature on supervision and supervisory relationships, power is a recurring topic, although it only rarely has been addressed in much depth (e.g., Fine & Turner, 1997a, 1997b; Hicks & Cornille, 1999; Salvendy, 1993; Tuckman, 1996). Some who have studied power in supervision have focused on supervisors’ use of power, often drawing on the work of theoreticians in the family science literature (e.g., Cromwell & Olson, 1975; French & Raven, 1959). Feminist perspectives on supervision have emphasized that power is an important variable that needs to be recognized, understood, and managed (Hawes, 1998; Holloway & Wolleat, 1994; Kaiser, 1992; Porter & Vasquez, 1997), because some degree of hierarchy is inherent in supervisory relationships, and because power differences can have a dramatic impact on these professional relationships and even on therapeutic outcomes (Nelson & Friedlander, 2001).

Power differences are inherent in the supervisory relationship. These differences between a supervisor and supervisee can be attributed to different levels in experience, expertise, or training (Hawes, 1998; Hicks & Cornille, 1999). Consistent with this, Prouty (1997) found hierarchy to be a central aspect of supervision; it was recognized as important by all supervisees in her study. Goalstone (1997) even found that students in training facilities preferred some level of hierarchy in the relationship and wanted their supervisors to take on a mentoring role as compared to teacher, consultant, or collaborative roles.

But the use of power in supervision is not always easy to discern, even if it is inherent or preferred. A good example is found in two concepts frequently mentioned in the literature: empowerment and collaboration (e.g., Anderson & Swim, 1995; Fine & Turner, 1997a; Nelson, 1997). Anderson and Swim (1995), who work from a postmodern, collaborative language-systems perspective, view the supervisor as taking the role of mentor rather than expert. Empowering supervisors minimizes the power differences in the relationship so the trainee will “professionally emerge with his or her own sense of power.” In other words, the supervisor must use his/her expert power to assist the trainee in assuming power” (Nelson, 1997, p.
125). Fine and Turner (1997a), describing collaborative supervision, offer a similar but slightly different view of power that involves “Face-to-face ongoing dialogues between a supervisor and therapist where goodwill prevails; the learning is mutual and intense; the power relations are transparent; and the emphasis is on meeting standards of the profession, ensuring the well-being of clients served by the supervisory participants” (p. 229). In empowerment, power differences are minimized, whereas in collaborative supervision power is more overtly acknowledged but managed in a way that is beneficial to supervisees.

Supervisors can use their power productively to enhance the supervisory relationship (Salvendy, 1993; Tuckman, 1996). For example, they can teach supervisees about relationship dynamics or demystify power (Cohen, 1998; Kaiser, 1992; Porter, 1985; Wheeler, Avis, Miller, & Chaney, 1986). By minimizing hierarchy in interactions, they can increase supervisees’ collaboration skills (Farmer, 1987; Hawes, 1998; Porter & Vasquez, 1997). Supervisors also can model ways in which power contributes to the development of a trusting supervision relationship (Kaiser, 1992) by conducting mutual evaluations, having open and on-going discussions about power, and by remembering that supervisees are expected to expose their weaknesses and vulnerabilities (Hawes, 1998; Porter, 1985; Wheeler et al., 1986).

Regardless of the degree to which power may be made transparent or minimized (Flemons, Green, & Rambo, 1996; Turner & Fine, 1995), supervisors generally are expected to evaluate supervisees, either informally as a means of providing feedback and improving supervisees’ skills, or formally by giving written evaluations or grades (Burke, Goodyear, & Guzzard, 1998; Emerson, 1996; Kaiser, 1992). Furthermore, because they are seen as gatekeepers with a higher obligation to the profession and society (Hawes, 1998; Salvendy, 1993), they have authority to determine whether supervisees meet criteria formally set forth by the profession (e.g., via licensing boards).

With hierarchy, abuse of power is possible, especially in training institutions where supervisors and supervisees may be involved in multiple relationships (Martinez, Davis, & Dahl, 1999). Abuses of power easily can result in harm to clients (Farmer, 1987; Martinez et al., 1999; Porter, 1985). For example, fear of a supervisor abusing boundaries can cause a supervisee to withhold important information about a case (Emerson, 1996). Common boundary violations include forcing a supervisee’s self-disclosure, providing unwanted therapy to a supervisee, sexual harassment, and initiating sexual contact (Bonosky, 1995). Other forms of power abuse include over-focusing on supervisee mistakes, psychopathologizing the supervisee, verbally attacking the supervisee, assigning an excessive caseload to a supervisee without adequate supervision, using supervision to meet a supervisor’s social–emotional needs, and forcing supervisees to adhere to a supervisor’s theoretical framework (Porter, 1985; Porter & Vasquez, 1997).

Although the emphasis in the literature has been on supervisors’ power, supervisees have power, and they too can abuse it (Worthington, Tan, & Poulin, 2002). For example, they can withhold important information from supervisors, evaluate their supervisors unfairly, and negatively affect the reputation and careers of their supervisors through false accusations (Ladany, 2004). Although there has been relatively little study of supervisees’ sense of or use of power, Quarto (2002) found that more experienced supervisees saw themselves as having more influence over how supervision proceeds than did less experienced supervisees.

Although the points made above are interesting and valuable, the body of research examining the uses of power by supervisors and supervisees is small. And, as can be seen, understanding power in supervision is clouded by conceptual complexity. Given that supervisees’ perspectives generally have been missing as an important means of understanding power in supervision, this study was designed to gain an in-depth understanding of supervisees’ experience of power in the clinical supervisory relationship and to examine the role and influence of power on supervisees in the clinical supervisory relationship.

METHOD

Participants

Participants for this study were supervisees in an academic clinical training program. After securing institutional permission and obtaining approval of the program’s faculty to conduct the study, all of their current students were sent an e-mail seeking their participation. Interviews, conducted on campus or at
students’ homes, lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. To tap the broadest range of supervisee experiences and still maintain confidentiality and anonymity for the program’s supervisees and supervisors, supervisees were asked to respond to questions based on all of their clinical supervisory experiences, not just those in this particular training program.

Of the 11 supervisees who participated in this study, three were men and eight were women. All identified themselves as Caucasian, and they ranged in age from 23 to 38. All had at least a bachelor’s degree, and five had a master’s degree. Six participants had recently started in the master’s program; five were advanced doctoral students who were training to be supervisors. Religious preferences varied, including a variety of Christian identities (e.g., Catholic and Lutheran). Participants’ experience as marriage and family therapists (MFTs) or therapists-in-training ranged from 7 months to more than 7 years. The supervisors they described included current faculty supervisors, supervisors in previous MFT programs, supervisors in contexts such as internships, supervisors-in-training, and clinical supervisors in employment settings. They described group supervision, individual supervision with another supervisee present, and clinical supervision taking place within internship settings. Most discussion centered on supervisors in the current clinical training program. On the occasion that workplace supervision was discussed, participants clearly identified that this was what they were discussing. None of the participants mentioned their supervisors’ names or theoretical orientations.

Grounded theory was used to inform the methodology of this study, because it allowed research questions that were open ended, broad, flexible, and designed to explore concepts not clearly defined, and to develop new theory on the topic of power in supervision (Rafuls & Moon, 1996). The researcher refrained from biasing questions toward any theory or view of power (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In fact, the terms “power” and “supervision” were purposely not standardized for participants to encourage them to reflect on their own definitions of these terms. Interviews began with participants describing the context of their supervision experiences, including length of experience as a supervisee, number of supervisors, who was present for group and individual supervision, and so on. Examples of questions asked of participants included: How does power in the supervisory relationship help/hinder you in your training? Do you feel you have power during the supervision session? Do you believe a supervisor has power in his/her relationship with you as a supervisee? When you think of power, what do you think of?

The researcher and first author, a 29-year-old Caucasian female, was an advanced doctoral candidate in MFT who, at the time of the study, had almost 7 years experience as a supervisee and 2 years’ experience as a supervisor-in-training. She was an “outsider” in the MFT program in which the data were collected. As a supervisee, she had noticed that positive supervisory power experiences coincided with positive relationships with supervisors, beneficial outcomes for clients, and an increase in personal and professional growth. In contrast, negative supervisory power experiences seemed to result in poor relationships with supervisors, fear, inhibition, fewer beneficial outcomes for clients, and less personal growth. Because she found that power in the supervisory relationship was rarely addressed, she had an interest in bringing voice to supervisees who might have been reluctant to discuss openly the effects of power in the supervisory relationship. These views were consistent with her strong identification with feminism.

The second author served as a major professor on this project and provided guidance to the first author on project planning and editing of the manuscript. He has been an American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) Clinical Member and Approved Supervisor for many years—he brought this experience to the project in helping to shape the various drafts of the manuscript. Partly because his guidance was provided long distance, he did not have access to raw data or participants’ identities at any point.

The researcher assumed that, because power is inherent in all relationships, it would be present in the supervisory relationship. She assumed that the participants agreed with this assumption, even if unknowingly, because the questions explored how participants experienced that power. A second assumption was that the participants had experienced power in their supervisory relationships. Even if they had not organized their experience around descriptions of power, she assumed that when asked questions it would be relatively easy for them to reflect on thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and actions about power in supervisory relationships.
The primary researcher expected her biases to affect the research questions and interpretation of the results. For example, at the time of the interviews, she was simultaneously a supervisee and a supervisor-in-training. She had not had experience as a faculty member, and thus she was more likely to identify with the supervisees in the interview process. Therefore, she consulted with other faculty and supervisors to keep her biases “in check.”

**Data Analysis**

After transcribing interviews, major themes were identified and coded using constant-comparison methods based in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher identified speaking turns, defined as a complete thought and statement (or series of statements) by either the participant or researcher, and then assigned numbers to each turn, which could have more than one code. Once open coding was completed on all the interviews, a list of possible categories and subcategories was compiled. Through axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the categories and subcategories were reassembled into a more organized scheme that developed into a theory. The recurrence of themes throughout the analysis gave the researchers a level of confidence that theoretical saturation had been realized in the study. As themes were collapsed into fewer, more comprehensive categories, the transcripts were reviewed to identify and ensure fit of each category to the data. At this point in the analysis, an “objective” supervisor who (a) had been providing supervision to the primary researcher and knew some of her biases, (b) had not previously been involved in the study, and (c) had no connection to the program in which interviews took place, reviewed the developing categories and challenged her to justify how categories were developed. Subcategories were refined in the same manner.

**Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) have offered four methods of establishing trustworthiness comparable to reliability and validity concerns in quantitative research: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. Credibility of data can be established through triangulation of sources and investigators (Patton, 1990). Level of participants’ experience was used as one triangulation point, because it was expected that different levels of training would correspond with different experiences of hierarchy and power in supervision. Using multiple investigators also enhanced credibility. For example, although the consultant supervisor was not directly involved in the research project, he brought extensive supervisory and supervisee experience to reflect on, contribute to, and challenge categories as they were being developed. This peer debriefing provided an additional external check. Negative cases were used to develop and challenge the researcher’s understanding and conceptual development of categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For example, most participants described empowerment positively; however, others discussed a lack of empowerment in supervision. By examining participants’ experiences of lack of empowerment, the empowerment category was further refined. Finally, a member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was conducted by sending an outline and a description of the categories to participants. They were asked for feedback, comments, and/or confirmation of the developed categories to ensure that categories accurately reflected the participants’ experiences and descriptions. Five of the 11 participants responded and confirmed that the categories reflected their experiences of power in the supervisory relationship.

Dependability was established by maintaining a rich description of the methods and data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), including an audit trail of the process and progress of the research and keeping memos pertaining to the categories, subcategories, concepts, and interrelated categories. These memos and records are available to anyone wishing to scrutinize the project or verify its conclusions. The researcher also kept an informal reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) documenting her reflections and any biases that may have influenced her understanding of participants’ experiences. For example, the researcher was expecting to find more abuses of power, based on her knowledge of the literature and her own supervisory experiences. Participants, however, did not talk about abuse of power, only misuse of power; moreover, no abuses of power were reported. This challenged the researcher to rethink her ideas of what was discovered in the interviews.
RESULTS

All participants described power as inherent in relationships; nearly all believed that power could be positive or negative, and most commented that the way power is facilitated was most important to their overall experience of it. The ability to influence or control was most frequently mentioned as a definition of power. Participants who identified with a postmodern perspective included having information or knowledge as part of their view of power, either for better or worse.

Supervisors’ Positive Uses of Power

Direct and indirect discussions of power. Some supervisors directly discussed power with supervisees by defining and clarifying the roles in their relationship:

I think she may have asked me about what I thought about being in that room with her because we did cotherapy at one time, and she asked me how that was, and feeling out the power exchange . . . but that was the only person that I’ve talked to about [power] overtly.

Indirect discussions of power were more common than direct discussions; these often occurred at the beginning of supervision when the supervisor described roles and responsibilities as part of contracting:

I don’t think we’ve ever [said] we’re going to talk about power now . . . at the beginning of the semester here, my supervisor gave me a letter or statement talking about what her [and my] responsibilities would be in the supervisory relationship . . . so I read that and signed it, and when I brought it back we talked about that a little bit.

Even though the word “power” may not have been brought up in these indirect discussions, supervisees interpreted, at least on some level, that roles, responsibilities, and evaluation were related to power.

A lack of discussion about power in the supervisory relationship also was common. Some supervisees seemed uncertain as to why power was not addressed directly:

I could not tell you why we didn’t talk about it . . . we probably really didn’t address a lot of cultural issues, we really didn’t address a lot of hierarchy, power. We knew it was there. It was something we didn’t really speak about.

Supervisees did not report negative experiences in supervision based exclusively on whether or not power had been explicitly addressed. They viewed discussions about power as helpful in demystifying an elusive aspect of the relationship.

Providing opinions through sharing ideas, giving feedback, and making evaluations. This category of power use comprises three related subcategories: sharing ideas, giving feedback, and making evaluations. Sharing ideas involved talking about case-related information, with the emphasis on clients rather than supervisees, so supervisees could rework their thoughts and ideas about treatment approaches. Giving feedback combined client information with ways the therapist could improve. Making evaluations was structured in that permanent records were kept of the supervisor’s professional opinions about the supervisee’s clinical work. Supervisees saw differing levels of power associated with each of these. For example, they were aware that evaluations could determine one’s progress through a program or whether students were even allowed to continue in the field, but they did not see either sharing ideas or giving feedback as having that potential.

Sharing ideas. Choosing interventions and thinking about different perspectives offered by others was the essence of sharing ideas. Many valued hearing what their supervisors and other supervisees thought about their cases: “I like being able to talk to professionals who have more experience than I do . . . they’ve seen a lot of stuff that I haven’t seen yet, and so I can bounce ideas off of them.” Participants said they took the initiative with supervisors to get their opinions and ideas in this nonevaluative context. The sharing of ideas always occurred without pressure to follow through; it had the element of a pleasurable conversation for supervisees.

Giving feedback. Feedback was seen as more power-laden advice from supervisors. It could be
focused on case content, but usually was directed toward improvement of the supervisee as a therapist. Feedback involved supervisors giving their expert opinions on how supervisees’ skills needed to change, but could also include information about what supervisees were doing well. Because learning is an inherent part of supervision, supervisees expected to get feedback from their supervisors. Receiving it often was seen as a positive, growth-enhancing experience: “She gives me good consistent feedback about what I’m doing good, about things I need to change,” and “I get feedback on my work, and then I get to learn a lot of new information from supervisors.” A lack of feedback could be disconcerting to some supervisees: “Sometimes I don’t get enough feedback, sometimes I feel like I’m never going to grow and be better if somebody doesn’t challenge me and help me look at what my weaknesses are.”

**Making evaluations.** Supervisees saw evaluation as the most power-laden exchange in supervision for two reasons: There was an element of permanence (in the form of grades, letters of recommendation, or supervision evaluations for licensure or certification), and because of the potential impact on supervisees’ careers. However, participants expected to be evaluated, “They’re your supervisor, they’re going to be evaluating you,” or “then there are other things like grades and evaluations that you can’t change, and it’s necessary to get the degree and go on.” Evaluation was seen as significant by supervisees, because how they were evaluated had an impact on their future in the program and their careers, “Sure supervisors have power . . . everybody recognizes them as faculty and recognizes them as having some influence as to what kind of therapists we’re going to be or whether we’re going to proceed through the program.” Evaluation was not inherently negative, especially for supervisees who looked forward to learning about themselves, “I think it’s good to have evaluations to figure out what your strengths are, your weaknesses are, and maybe some stuff that you don’t see.” Although they recognized the necessity of being evaluated by supervisors, none of the participants described evaluations, per se, in a negative fashion. Clearly, supervisors exhibit power through evaluations. As one participant said, “A base underlying piece [of how power is exhibited] is the evaluation.”

**Empowering supervisees.** Empowerment involved supervisors using their power to benefit therapists-in-training by encouraging supervisees’ own power use. Empowerment stood out as an extremely beneficial, positive use of power by supervisors. It entailed giving supervisees choices, allowing them to take power and control, and affirming their experiences. Supervisors empowered by emphasizing and capitalizing on supervisees’ knowledge and wisdom, as well as by allowing supervisees to make and live with decisions regarding their cases. Affirming supervisees’ experience and knowledge was an effective way of giving power to supervisees:

> It’s really neat that they get excited with you with the work, and when they see things happening on the tape or live that once they say, “oh I see this, I see what you’re talking about, I see how you use that,” it reconfirms what you are starting to know.

In the above example, the supervisor used her power to help the supervisee realize her own sense of power as a therapist. Respecting supervisees’ decisions about clients also was seen as empowering, “They empower you here. They make it very clear that you have the final say of what goes on in your session, so if I say I don’t want to go there with my clients right now, there’s immediate respect.” Empowerment included having respect for and helping supervisees to develop their own power, “One of the things that I’ve experienced here is that the supervision is very empowering, and they challenge you and try to get you to take that power and to run with it and understand it.” None of the participants described empowerment in negative terms.

**Promoting an atmosphere of safety.** One commonly discussed theme was safety within the training atmosphere. Supervisors were seen as the purveyors of that safety in both individual and group supervision, which in turn was associated with an effective use of power; conversely, a lack of safety was associated with inappropriate uses of power:

> We knew with our supervisor what the boundaries were, and then because we knew, we felt safe to do and to talk about different things, we knew he was going to keep us safe, but it was also that he wasn’t going to abuse his power.
When supervisors created an atmosphere of safety, they sent a message to supervisees that time in supervision was protected and that they could challenge and confront supervisors without fear of being treated negatively in the future.

The assurance of safety in the supervisory relationship helped supervisees to feel as if they could explore themselves both personally and professionally—to make themselves vulnerable so they could learn to be better therapists. Being vulnerable was seen as positive and helpful to their clinical development, if safety had been established in the supervisory relationship, “with the supervisors I’ve felt really safe with, I have felt a personal sense of power, not power over my supervisor, but having some personal power that it was OK to be vulnerable.” This participant’s willingness to be vulnerable was dependent on the presence of safety in the supervisory relationship. Supervisees offered other examples of what happened to their willingness to explore themselves when their sense of safety had been violated in supervision:

If you’re not feeling safe and secure and comfortable with your supervisor, you’re obviously not going to be getting the kind of supervision that’s going to be of the most benefit to your client, because you may not feel like you can take risks that you need to take, or be upfront, or be vulnerable.

Safe supervisory relationships also were characterized by maintenance of confidentiality. In exposing oneself and being vulnerable, supervisees trusted their supervisors to ensure that personal information would remain within the confines of the supervisory relationship:

There’s power in the fact that there’s confidentiality, it creates a safe haven . . . with power being knowledge, it creates a safe haven in that I know that I can come to my supervisor to get information to where I can help my clients more.

Collaborating with supervisees. Hallmarks of collaboration in the supervisory relationship include being open, flexible, treating supervisees as colleagues to some extent, and enhancing supervisees’ styles. Collaboration did not mean that supervisors gave up their power; rather, supervisees were still aware of and respected the power differential between themselves and their supervisors. Soliciting and valuing supervisees’ input was essential in collaborative supervision. Of this collaboration, one supervisee said, “it’s more of a professional relationship of collaboration and being closer to equal power with them,” and “you’re the student, they’re the professor, and then there’s an obvious differential there that, even if they are very collaborative, the final word in a sense will still go and defer to that professor.” Supervisors and supervisees were open to hearing each other’s experiences and ideas, “And if you say, ‘I don’t think that would work,’ they’re not [going to say], ‘I’m in charge here,’ so I don’t feel like I have power but I feel like it’s just a more equal standard.” Collaboration involved working together to expand each other’s ideas about how to approach therapy and included an element of mutual respect. Power was still present in collaborative supervisory relationships, because participants reported maintaining respect for supervisors’ roles. Participants highly valued collaborative relationships, which were seen as positive supervisory experiences.

Expectations of supervisees. Supervisees felt that supervisors, by virtue of their role, had expectations of them. They sought to meet their supervisors’ expectations: “I find myself more anxious about what their response is and how they, you know, wanting to please more and to be better in that role as a therapist.” Most supervisees expressed a desire to please their supervisors by meeting their expectations; many used this desire to please as motivation. Expecting supervisees to be responsible is a positive use of power because, even though participants may not have enjoyed the process of being held responsible, they enjoyed the end result, “I hate doing paperwork, but the forms actually make me think harder about things, and make me come in more prepared, and help him to know more about what’s going on, and makes me responsible for things.”

Supervisors’ Negative Uses of Power

Favoritism. Favoritism occurred when a supervisor demonstrated a bond with a particular supervisee that appeared to others as special treatment. Supervisees were afraid that, in comparison with supervisors’
favorites, they would experience different or negative treatment. Nearly all participants identified favoritism as having been present in their supervision. “And there’s been a couple of occasions in practicum group where the supervisor may have had a better bond with a couple people . . . had a favoritism type thing.” Whereas in this example favoritism was not described as having an effect on other supervisees, most often it was seen as negatively affecting “nonfavorite” supervisees. Because of this, supervisors were seen as exercising power. When another supervisee was seen as the favorite, some supervisees began to question how supervisors viewed them: “They may not seem to like you or they seem to have their favorites among students, so that might be a factor if you have to have supervision with them too, you might be viewed badly.” Favoritism was sometimes apparent when a student was selected to receive a scholarship or given some award.

**Imposition of style/orientation.** Another negative use of power was supervisors’ imposition of their style or theoretical orientation/perspective on supervisees.

They try sometimes to tell you what interventions you need to go in and do next. But there’s been a couple of times where I have felt like if I don’t do this, they’re going to slam me, so I’ll try it, but it’s not what I want to do.

The fear of negative implications was enough for supervisees to follow their supervisors’ directives regardless of their own judgment or preferences.

**Supervisors’ misuse of power.** Misuses of power were intrusive actions that supervisees saw as not helpful in their learning and growth. This category was different from actions such as imposing a theoretical orientation and showing favoritism, because the actions went against supervisees’ expectations. For example, students expected that, as part of their role, supervisors might suggest an intervention from a model with which therapists are uncomfortable, but they did not expect supervisors to violate confidentiality.

**Violation of confidentiality.** Violation of confidentiality could take different forms, including taking information about a supervisee out of context by failing to be careful about the multiple roles supervisors often occupy (e.g., supervisor or professor) or by sharing personal information with other supervisors, who in turn inappropriately shared information with others. “I’ve had a supervisor who took things that I said in supervision and some of the information I think was taken out of context and was actually used with other students.” Other participants reported hearing confidential information about other students, “I’ve had other supervisory relationships where they’ve shared inappropriate information with me about faculty or other students, and it’s felt uncomfortable.” Supervisees expected some information to be shared with others, particularly other supervisors, although they expected that some very personal information would remain within the confines of the supervisory relationship.

**Supervisors inappropriately meet own needs.** Another misuse of power occurred when supervisors placed their own needs above those of supervisees. At times, supervisors appeared to exert power because of their feelings of insecurity:

I’ve had an experience with a supervisor who creates a barrier around her using her status, I guess out of insecurity because a lot of students challenge her, so she has to exert power to maintain position, and I feel unsafe around that supervisor.

The supervisor in this example appeared to have a need to exert her power to maintain her position. Another example of supervisors meeting their own needs was the failure to show up for scheduled supervision sessions, “a supervisor not showing up for appointments multiple times, not taking responsibility for it or not apologizing for it, and me feeling powerless to do anything about it.”

**Supervisees’ Positive Uses of Power**

**Sharing feedback with supervisors.** Supervisees played a role in exerting their power in the supervisory relationship. They shared perspectives and offered feedback to their supervisors, primarily using two methods: Open meetings and in semester-end written evaluations. Open meetings provided supervisees an opportunity to express their concerns publicly in an effort to bring about changes. Not all
participants agreed about supervisors’ openness to hearing supervisees’ ideas during open meetings, “they have the open meetings, they want to supposedly hear what you have to say to make you feel like you have more power in the decision making process, but really nothing ever gets done.”

Formal, written evaluations were another way in which supervisees expressed their ideas about supervision. Some said they had little power in the formal evaluation of their supervisors, but other participants were well aware of the effect these evaluations had on their supervisors, “You do have a little bit of evaluative power and if they get negative reports consistently. . .” It is clear then that supervisors and supervisees have some power through the evaluative processes.

Supervisee–peer power. Supervisee–peer power refers to the power of supervisees to be influential when sharing information with their fellow supervisees. Supervisees could influence their peers’ thinking about supervisors and gain power from other supervisees when they “stood together” on issues or concerns. The power of a group of supervisees was much greater than the power of just one, “I mean as a group, we might have more power than our supervisors and we influence what happens by going to the director of the program if we’re not satisfied with what’s going on.”

Another aspect of supervisee–peer power was the ability of supervisees to share knowledge about particular supervisors with other supervisees, “We talk about different supervisors, what their styles are, what we like about them, what we don’t like . . . that gives the students power because then they have some information about different faculty.” The ability to warn potential supervisees was also powerful for supervisees:

You could undermine [the supervisor] and [tell others] they’re incompetent or they’re not respectful…but I can talk with other people that are seeking degrees and steer them away from the possibilities at times.

Supervisees’ withholding information. Supervisees could decide what personal or professional information to share with supervisors, “I decide what I’m going to share with them, and what I don’t. I pretty much structure our time in what I want to talk about, and the cases that I want to discuss. So I’ve got some power.” Withholding information from supervisors could include personal or case/client-related information. The following example was from a supervisee who withheld case-related information: “If the topics are really up to me, that I can really steer it one way or another, I could very easily steer it away from a client that I didn’t want to talk about.”

Supervisees as consumers. Some supervisees viewed themselves as having a certain level of power in the supervisory relationship by virtue of being consumers. One described it this way: “Yes I do [have power] because the supervisor is in essence working for me in that time, that’s the way I look at it, as that they’re in there to help me, I am the consumer.” However, being consumers of supervision did not guarantee that supervisees felt a sense of power. One distinguished being a student-consumer from being a consumer in the “real world.”

I think as a student it’s forgotten that we’re also consumers. We pay a lot of money and make a lot of sacrifices to be students. But yet it’s almost like my dollar carries more weight in the real world when I’m paying someone weekly, instead of paying a big chunk of money when I pay my tuition towards my supervision credits.

Supervisees’ Negative Uses of Power

Supervisees’ misuse of power. Although it is possible for supervisees to misuse their power in a variety of ways, very few such incidents were reported from this study’s participants. Those that did occur concerned violating supervisors’ confidentiality, and/or failing to directly address concerns with supervisors.

An issue came up and I learned something about one of my supervisors that I didn’t know was secret at the time I learned it, and so I revealed it to somebody else . . . and [subsequently] I learned that it was not common knowledge, and so that may be an abuse of [power, even though] I wasn’t trying to be malicious.
Other participants described failing to follow proper conflict-resolution channels or talking to a higher-up rather than the supervisor about a problem as a misuse of power, but none described actually misusing their power.

DISCUSSION

Understanding the Results

The results of this study provide insight about how supervisees perceive the use of power by their clinical supervisors. Consistent with previous studies (Goalstone, 1997; Prouty, 1997), supervisees expected their supervisors to have and use power. Moreover, they viewed appropriate use of this power, even when uncomfortable to them, as contributing to their clinical growth. A good example of this is the fact that participants expected to be evaluated in supervision and none described this evaluation in negative terms. They valued evaluation as a time to be informed about their strengths and weaknesses, so they could improve themselves through future supervision. What makes this finding especially interesting is that one might expect evaluations, one of the most potent uses of power by supervisors, to be negatively experienced by some supervisees. However, even critical evaluations were viewed positively, especially when supervisees expected evaluation and when it was conducted in a formal context.

A second significant finding was that participants predominately described power use in positive terms. This is evident in the number of positive categories compared with the number of negative categories for both supervisors’ and supervisees’ uses of power; however, the differences between positive and negative uses of power are not always clear. A use of power that might, at first glance, appear negative, might actually have positive ramifications. For example, a supervisor who “imposes” his/her theoretical orientation on supervisees may appear to be abusing his/her power to the supervisee, whereas the supervisor’s goal is actually to empower the supervisee by expanding his/her ability to work from different models. Conversely, participants described withholding information as a positive use of power. It is possible that supervisors would view some forms of supervisee withholding information as negative. In this study, however, only supervisees were interviewed. Future studies that examine supervisors and supervisees may find that view of power use in supervision is contextualized—that is, dependent on the person and the situation.

Empowerment and collaboration were seen as positive uses of power by supervisees. None of them described collaboration or empowerment in terms of ignoring or eliminating the power differential between themselves and their supervisors. Instead, they saw supervisors as overtly using their power to lift up the supervisee, for example, by working to increase supervisees’ confidence or by affirming their knowledge. Power was clearly present within this empowerment. Similarly, collaboration in supervision was viewed as acting “as if” there is an equal status between supervisor and supervisee, if only temporarily. With collaboration, there is a mutual sharing of ideas and working together as colleagues. This does not diminish or eliminate supervisors’ power. Supervisees know they will eventually be evaluated, yet they clearly enjoyed being treated as a colleague during some part of the supervisory relationship. Although there is conceptual overlap between empowerment and collaboration, there seems to be a clear distinction between the two in terms of the degree of overtness in the exercise of power by the supervisee.

In this study, abuses of power were rare. Many participants spoke of one or two incidents of abuses of power; some did not cite any power abuses. In contrast, misuses of power seemed to be more common, especially when a supervisor’s use of power may have been uncomfortable to the supervisee. This failure to find many abuses of power may be a function of the participants’ particular program, given that there have been many discussions in the literature of negative power uses, such as boundary violations, sexual contact/harassment, providing therapy to supervisees, forcing supervisee self-disclosure, overemphasizing supervisee mistakes, psychopathologizing supervisees, verbally attacking supervisees, and forcing adherence to a supervisor’s theoretical orientation (Bonosky, 1995; Martinez et al., 1999; Porter, 1985; Porter & Vasquez, 1997).

The results of this study must be understood in context of its limitations; the primary limitation is that only supervisees were interviewed. Interviewing supervisors would add to the richness of an understanding.
of power use, because they are likely to have different perspectives of power use, because they are likely to have different perspectives of power in the supervisory relationship, which may alter the themes. For example, in this study, supervisees described a number of ways in which their supervisors used power, but they described fewer ways in which they themselves used power in the supervisory relationship. If supervisors were interviewed, it is possible they would be able to expand on the way supervisees use or misuse power. As noted previously, supervisors may also have different experiences of (and use different labels for) the power uses attributed to them by supervisees. For example, participants identified favoritism as a use of supervisor power in which certain supervisees get special treatment. Supervisors, if asked about favoritism, may see the same situation as merely a good supervisor-supervisee “fit.” This would be a more neutral manifestation of power. Supervisors may also say that supervisees have a role in creating favoritism by being cooperative supervisees.

Another limitation is that, to help facilitate a sense of safety in the interviews, supervisees were instructed to reflect on all their supervisory experiences. Because of this, one could argue that the precise nature of any one supervisory relationship was lost. For example, when a participant described a negative experience of power, it remains undetermined how much that one experience affected that particular supervisory relationship. Moreover, the authors took extraordinary steps to protect participants’ confidentiality, in part because MFT is a small field. This protection of confidentiality comes at the expense of a rich, thick description of the participants and a more contextualized understanding of their reported experiences.

Because only supervisees in an academic setting were interviewed, many of the identified themes of power use were limited to that setting. However, it is likely that power uses may be similarly experienced in agency settings. For example, formal evaluations do occur in agencies through performance evaluations. In contrast, the explicit expectation of learning is unique to the academic setting. Furthermore, interviews took place in only one academic setting. Other academic programs may have different elements that influence power in supervision.

The lack of ethnic and racial diversity among the participants is a substantial concern in understanding this study’s findings. If participants were more ethnically and racially diverse, the interviews may have resulted in a more complex picture of power. For example, supervisees of color may experience power differently when working with Caucasian supervisors versus supervisors of color (Hays & Chang, 2003). Also, because demographic information was not gathered for the supervisors described by supervisees, it is impossible to determine how supervisor diversity, or lack thereof, affected supervisees’ views. Power dynamics may be different in supervisory relationships in which supervisors and supervisees have different social characteristics.

Recommendations for Supervisors and Supervisees

The results of this study highlight that positive uses of power can enhance the supervisory relationship. Previous research has touched on this important theme. Kaiser (1992) suggests that it is imperative for supervisors to model appropriate uses of power for supervisees, so these therapists-in-training will appropriately use power with their clients. Future research could explore the isomorphism between, for example, empowerment in the supervisory relationship and empowerment in the therapeutic relationship.

One of the most important ways in which supervisors can model appropriate and positive uses of power is to have open discussions of power. Hawes (1998) suggested open discussions of power between supervisors and supervisees and, indeed, participants in this study experienced open discussion of power as beneficial. Open discussion of power means: (a) using the term “power” when discussing it, (b) talking about power at the first supervision session, and (c) revisiting power as a discussion topic throughout the supervisory relationship. Following these guidelines will help ensure that supervisees feel safe in supervision.

Because safety is clearly identified as being very important in supervision, supervisors should think about what they can do to facilitate a safe environment in supervision. One way to do this is to discuss confidentiality with supervisees, focusing specifically on the limits of confidentiality within an academic setting. Students need to understand that, because supervisors have collaborative training-oriented
relationships with other supervisors and faculty, there is a high probability of information being shared about supervisees. Supervisors should make clear to supervisees what information will remain within the confines of the relationship and what will not. However supervisors decide to approach confidentiality, their approach should be made transparent to supervisees so that the supervisees will know what to expect from the relationship and can determine for themselves how much they wish to share in supervision. Exploring the limits of confidentiality can help supervisees feel safe, which facilitates growth in supervision.

Supervisors can actively collaborate with and empower their supervisees. Supervisors can empower by: (a) affirming supervisee’s knowledge or understandings as accurate, (b) allowing supervisees to make decisions regarding their cases, and (c) giving supervisees choices. Each of these actions can help affirm supervisees’ own sense of power. In addition, supervisors can foster a sense of collaboration by respecting supervisees’ preferred models of therapy and treating them like colleagues when discussing cases.

Finally, supervisors can be clear about their expectations, in part by providing explicit expectations that are linked to summative and formative evaluations of supervisees. By thinking through what is expected of supervisees, supervisors are likely to be more consistent in their evaluations. Transparency in the evaluation process can help supervisors be transparent at other important times; participants in this study seemed to describe supervisors’ misuses of power when they did not have a clear understanding of supervisors’ motivations and actions. Acknowledging mistakes and sharing decision-making processes with supervisees will help prevent misunderstandings and feelings of misused power.

This study also has implications for supervisees, who may not feel they have power in the supervision arena. They may find comfort in knowing that they are consumers of a service, and there are other people to speak with if they have a complaint about supervision. They can work with other supervisees to present a united voice to faculty about issues of concern to them. Supervisees also can take a proactive approach to increase their perceived power. For example, they can ask supervisors to clarify expectations in supervision. Supervisees also need to recognize that they may have power of which they are unaware and work to prevent their own power abuses.

The results of this study show that supervisees are affected by power in the supervisory relationship. We have provided a number of ways in which supervisors can positively use their power, based on interviews of supervisees in an academic program. We hope this study will stimulate even more research on power uses in supervision.

REFERENCES


Aldine de Gruyter.


