Supervisee Perception of Power in Clinical Supervision: The Power Dynamics in Supervision Scale

Ryan M. Cook  
The University of Alabama

W. Bradley McKibben  
Nova Southeastern University

Stefanie A. Wind  
The University of Alabama

Power dynamics in supervision have been routinely discussed in clinical supervision literature (e.g., Murphy & Wright, 2005; Porter & Vasquez, 1997; Szymanski, 2003, 2005). The power dynamics between supervisors and supervisees inherently exist as a result of the hierarchical structure of supervision. Failure to adequately attend to issues of power in supervision can result in ineffective or even harmful supervision. Currently, supervisors do not have an objective measure of power dynamics within the supervisory relationship or a tool that allows for ongoing measurement and discussion of power in supervision. The authors developed the Power Dynamics in Supervision Scale (PDSS) and investigated its psychometric properties with a sample of 267 supervisees. Results from the polychotomous Rasch model indicated that the PDSS items (n = 16) explained 51.77% of the variance as a single factor. Item locations on the logit scale indicate supervisees perceive differing levels of power, meaning that PDSS items adequately identified differences in power perceptions among supervisees. Supervisees perceived themselves as possessing the most power on maintaining healthy boundaries with their supervisors, a willingness to feel vulnerable in supervision, and feeling empowered in supervision. They also perceived their supervisors as possessing the most power in identifying interventions to use with clients, setting goals for supervision, and providing feedback about clinical skills in supervision. Implications for supervisors and supervision research are provided in light of the findings.

Keywords: supervision, power dynamics, Rasch modeling, psychology

Supplemental materials: http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tep0000201.supp

This article was published Online First June 28, 2018.

Ryan M. Cook is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Studies in Psychology, Research Methodology, and Counseling at the University of Alabama. His research interests include intentional non-disclosure, counselor decision-making, and clinical supervision.

W. Bradley McKibben is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Counseling at Nova Southeastern University. His research interests include professional counselor development and relational/cultural issues in clinical supervision. He has supervised master’s-level counseling practicum and internship students through a variety of supervision modalities, and he has taught and supervised doctoral-level counseling supervisors-in-training.

Stefanie A. Wind is an Assistant Professor of Educational Measurement in the Department of Educational Research at The University of Alabama. She conducts methodological and applied research in the area of psychometrics, with an emphasis on issues related to raters, rating scales, and parametric and nonparametric item response theory models for ratings.

The authors would like to acknowledge the research assistance provided by Bryant Abbott and Morgan Drake, The University of Alabama.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ryan M. Cook, Educational Studies in Psychology, Research Methodology & Counseling, The University of Alabama, 310A Graves Hall, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487. E-mail: rmcook@ua.edu

© 2018 American Psychological Association. 1931-3918/18/$12.00 http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tep0000201
tion. Currently, supervisors do not have an objective measure of power dynamics, supervisees’ understanding of power dynamics, or supervisees’ perceptions of sources of power within the supervisory relationship. Accordingly, we sought to create the Power Dynamics in Supervision Scale (PDSS), an instrument developed using Rasch modeling that is designed to measure where supervisees perceive power lying between them and their supervisors across multiple sessions. The PDSS is a brief, 16-item tool that supervisees and supervisors can easily utilize to understand and explore the supervision experience.

Conceptual Framework of Power Dynamics in Supervision

Power in supervision has been most commonly discussed through the lens of feminist supervision with emphasis on the supervisor using power diligently (e.g., Nelson et al., 2006; Porter, 1995; Porter & Vasquez, 1997; Szymanski, 2003, 2005). Power analysis, whereby supervisors and supervisees openly discuss inherent power differentials in the supervisory relationship, is a core function of a feminist-oriented supervisory approach (Szymanski, 2003, 2005). Through this approach, power can be used in the supervisory relationship to benefit the supervisee by facilitating their autonomy and empowerment (Porter & Vasquez, 1997). Also, supervisors create an environment of safety whereby supervisees feel their ideas and input are valued and in which supervisees feel that their strengths are recognized (Porter, 1995; Porter & Vasquez, 1997; Szymanski, 2003).

To amply address power dynamics in supervision, Szymanski (2003) suggested that supervisors explain the supervision process, define the roles and confines of supervision, and encourage discussions of potential boundary issues (e.g., sexual attractions, multiple relationships). She also noted the importance of supervisors reflecting on their privilege, which might contribute to the power dynamics in supervision. Hernández and McDowell (2010) also highlighted cultural identities and social norms as particularly salient because supervisors and supervisees influence the supervisory relationship by virtue of privilege or lack thereof.

In a study especially important to the current investigation, Murphy and Wright (2005) explored supervisees’ perceptions of positive and negative uses of power in supervision. They found that supervisees perceived positive uses of power as including (a) facilitation of discussions of power, (b) sharing ideas, (c) providing feedback, (d) evaluations, (e) empowering them as supervisees, (f) promoting safety in the supervisory relationship, (g) a collaborative partnership, and (h) defining the expectations of supervision. In contrast, supervisees perceived negative uses of power as including (a) preferential treatment toward one supervisee, (b) supervisors imposing their clinical style, (c) abusing power, (d) violating the supervisees’ confidentiality, and (e) supervisors prioritizing their needs over the supervisees. Regarding their own use of power, supervisees perceived their power as deciding what information to share with or withhold from their supervisors. Supervisees in this study also viewed themselves as consumers of supervisory services whereby they had an opportunity to learn from and provide feedback to their supervisors. Seemingly, both supervisors and supervisees exert power, which influences the outcomes of supervision.

The conceptual and empirical literature, although limited, highlights the importance of attending to power dynamics, as well as positive and negative uses of power in supervision. Although the literature informs the importance of identifying and attending to power dynamics in supervision, supervisors still lack a tool to help them examine power dynamics within their own supervisory relationships. Supervisors and supervisees are recommended to reflect on their supervision experience and issues of power that they identify (Porter & Vasquez, 1997). This leaves supervisors without the ability to operationalize important questions unanswered, such as the following: When do supervisees perceive power as being beneficial versus problematic? To what degree should a supervisor or supervisee possess power in the supervisory relationship? Most notably, where do supervisees perceive the power lying between them and their supervisor in regards to specific aspects of power? With no way to address these questions, supervisors may be, at a minimum, unknowingly providing ineffective supervision, but they might also be placing their supervisees and themselves at risk for legal and ethical ramifications (Ellis et al., 2014).

The Current Study

Mangione, Mears, Vincent, and Hawes (2011) found that supervisees were most often the ones who initiated conversations of power, but rarely did this dialogue result in substantive change in the relationship. An instrument that measures power perhaps could create an opportunity for supervisors and supervisees to engage in purposeful dialogue about the presence of power in supervision that would result in meaningful change. Thus, we sought to create the PDSS, which will provide supervisors with a measure of how their supervisees perceive power dynamics within their supervisory relationships. The PDSS is designed to be given to supervisees at the end of a supervision session to provide quick, objective feedback regarding the supervisees’ experience of their supervision session that can be utilized immediately.

We hypothesized a unidimensional structure of power dynamics, where higher scores indicate that supervisees perceived their supervisor possessing more power and lower scores indicating that the supervisees perceived themselves possessing power. Specifically, we sought to investigate the following research questions: (a) To what extent can the PDSS items be ordered to reflect different levels of power between supervisees and supervisors? and (b) What evidence is there that the PDSS items demonstrate acceptable psychometric properties, such that the instrument can be interpreted as a meaningful measure of power dynamics between supervisors and supervisees?

Method

Development of the PDSS

We used the following guidelines from DeVellis (2016) to develop the PDSS: (a) determine what to measure, (b) generate an item pool, (c) determine the measurement format, (d) expert review, (e) administer the survey to a development sample, and (f) optimize scale length. In determining what to measure, our goal was to develop an instrument that can identify where the power is perceived to lie between supervisor and supervisee. Coming from this perspective, we made three assumptions: (a) Supervision power dynamics are fluid and may transition between supervisee and supervisor; (b) power may be held more by the supervisor in
some areas, by the supervisee in others, and equally shared in others; and (c) power lying more or less with a supervisor or supervisee, or being equally shared, is not inherently positive or negative.

Based on the intended scope and purpose of the PDSS, we generated an initial item pool of 21 items derived from the literature on power in clinical supervision. Each item contained two dichotomous statements placed at opposing ends of a visual analog scale (VAS; see Table 1). We used this measurement format to score items rather than a unidirectional Likert scale (e.g., 0–4) in order to more clearly represent our view of power dynamics as a continuum between supervisors and supervisees. We also utilized a VAS rather than a Likert scale to better capture the fluidity of power dynamics. The VAS presents a sliding scale response format for each item. Item statements on the left anchor of the VAS reflected power held by the supervisee and were scored as 1. Item statements on the right anchor of the VAS reflected power held by the supervisor and were scored as 4. Participants also had the option of selecting not applicable for each item statement. These responses were scored as zeros and treated as missing in the analysis. Accordingly, we interpreted responses to PDSS items on the VAS such that higher ratings indicated that supervisees perceived their supervisor as possessing more power and lower ratings indicated that supervisees perceived themselves as possessing more power, with the midpoint as the “tipping point” toward supervisee or supervisor.

Next, we submitted the items and VAS to expert review. Specifically, we asked three professors, chosen based on their extensive research agendas in clinical supervision, to review the items and VAS for clarity and for content validity. Based on their feedback, we added 6 items and edited 25 to improve clarity. All experts commented that the VAS seemed to fit the items and that it seemed to measure where power dynamics lie in supervision. Following expert review, we administered the items to a development sample.

Procedure

To sample trainees receiving clinical supervision, we obtained a list of counseling psychology and school psychology programs accredited by the APA and counselor education programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) by using the APA and CACREP websites, respectively. We then identified the publicly available e-mail addresses of all department heads and clinical faculty at the APA programs and all faculty members from CACREP programs. This resulted in us contacting faculty at 64 APA counseling or school psychology programs and 274 counselor education programs after obtaining institutional review board approval. We emailed all faculty members and requested that they forward a participation request and Qualtrics survey link to any students who were enrolled in a counseling practicum, internship, or postdoctoral placement (school and counseling psychology programs only). The online survey included the PDSS, a demographic questionnaire, and two other instruments not analyzed for the current study.

Participants

In total, 267 master’s-level and doctoral-level trainees from counseling psychology, school psychology, and counselor education programs who were currently enrolled in counseling practicum, internship, or postdoctoral internship participated in this study. An additional 108 participants opened the study but did not complete any items. The participants’ ages ranged from 21–51 (M = 29.69, SD = 7.93). The majority of participants identified as White or Caucasian (n = 174, 65.2%) and female (n = 193, 72.3%). Most participants were enrolled in a master’s-level counselor education program (n = 158, 59.2%). The average length of the supervisory relationship was 7 months (SD = 9.26, Mdn = 4.0, n = 228). Full demographic information for both supervisees and supervisors is included in Table 2.

Analytic Approach

Because our focus was on exploring the psychometric properties of the PDSS with the goal of improving the instrument for future administrations such that it can be used as a communicative device in practical counseling settings, we used Rasch measurement theory (Rasch, 1960) to guide our analytic approach. Empirical evidence of fit to the Rasch model allows researchers to identify items that do not function consistently across persons and persons who are not measured consistently across items. Furthermore, because the Rasch model is based on invariant measurement, item and person estimates can be described on a common linear scale, thus facilitating communication about a variety of features of latent variables, including item ordering and person ordering.

Table 1
Sample Power Dynamics in Supervision Scale Items With the Visual Analog Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Statement</th>
<th>VAS Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I identified the goals for this supervision session</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My supervisor identified the goals for this supervision session</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had the power in our supervisory relationship in this supervision session</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My supervisor had the power in our supervisory relationship in this supervision session</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was able to speak freely in this supervision session</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I withheld information in this supervision session</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2
#### Supervisee and Supervisor Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Supervisee, n (%)</th>
<th>Supervisor, n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Androgynous</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>193 (72.3)</td>
<td>165 (61.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32 (12)</td>
<td>59 (22.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgender male</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender male</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not respond</td>
<td>37 (13.9)</td>
<td>42 (15.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/Black</td>
<td>11 (4.1)</td>
<td>20 (7.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>3 (1.1)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>8 (3)</td>
<td>5 (1.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern European</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino/a</td>
<td>13 (4.9)</td>
<td>13 (4.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaican</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>18 (6.7)</td>
<td>5 (1.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>174 (65.2)</td>
<td>181 (67.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not respond</td>
<td>38 (14.2)</td>
<td>39 (14.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training background</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical psychology</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>34 (12.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling psychology</td>
<td>53 (19.8)</td>
<td>52 (19.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor education</td>
<td>205 (76.8)</td>
<td>101 (37.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School psychology</td>
<td>4 (1.9)</td>
<td>21 (7.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>12 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>7 (2.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not respond</td>
<td>5 (1.9)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s level</td>
<td>158 (59.2)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral level</td>
<td>72 (26.9)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not respond</td>
<td>37 (13.9)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Ten (3.7%) supervisees specifically identified as cisgender in addition to their affirmed gender pronoun, and nine (3.4%) supervisors were identified as cisgender in addition to their gender pronoun.

### Data Analysis

We estimated supervisee (person) and attitude statement (item) locations using the Rating Scale (RS) model (Andrich, 1978):

\[
\ln\left[\frac{P_{ni=k}}{P_{ni=k-1}}\right] = \theta_n - \delta_i - \tau_k
\]

where \( \theta_n \) is location of supervisee \( n \) on the latent variable (i.e., the strength of the supervisees’ perception of their supervisor possessing power across the PDSS attitude statements), and \( \delta_i \) is the location of attitude statement \( i \) on the latent variable (i.e., the degree to which a particular attitude statement is associated with a power balance in favor of the supervisor across supervisees). The last term in Equation 1 is the location of the threshold between adjacent rating scale categories. When the RS model is applied, locations of each supervisee, attitude statement, and threshold are estimated on a common linear scale. The RS model also provides a variety of indices that summarize the degree to which the data correspond to the expectations of the Rasch model. In this study, we focus on two indices of psychometric quality: (1) model-data fit statistics and (2) separation statistics.

### Model-data fit statistics

Model-data fit analysis in Rasch measurement is conducted using residuals or discrepancies between observed responses and expected responses based on the model. Residuals are summarized using two mean square error (MSE) statistics: Infit MSE and Outfit MSE; standardized versions of these statistics are also available. These statistics can be calculated for individual items and supervisees, such that researchers can identify and explore misfit related to specific attitude statements and supervisees. Because Infit MSE is weighted by statistical information (i.e., variance or measurement precision), it is sensitive to less extreme unexpected observations. Outfit MSE is not weighted, so it is sensitive to more extreme unexpected observations.

The generally agreed-upon expected value for Infit and Outfit MSE statistics is 1.00, where values below 1.00 suggest less variation than expected and values above 1.00 suggest more variation than expected. In this study, we view the fit statistics as continuous variables, while recognizing the generally accepted values for rating scale items of about 0.60–1.40 (Bond & Fox, 2015; Engelhard, 2013) for MSE values. We also examined the standardized versions of these statistics, where acceptable fit is defined as \(-2.00 \leq \text{Infit} \text{Z or Outfit} \text{Z} \leq 2.00\).

### Separation statistics

Next, separation statistics describe the degree to which individual items and supervisee locations are distinct. Specifically, the reliability of separation statistic (Rel) is an index of the differences between individual items and individual supervisees. When there is good model-data fit, Rel can be interpreted similar to Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. A chi-square statistic can also be calculated that describes the degree to which these differences are statistically significant.

### Results

#### Preliminary Analysis

First, we examined the presence of missing data, and across all 27 items, 2.4% of the data was missing. It was not necessary to impute missing values because the Rasch model can provide estimates as long as there is sufficient connectivity between items and persons (i.e., each person responds to at least one item in common with another person, and each item has responses from at least two people; Schumacker, 1999). Next, we conducted a preliminary analysis to identify any items that demonstrated significant model misfit and thus warranted removal from the final scale. With all items included, there was adequate overall fit, where 49% of the variance in responses was explained by the model. However, fit statistics for individual items revealed 11 items with fit statistics that exceeded the range of generally accepted values: Items 1–3, 5, 7–9, 11, and 22–24. Accordingly, we removed these items from the scale in the subsequent analyses.

Prior to our final analysis, we confirmed the unidimensionality of the final set of PDSS items (\( n = 16 \)) using a principal components analysis (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy = .938; Bartlett’s test of sphericity \( p < .001 \)), and the results showed 51.77% of variance explained by a single component. The amount of variance explained by the first factor is well above the 20% critical value suggested by Reckase (1979) for Rasch analysis of potentially multidimensional scales. Further-
more, analysis with the RS model on the 16 items revealed that the
RS model explained 66.84% of the variance in PDSS responses.

We then checked for differences in participant responses based
on gender, race, training background, educational level, and length
of the supervisory relationship. We found no statistically signifi-
cant differences in main effects for gender, race, training back-
ground, and length of the supervisory relationship, but we did find
that master’s-level students responded statistically different from
doctoral students (χ²(2) = 18.7, p < .0001). The doctoral students
perceived themselves as possessing more power than the master’s-
level students. This finding may be explained by the differing
developmental levels of the supervisees. Whereas master’s-level
students are novices, doctoral students may be more development-
ally advanced supervisees given prior experiences in supervision
(Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010).
Given that our population included all of these subgroups of
participants and our dimensionality analysis suggested that the
construct was similar for all of the participants, we examined all
educational-level groups as a single group.

Summary Statistics

After we removed the severely misfitting items, we examined
summary statistics for the RS model (see Table 3). To provide a
frame of reference for interpreting locations, we centered the items
at zero logits (M₀ = 0.00, SD = 0.80). The average supervisee
location was lower than the average item location (M₀ = −2.48,
SD = .76), which suggests that the supervisees did not report a
strong imbalance of power in favor of their supervisors. For
supervisees and items, the average values of the standardized and
unstandardized fit statistics were within the range that previous
researchers have established as expected when data fit the model.
For supervisees, the reliability of separation statistic was 0.91,
χ²(266) = 2,457.0, p < .001; this value suggests that the final set of
PDSS items was sensitive to supervisees with different levels of
power perceptions. For items, the reliability of separation statistic
was 0.98, χ²(15) = 962.0, p < .001; this value suggests that the
PDSS items were distinct in terms of their difficulty to endorse.

Supervisee and Item Locations

The variable map (see online supplemental Figure S1) is a
 graphical summary of the supervisee and item estimates. The first
column is the common scale on which supervisee and item loca-
tions were estimated. The second column shows the locations of
each supervisee, where an asterisk represents two supervisees and
a period represents one supervisee. Supervisee locations ranged
from −6.23 for the supervisee with the highest perception of
supervisor power to 5.62 for the supervisee with the highest
perception of supervisor power. The third column shows the lo-
cations of the items. Item 6 (“I decided which interventions will be
provided ratings that were unexpected given their measures. An
examination of the residuals revealed that most of the unexpected
responses for Item 6 consisted of supervisees providing higher
ratings than expected based on the model. Conversely, most of the
unexpected responses for Items 4 and 27 consisted of supervisees
providing higher ratings than expected based on the model.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide psychometric evidence
for the PDSS, a measure of power between supervisees and su-
pevisors. Based on the results, we retained a single factor, 16-item
measure, which was consistent with our hypothesized unidimen-
sional structure. The results suggest differing levels of perceived
power by supervisees, meaning that PDSS items adequately iden-
tified differences in power perceptions among supervisees. Super-
visors perceived themselves as possessing the most power on
maintaining healthy boundaries with their supervisors, a willing-
ness to feel vulnerable in supervision, and feeling empowered in
supervision. These three items provide important details regarding how supervisees perceive their use of power in supervision. It is important to note that the participants in the current study had worked with their supervisors for, on average, 7 months. Most field experiences are less than a year in length, so the findings from the current study may reflect how supervisees perceive power in more well-established supervision relationships.

Although maintaining healthy boundaries was where supervisees perceived possessing the most power, this item also elicited the most extreme unexpected responses, suggesting that supervisees provided higher scores (more supervisor power) than anticipated. Maintaining healthy boundaries is an important ethical responsibility of supervisors (APA, 2014; Murphy & Wright, 2005; Szymanski, 2003, 2005) that protects supervisee well-being. Supervisors are encouraged to define the roles and responsibilities for their supervisees clearly from the outset of the supervisory relationship (APA, 2014; Borders et al., 2014). The supervisees’ perceptions of healthy boundaries might be influenced by the large percentage of master’s-level students (59.2%) included in the current study. As novice supervisees, master’s-level students are less able to identify and articulate their developmental needs to their supervisors (Loganbill et al., 1982; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010). They may be confused about supervisors’ expectations of them and uncertain of what constitutes “healthy boundaries,” and they may therefore rely on their supervisors for guidance (Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010). It is plausible that healthy boundaries existed in the supervision relationships for the supervisees in the current study; however, the supervisors did not engage their supervisees in conversations about their roles and responsibilities in supervision adequately (Ellis et al., 2014).

Participants also viewed their power as being able to be vulnerable with their supervisors. A willingness to be vulnerable is imperative to supervise personal and professional growth in supervision, but it also means opening up to criticism and feedback from supervisors (Porter & Vasquez, 1997). Some supervisees may be concerned about negative consequences associated with their openness (Ladany, Hill, Corbett, & Nutt, 1996). Supervisees in this study also perceived themselves as being empowered in the supervisory relationship, which aligns with feminist supervision theory’s position that supervisors should create an empowering environment that facilitates supervisee autonomy (Porter & Vasquez, 1997). Supervisees who feel vulnerable or disempowered may feel that the supervisor holds more power in the relationship and/or is misusing power (Murphy & Wright, 2005; Porter & Vasquez, 1997). There are other potential explanations for our findings, such as Mehrabian’s three-dimensional model of pleasure, arousal, and dominance (Mehrabian, 1980). Perhaps the supervisees in this study experienced low dominance but high arousal due to the normative process of continually being evaluated (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Mehrabian, 1980).

In this study, participants perceived their supervisors as possessing the most power when identifying interventions to use with clients, setting goals for supervision, and providing feedback about clinical skills in supervision. These findings speak to the supervisors’ roles as experts and evaluators in the supervisory relationship (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). Such sources of supervisor power may explain why supervisees perceived their supervisors in positions of power in general. Interestingly, although the supervisees perceived their supervisors as possessing more power for these aspects of supervision, they still viewed these aspects of clinical supervision as shared between them and their supervisors. This finding may provide empirical evidence regarding the importance of collaboration and cooperation within the supervisory relationship (Rousmaniere & Ellis, 2013; Szymanski, 2003). Overall, we found evidence that supervisees are not only aware of power dynamics in supervision (Mangione et al., 2011; Murphy & Wright, 2005) but also able to detect differences in power between themselves and their supervisors across multiple areas. The PDSS allows supervisors to understand how supervisees perceive power in supervision and to attend to issues when needed (Porter & Vasquez, 1997).
Implications

Failure to address power is at the very least against best practices (APA, 2014) but may even result in ineffective or harmful supervision (Ellis et al., 2014). Ellis et al. (2014) suggested that attending to power dynamics in supervisory relationships is a requirement of supervisors to provide minimally adequate clinical supervision. Feminist tenets provide guidance for how supervisees can best attend to power dynamics in supervision. Supervisors should reflect on the supervisory process and invite feedback from their supervisees regarding their experiences in supervision (Porter, 1995; Porter & Vasquez, 1997). However, issues of power may go unnoticed or unaddressed by supervisors. Mangione et al. (2011) found that supervisors might be less aware of issues of power compared to their supervisees and infrequently engage their supervisees in a purposeful conversation about issues of power in the supervisory relationship. The PDSS creates an opportunity for formalized feedback to be quickly solicited, which allows for conversations about power in numerous aspects of clinical supervision as recommended by feminist scholars (e.g., Porter, 1995; Porter & Vasquez, 1997), thereby helping supervisors to provide adequate clinical supervision (Ellis et al., 2014).

The PDSS can also help to normalize power dynamics that may otherwise be difficult to discuss overtly (Murphy & Wright, 2005). Supervisees are often aware of the power dynamics in supervision, but some supervisees may be hesitant to share these concerns with supervisors due to fears of repercussions or negative evaluations (Ladany et al., 1996). The supervisor needs to take the lead in initiating these discussions and naming specific aspects of power directly (Mangione et al., 2011), which can be facilitated with the PDSS.

Supervisees perceived themselves as holding the most power in maintaining healthy boundaries, being willing to be vulnerable, and feeling empowered. Given that feminist supervision emphasizes supervisee autonomy (Szymanski, 2003), supervisors may focus on the aspects of clinical supervision in which supervisees perceive themselves as holding power as a means to facilitate autonomy (Porter & Vasquez, 1997). Supervisors can ask questions of their supervisees to better understand the factors that facilitate or inhibit these aspects of clinical supervision. Similarly, supervisees may perceive some aspects of supervision as responsibilities that supervisors should hold. Since supervisors have more experience and training (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014), supervisees may look to their supervisors for guidance in some areas. Even though supervisees may need additional assurance on certain tasks, it may be important for supervisors to approach these tasks as a shared experience (Porter & Vasquez, 1997). Supervisors may find it helpful to encourage supervisees to conceptualize a case before interjecting and to assist them in identifying interventions rather providing solutions (Mangione et al., 2011). In sum, a supervisee who perceives himself or herself as not holding power in some facet of supervision does not indicate a problem; supervisors need to have open conversations to determine how all parties can utilize power responsibly for the betterment of the supervisee and the protection of clients.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of the current study create an opportunity for future research. First, we recruited participants via faculty members and are thus unable to calculate a response rate. While we know 108 individuals opened the survey link and did not take the survey, we have no way of knowing who chose not to participate in the study and why. Also, we only collected data regarding the supervisees’ perceptions of power. Although the PDSS provides information about supervisees’ perceptions of power balance, it does not reveal the implications of power balance for individual supervisees or supervisors. In future studies, researchers should examine PDSS results alongside qualitative data to gain a better understanding of how supervisors and supervisees interpret information about power balance in supervision. Future researchers should explore how supervisors perceive the presence of power in supervision in relation to their supervisees’ perceptions of power. Future researchers should also investigate differences in perceived power dynamics based on professional and personal identities. Demographically, we sampled psychology and counseling trainees who were predominantly White (65.2%) females (72.3%). Our results may not generalize evenly across diverse cultural identities. Issues of privilege and oppression may be salient to how supervisees experience power in the supervisory relationship in more diverse supervision dyads. Relatedly, we found that master’s-level students perceived their supervisors as possessing more power in the supervisory relationship than did the doctoral-level supervisees. Thus, future researchers should more closely examine validity evidence for the PDSS in more diverse samples. Specifically, studies are needed that include investigations of person fit and differential item functioning across professional disciplines, cultural identities, and supervisee developmental levels. Finally, we believe that the PDSS has promise as an instrument that can be administered after each supervision session to improve outcomes in supervision, an investigation that was beyond the scope of the current study. Future studies should examine if the PDSS can be administered across multiple sessions to mitigate potential issues and improve the quality of supervision. Future studies should examine the relationship between the PDSS and other variables of interest (e.g., working alliance) in order to understand how power dynamics affect the supervisory process and outcomes.

References


Received August 28, 2017
Revision received March 1, 2018
Accepted March 23, 2018

E-Mail Notification of Your Latest Issue Online!

Would you like to know when the next issue of your favorite APA journal will be available online? This service is now available to you. Sign up at https://my.apa.org/portal/alerts/ and you will be notified by e-mail when issues of interest to you become available!