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## Experiences of the supervisory alliance and self-compassion in counseling and psychotherapy students

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# Experiences of the supervisory alliance and self-compassion in counseling and psychotherapy students

## Abstract

This qualitative research examined the relationship between supervisory working alliance, self-compassion and reflexive self-awareness with students enrolled in a graduate-level counseling or counseling and psychotherapy program ( $n = 48$ ). A thematic analysis using a Critical Incident Questionnaire was performed. The themes identified in this study indicate that both supervision alliance and self-compassion seemingly contribute positively to student supervisee learning experiences and to the development of their reflexive self-awareness. Moreover, the perceived learning achieved, and the development of reflexive self-awareness, reciprocally strengthened the supervisory alliance. Furthermore, the degree of supervisees' self-compassion as well as their perceived supervisory alliances had an impact on supervisees' experiences of the supervision process.

## Keywords

supervisory working alliance – reflexive self-awareness – self-compassion – career counseling and psychotherapist training

## Author's Notes

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Clinical supervision is seen as one of the most effective and efficient educational interventions for training in the fields of counseling and psychotherapy (Watkins & Milne, 2014). In addition to enhancing supervisee professional development and competence, supervision plays a key role in quality control of services and professional gatekeeping (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Supervision therefore occupies a prominent place in the educational curriculum and is a priority for regulatory boards serving to safeguard the quality of services offered and protect the public (Falender, 2018; Ladany & Inman, 2012).

Bernard and Goodyear (2019) point out that we are facing a second and even third generation of theoretical models in supervision. These more integrative models have emerged from three major theoretical streams, combining psychotherapy-based models, developmental models, and process models. Like in counseling and psychotherapy, the models are also influenced by preoccupations with evidence-based practice (Milne, 2017). Despite some differences, most of the models support the importance of developing a process of self-reflection (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). The development of reflexive self-awareness is identified as a key competency and prerequisite for learning and professional development (Rønnestad et al., 2018). Albeit necessary, it is a complex process. Little empirical research exists about how reflexive self-awareness develops in supervision. As the sections below articulate, the relationship between reflexive awareness, supervision alliance, and counselor self-compassion is still unknown. This study aimed to understand the role of alliance and self-compassion in the supervisory process for the development of reflexive self-awareness among supervisees in their initial training as counselors and psychotherapists.

## **Reflexive Self-Awareness**

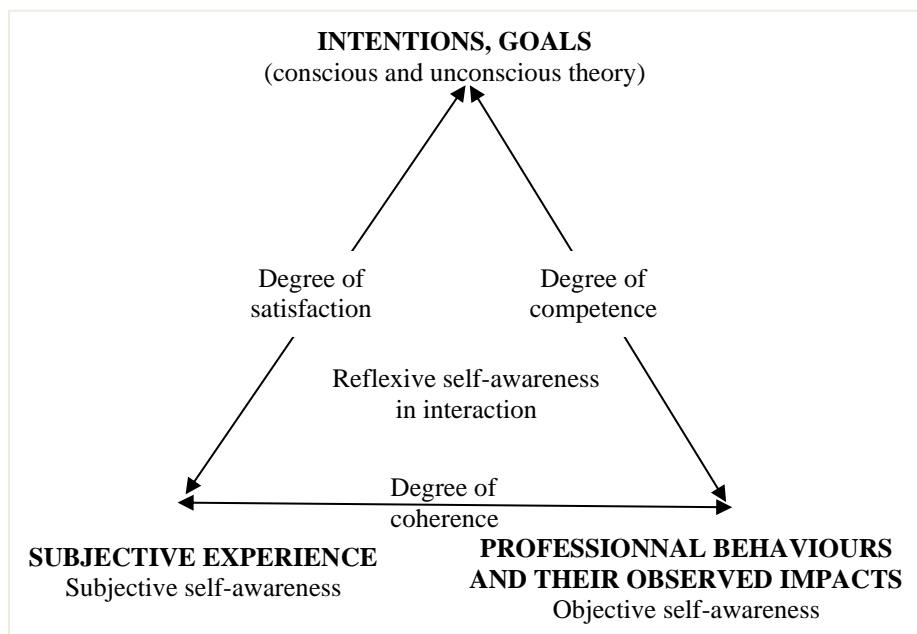
Reflexive self-awareness refers to the “process of experiencing oneself as a subject as well as of reflecting on oneself as an object” (Aron, 2000, p. 668). This process takes into account both subjective and intersubjective dimensions of psychotherapeutic action and the necessity of their mutual interaction in the development of reflexive self-awareness. Lecomte and Savard (2012) propose an integrative model for the development of reflexive self-awareness in supervision based on theory and practice. In this model, the supervisee’s self-awareness is developed through reflective self-awareness, which helps link the objective and subjective dimensions of self-experience. Reflexive self-awareness entails constant coordination of the subjective and objective perspectives of self. This can be facilitated by creating a safe place where supervision can meaningfully contribute to the development of the counselor or the psychotherapist’s ability to provide optimal responses (Lecomte & Savard, 2012). As illustrated in Figure 1, according to Lecomte and Savard (2012), supervision is based on three fundamental parameters.

For Lecomte and Savard (2012), the first pole, *subjective experience*, refers to the supervisee's experience (the "I" experience). In this pole, the supervisee explores and clarifies their subjective experience in interaction with others as well as the resulting impact on their professional behavior. Figure 1 shows that subjective experience is influenced by the intentions and goals determined by the supervisee's theoretical orientation (conscious) and personal theory of change (unconscious). The second pole, *professional behaviors*, refers to observation of the supervisee's interventions and the subsequent impacts on the client. These consist of the observable interventions and relational patterns in the intervention process and their effects on the client. Analysis of

their professional behavior is influenced by subjective experience and theoretical orientations (intentions). The supervisee speaks with objective self-awareness. The third pole of intervention is the supervisee's intentions considering their theoretical orientation and personal theory of change. It is the supervisee's theoretical orientation that will determine their expected professional behaviors.

**Figure 1**

*Fundamental Parameters of Supervision*



*Note.* Lecomte, C., & Savard, R. (2012). La supervision clinique: Un processus essentiel pour une pratique réflexive en santé mentale. In T. Lecomte & C. Leclerc (Eds.), *Manuel de réadaptation psychiatrique* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), p. 354. PUQ. © 2012 by Lecomte & Savard. Reprinted with permission.

According to Lecomte and Savard (2012), a discrepancy between intentions or goals and subjective experience influences the supervisee's degree of satisfaction. A discrepancy between intentions, as determined by the theoretical orientation (or course

objectives), and the impact of their professional behaviors will affect the supervisee's perceived degree of competence. Failure to implement their intentions may result in the supervisee perceiving themselves as incompetent or ineffective.

Finally, Lecomte and Savard (2012) point to how a gap between subjective and objective experience of professional behaviors determines the degree of coherence felt by the supervisee. This indicates the degree of difficulty the supervisee has integrating "who they are" with "what they do." The links, tensions, and interactions between the supervisee's intentions, professional behaviors, and subjective experience constitute the fundamental approach to the clinical supervision process. It is also important to underline the dynamic interplay in this model where the poles all influence each other. The creation of a working alliance as a safe space for self-reflection facilitates the exploration and understanding of the different poles. The model is used to interpret the data for this article.

### **Supervisory Working Alliance**

Like in practice and research in the fields of counseling and psychotherapy, the alliance in supervision has been established as "potentially one of the most important common factors in the change process of supervision" (Ladany et al., 1999, p. 447). The supervision alliance has come to be viewed as the "very heart and soul of the supervision endeavor itself" (Watkins, 2014, p. 26). The working alliance is defined as a collaboration for change which encompasses three aspects: (a) mutual agreement and understanding of the targeted goals; (b) each partner's tasks for attaining the goals; and (c) the bond required between the partners to sustain the effort (Bordin, 1983).

Although the importance of the supervisory alliance for the effectiveness and outcomes of supervision is widely discussed in the literature (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019),

there is surprisingly little evidence to support this assumption (Milne, 2017). Watkins's (2014) review of alliance studies highlights that only a small minority address the fundamental assumptions regarding the alliance, such as whether a strong alliance influences supervisee learning (competence acquisition) or their clinical effectiveness. Studies examining alliance in supervision have linked strong alliances to increased self-disclosure and willingness to reveal oneself (Ladany et al.; 1996; Mehr et al., 2010, 2015); to increased supervisee satisfaction (Ladany et al., 1999; Livni et al., 2012; Parcover & Swanson, 2013); and to reduced supervisee experiences of anxiety (Mehr et al., 2015). While these results seem encouraging for the professional development of supervisees, the link between these studied concepts and the development of intervention skills remains to be established. In addition, some research findings question the link between the alliance and the outcomes of supervision. A review by Milne and James (2000) concluded that it is possible to provide effective supervision without explicit emphasis on the alliance. Furthermore, an empirical study by Rieck et al. (2015) found that supervisor agreeableness had a significant negative association with client change scores (*agreeableness* referred to trust, altruism, modesty, and tendermindedness). Research by Ybrandt et al. (2016) also found that supervisees were able to create and maintain a strong working alliance with their clients while negatively evaluating their supervision alliances.

While the quality of the alliance may influence learning and the development of self-awareness, it also appears that other individual characteristics can be considered. There is growing evidence that self-compassion is an important individual characteristic which may help to protect against destabilizing issues arising from training as a counselor and psychotherapist and to promote the development of self-awareness (Beaumont et al.,

2016; Finlay-Jones et al., 2017; Fulton & Cashwell, 2015).

### **Self-Compassion in Supervision**

In recent years, empirical research has begun to focus on understanding factors and processes that promote subjective well-being and adaptive coping in education contexts and more specifically for counseling and psychotherapy trainees (Beaumont et al., 2016; Finlay-Jones et al., 2017). In this context, self-compassion in supervisees has garnered interest in research and practice regarding its potential to buffer against negative emotions or difficult supervisory events that may hinder their learning process.

According to Neff (2003), self-compassion involves "being open to and moved by one's own suffering, experiencing feelings of caring and kindness toward oneself, taking an understanding, nonjudgmental attitude toward one's inadequacies and failures, and recognizing that one's experience is part of the common human experience" (p. 224). Self-compassion has three basic interactive components which each have a positive and a negative pole: self-kindness versus self-judgment, a sense of common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification.

Research suggests that self-compassion can assist in reducing anxiety and distress in counseling and psychotherapy trainees (Fulton & Cashwell, 2015). Self-compassion has also been found to contribute to emotion regulation, attenuating students' reactions to negative events (Finlay-Jones et al., 2017; Leary et al., 2007), as well as lower experiential avoidance and enhance session depth (Fulton, 2016). Moreover, research into initiatives designed to promote the practice of self-compassion among counseling and psychotherapy students suggests several benefits for learning and developing intervention skills. They include increased self-awareness, compassion for self and others, therapeutic presence,



empathy, self-acceptance, capacity to deal with negative emotions, positive impact on the relationship, and other intervention skills (Boellinghaus et al., 2013; McCollum & Gehart, 2010). Despite these encouraging results, self-compassion has not yet been explored in the context of supervision.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to better understand how alliance and self-compassion can support the development of reflexive self-awareness among supervisees in the initial training phases of counseling and psychotherapy. This study aims to answer the following question: How is the development of reflective self-awareness in supervisees supported by clinical training supervision?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants were 48 graduate-level counseling and psychotherapy (personal counseling) students from three universities in Canada where students' training involves counseling and/or psychotherapy with the community. All participants were working with clients as part of their training, under the supervision of professors at the university or professionals working in the field, hired as supervisors from outside the university (supervisors,  $n=13$ ). Regulatory bodies linked to these programs require supervisors to have a minimum of 3 to 5 years of professional experience. The clients were a community sample of persons using the counseling or psychotherapy services at the university clinics. Considering the research question, the study focuses on the supervisees. A total of 48 supervisees participated (age  $M = 29.77$ ;  $SD = 10.55$ ). The participants were all European Canadian and predominately female (41 females and 7 males). Twenty-eight students were enrolled in a career counseling program and twenty were counseling and psychotherapy

students.

Supervision frequency and modes varied among the study programs where data was collected. Exploration revealed no differences between groups on the nature of critical incidents reported by students. The supervision sessions took place over the course of one semester. Three individual supervisions were evaluated in this research: at the beginning, middle, and end of the supervision process (weeks 3, 8 and 12). Students were recruited on a voluntary basis through in-class presentations and information emails.

### **Measure and Procedure**

The Critical Incidents Questionnaire (CIQ) (Heppner & Roehlke, 1984), a self-report questionnaire, was used to collect qualitative data on critical incidents occurring under supervision. Critical incidents are recognizable turning points resulting in perceived change in effectiveness. The examination of critical incidents is often used to better understand and consider various psychosocial constructs contained in individuals' subjective and intersubjective experience (Leclerc et al., 2010). This method has been used on several occasions in the field of supervision (e.g., Parcover & Swanson, 2013) and is recommended by Williams et al. (2008) as a measure of reflective practice.

For this study, a critical incident was defined as an occurrence resulting in significant perceived impact, either positive or negative, on learning. Supervisees were asked to respond to the following questions: (a) Describe any such incident which occurred during the last supervision session. (b) What made this a critical incident for you? (c) What did you want to gain from this supervision session, and did you? (d) What, if anything, was different about this session compared to previous ones? (e) What else occurred that was noteworthy?

Each participant completed a sociodemographic questionnaire prior to the beginning of their supervision process. All data was collected online. To ensure confidentiality, no identifying information was recorded on the measures; instead, paired questionnaires were marked with a random alphanumeric code (e.g., S001). The names of participants used in this text are fictitious. The procedures used in this study were approved by university research ethics boards.

### **Analytical Method and Epistemology**

This research is based on the pragmatic paradigm. This worldview is not committed to any system of philosophy and reality and the method is chosen for its relevance to the research question (Creswell, 2014). The aim of this research is to improve supervision practices. To this end, the study attempts to clarify what influences the development of reflexive self-awareness from the supervisee's point of view. The reflexive thematic analysis method was used due to its epistemological flexibility, relative simplicity, and appropriateness for the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willig, 2013). This is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this method, reflexivity, "the researchers' insight into, and articulation of their generative role in research, is key to good quality analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 9). Thus, themes are analytic outputs which help to understand what is significant for the development of the supervisee's reflective self-awareness.

Theoretical thematic analysis was applied to the research question. As pointed out by Braun and Clarke (2022), this tends to be driven by the researchers' theoretical or analytical interest in the area and is thus more explicitly deductive. However, attention

was paid to themes that can be identified from the data (i.e., data driven or inductive) without trying to fit the theme into a pre-existing coding frame.

### **Thematic Analysis Procedure**

Item responses collected through the CIQ were uploaded into NVivo 12 qualitative data management software. A time marker and information on the experiment site were introduced into the material (time 1, 2 and 3; site 1, 2 and 3). These elements made it possible to follow the evolution of each participant throughout the supervision process. Analysis was then conducted using alphanumeric codes only.

The phases of reflexive thematic analysis identified by Braun and Clarke (2012) were then used. The principal investigator initially familiarized themselves with the entire data set. Systematic data coding based on conceptual definitions of constructs studied in the research was then conducted. In this research, the codes refer to linguistic manifestations of constructs. For example, "I agree with the proposed direction" (goals), "supervision was effective" (tasks), and "I have more confidence in my supervisor" (bond) are manifestations of alliance. "To be empathetic to oneself" is a manifestation of self-kindness, one of the dimensions of self-compassion. In contrast, linguistic manifestations where the person is critical of themselves reveal self-criticism ("feeling incompetent" or "ashamed of their performance"). For objective self-awareness, attention was paid to expressions such as "I realized" or "I became aware of." Subjective awareness was linked to manifestations such as "I felt" or "I explored my feelings." As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012), particular attention was paid to similarities between participants from the beginning of coding. This enabled identification of common characteristics of experiences analyzed and thus, possible associations between the themes: supervisory alliance, self-

awareness, and self-compassion). The first author then created themes referring to links between the different constructs. He is a supervisor with a Ph.D. in career counseling and over 15 years of experience as a guidance counselor. The other authors, all professors in career counseling or psychotherapy, audited the themes to include their input. The third author is also one of the authors of the theoretical supervision model described above. This last step helped the authors to refine and define the themes. The transcripts were selected for their salient representation of the phenomena studied, and for recurrence.

The trustworthiness of the methodology and findings was ensured by applying the four criteria recommended for qualitative research: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Chwalisz et al., 2008). Strategies for increasing credibility included a consensual validation and cross-analysis process to assess the quality of results by other researchers involved in writing this article. The first author kept an audit trail, including annotations and a research diary to ensure dependability. The research diary also helped the author to engage in reflexivity throughout the analysis, also contributing to confirmability. Regular supervision was requested from the first author to ensure the transferability of the analysis. This helped to clarify the different themes and led to reorganization of the thematic structure.

## **Results**

The reflexive thematic analysis uncovered three themes: (a) alliance supports the evolving nature of learning, leading to the development of reflexive self-awareness; (b) alliance ruptures and the nature of reported critical incidents; and (c) self-compassion supporting the development of self-awareness and learning. To explore the links between the constructs, the supervision model of Lecomte and Savard (2012) was used.

## **Theme 1: Alliance Supports the Evolving Nature of Learning, Leading to the Development of Reflexive Self-Awareness**

The relationship between the alliance and the development of reflexive self-awareness is illustrated by Anne: "A better relationship between the supervisor and myself allowed me to open up more which helped me to understand my own personal dynamics." This is echoed by Paul, "I felt a kind of therapeutic relationship with my supervisor [...] which helped me to address my vulnerability and to clarify what was holding me back in my sessions with my client." For many supervisees, creating and cultivating a strong alliance provided a supportive and validating space which encouraged exploration and fostered clarification of tensions between subjective experiences, intentions, and professional behaviors. As previously mentioned, exploring, clarifying, and modifying the gaps and tensions between these three parameters (supervisee's degree of satisfaction, competence, and coherence) seems important for engaging supervisees in the development of self-awareness.

Rosalie's case is a salient example of how the alliance contributes to the evolution of supervision goals and fosters engagement in reflexive self-awareness. Initially, the incident she reported had to do with knowledge (case conceptualization which refers to the pole of intention) and know-how (professional behavior to be applied based on the case conceptualization). She noted that supervision had provided her with:

Clear and specific advice on interventions to put into practice with my client at the next meeting [...] I also received an analysis of the client's situation that helped me understand her better. And tools to start this reflection to help me understand on my own in the future and be more autonomous. (site 3, time 1)

Rosalie's expression of satisfaction with her progress and feeling of greater autonomy suggests that her supervisor reinforced the alliance by intervening on her degree of competence. For example, Rosalie noted, "My supervisor was very kind and gentle, which made it easier to talk about what came up in the session with her." She added that she felt "reassured" by the supervision. The establishment of this alliance seemed to foster enhanced learning later in the supervision process. In the following excerpt, supervision seemed to influence Rosalie's sense of coherence, resulting in a more consistent use of self in intervention. Rosalie's comments suggest better integration of integration practical (know how), and personal knowledge.

We dug down to understand the dynamics between the client and myself and how I functioned. The focus is more on me, because I realize I need to understand myself to intervene successfully [...] This investigation has allowed me to better understand myself as a human being and as a professional. I can now recognize what I'm experiencing when a similar situation occurs, and determine what may harm me and what to do instead. (site 3, time 2)

In this excerpt Rosalie seemed to become more aware of her own dynamics and understand their impact on how she intervenes. This led to a clearer understanding of herself as a professional and a person.

## **Theme 2: Alliance Ruptures and the Nature of Reported Critical Incidents**

The CIQ asked supervisees to report incidents that impacted their competency development. However, when there appeared to be a rupture in the alliance, many supervisees referred to their perception of relational issues or supervisory approach rather than what they had learnt. For example, several supervisees mentioned feeling they did

not have enough time or space to discuss important topics or that they did not understand their supervisor. This manifestation of alliance rupture regarding the goal or task suggests that topics of importance to the supervisees remained unresolved or the goals were not clearly understood. Supervisees often expressed negative feelings about the supervisor or supervisory process in the case of such critical incidents.

Stephanie's experience (site 1) illustrated how an alliance rupture can interfere with the supervision process. Her identified critical incident, at the beginning of the supervision process, reflects a difference between how she and her supervisor perceived her professional behaviors. Her comments suggest that the supervisor observed inconsistency between the supervisee's experience and how she perceived her professional behaviors. Apparently, the supervisee evaluated her interventions positively, which she had confirmed by other professors, who, according to her, supported her view. She considered her professional behaviors were coherent with her theoretical orientation. She mentioned that the supervisor's approach "was in opposition with her previous professional experience and beliefs" in this regard. Stephanie's responses suggest she did not feel her intentions regarding her interventions were understood. The supervisor appears to have attempted to explain her evaluation, but it did not correlate with Stephanie's perception. She perceived this as a "misinterpretation" of her behavior. This led to a difference in the conceptualization of the intervention where the supervisee expressed disagreement with the supervisor's approach.

Stephanie stated the supervisor's proposed intervention was not coherent with her own conceptualization ("my previous training tells me that this is not the way to handle this"). Again, rather than rectifying the discrepancy, she sought the opinion of other



professionals to validate her perspective as trust had not yet been established with her supervisor. In consequence, she perceived a lack of collaboration in their work together and noted the rupture in their alliance. Stephanie perceived a discrepancy in the degree of competence. She did not share her supervisor's conceptualization of the intervention, leading to a misunderstanding about the evaluation of her professional behaviors which seemingly caused dissatisfaction:

We don't agree on this. I have thought about it a lot and requested advice from my practicum professor and another professor, and they both support my view. I have not addressed this with my intern supervisor yet because they avoid confrontation, and we no longer work together again. I am also conscious of the power differential. [...] Our very first session went badly, actually rupturing a fledgling relationship so anything after that was bound to be better. The rupture was never addressed. The atmosphere of this session was similar to the very first session. (site 1, time 1)

Later in the process, Stephanie (time 2) reported another perceived misinterpretation of a clinical situation. Once again, it seemed the supervisor focused on the supervisee's degree of competence, saying Stephanie had done well in her interventions and could not have done more for her client. Stephanie's responses suggest that did not feel heard about her degree of coherence, causing another rupture. She stated, "I felt that my supervisor was misreading and jumping to conclusions, not hearing what I was asking for." About her supervisor's interpretation, she added, "I replied that it felt uncaring." The alliance seemed to be ruptured (e.g., "my supervisor assumed I was trying to challenge her experience and authority when I was concerned for a client's safety" and "I saw her projecting her own insecurity on me"). The supervision concluded with the supervisor

suggesting Stephanie seek another professional opinion. The influence of this rupture can be observed later in the process (time 3) when Stephanie, chose to avoid delving into deeper topics:

I was looking for an opportunity to discuss my cases and any issues that I might be struggling with. Given our past issues and the ruptured supervisory relationship, I kept things light and brought up issues that wouldn't cause her to overreact but that I still wanted help with because I recognized I could still benefit from her experience. (site 1, time 3)

Stephanie's critical incident shows she preferred to focus on knowing and knowing how, as she recognized the supervisor's clinical competence, which also avoided the tensions in their emotional bond. Her lack of trust seems to have prevented her from fully sharing her subjective experiences, leaving the supervision to focus on theoretical orientations and professional behaviors.

### **Theme 3: Self-Compassion Supporting Learning and Development of Self-Awareness**

Many supervisees experienced dissatisfaction with their performance and reported self-critical thoughts that seemingly affected their perceived degree of competence. They reported feeling shame and disappointment with their performance (e.g., "I was super-critical of myself" and "I feel like a failure"). We also noted many supervisees "putting pressure on themselves to succeed," "always being afraid of making mistakes," or often feeling "anxious about not doing the right thing," seemingly judging their learning with performance criteria. Many supervisees in the sample were seemingly destabilized by sharing openly about their subjective experiences and attempting to understand their professional behaviors and impact on their clients when in supervision. They reported

feeling "vulnerable," "fragile," or "shaken."

Self-compassion seems to have helped a number of supervisees to regulate destabilizing subjective experiences that affected how they measured their competence and coherence. Some supervisees reported they suffered in supervision but were also able to stay open to learning. They accepted to address these experiences in supervision which often led to heightened awareness of their psychological functioning and its influence on their relationships with others.

Amelia's case (site 3) illustrates how self-compassion served to support the development of reflexive self-awareness. From the beginning (time 1), Amelia reported, "having great doubts about her ability to become a good practitioner." In her next meeting (time 2), Amelia wanted to "discuss my interventions, which I considered to be poorly adjusted" where her low degree of satisfaction affected her degree of competence. The supervisor seemingly addressed this request by exploring her subjective experience (my interventions "were discussed, but based on my experience"), which unexpectedly led to a more vulnerable topic: her fear of "losing her relationships with clients."

Amelia progressed from self-critical discourse to expressing greater kindness toward herself ("willingness to take care" and "to be more empathetic toward myself"). She also remained open to learning and aware of her psychological functioning and how it influenced her relationships with others, i.e., she understood how past events may explain her fear of losing clients and in turn, influence how she intervenes. These comments suggest this self-understanding made her more open to learning. Addressing her limits in the supervisory context was apparently new to her:

I didn't think that supervision would take this turn, but in the end, it was very

beneficial for me, and for the supervisor, who was able to better understand my psychological functioning and its impact on how I intervene. It made me more aware of how certain past events still have a great impact on my present and are holding me back a lot. I want to address them, work on them, and to progress personally to become a better counselor. [...] I was able to be more empathetic with myself, which I'm not usually, especially not in supervision where my skills are evaluated. (site 3, time 2)

The establishment of a strong alliance from the outset, where Amelia stated she felt "recognized as a practitioner" by the supervisor, seems to have enabled Amelia to explore her limits. The excerpt suggests this resulted in self-awareness which fostered the supervisory alliance: the supervision "was beneficial to me and the supervisor." Self-compassion seems to have helped several supervisees in the sample regulate their emotions when their degree of coherence was challenged by discrepancies between their own perception of their degree of competence and their supervisor's observations. As previously suggested, this discrepancy between supervisee and supervisor can strain the alliance. However, it seems that self-compassion played a positive role in these situations, contributing to increased reflexive self-awareness and strengthening the alliance.

Suzanne's case (site 3, time 3) illustrated this dynamic when she reported wanting to address her "development points" during supervision. She noted that the supervisor remarked that she "still needs to progress in this respect" when talking about "advanced empathy skills." This suggests a possible discrepancy between the supervisor's assessment and the supervisee's perception of this competency (degree of coherence). The supervisee did not seem to be aware of this weakness. Suzanne seems to have been shaken ("moment

of doubt” and “questioning”) by this comment, which generated a self-critical discourse (“I felt incompetent as a counselor”). The intervention regarding the discrepancy in the degree of coherence seems to have affected the supervisee’s satisfaction and degree of competence. Comments suggested that Suzanne demonstrated self-compassion by acknowledging this limitation and by modifying her internal discourse. The result was recognition and a desire to improve the situation. This shift in discourse seems to have created openness to learning.

At one point, the supervisor and I discussed my development points as a counselor. Advanced empathy skills were discussed. They told me I needed to progress further on this point. At the time, I have to admit, I lacked confidence in my interventions and had doubts about my potential as a counselor, since empathy is central to my future profession. The incident was therefore critical because it immediately made me question myself. However, in retrospect, that feedback will allow me to develop and improve as a counselor, which can only be beneficial. I am grateful for such supervision. (site 3, time 3)

This excerpt and other critical incidents illustrate how self-compassion seemingly served to reframe the learning experience. Indeed, our analysis indicated that self-compassion helped change some supervisees’ internal discourse from self-criticism to self-kindness by normalizing their learning experiences. In many cases, this shift toward self-compassion was supported by alliances where the supervisor helped the supervisee to be more tolerant of their performance. Conversely, a lack of self-compassion on behalf of some supervisees seemed to interfere with the supervisory process and limit their learning.

Jennifer’s case (site 3) illustrates how self-criticism and difficulty regulating

negative emotion interfered with the supervisory process. In this example, the critical incident suggests a discrepancy between the supervisor and the supervisee on the degree of coherence about her interpretation of a psychometric test. Jennifer noted she was not aware she had misinterpreted a test and that this may have created tension in the client. The supervisor's intervention appears to have affected Jennifer's degree of competence, making her feel incompetent, causing humiliation and shame. She blamed and criticized herself and struggled to regulate her humiliation. In this case, the focus of supervision seemed to be on regulating her emotion of humiliation rather than learning or competency development. Difficulty regulating the experience of humiliation also seemed to strain the alliance. Despite Jennifer stating she did not blame her supervisor for the humiliation she felt, she expressed perceiving the supervisor's comments as confrontational and "undermined her sense of personal efficacy and pride."

I felt a sense of incompetence and that I'd made a mistake. I felt humiliated. However, I do not blame my supervisor for my feelings because he presented the facts respectfully and professionally. I wanted feedback on my skill development, as well as advice and feedback to supplement my psychometric report and progress notes. However, the critical incident mentioned above shook me so much that we spent a lot of time on this point. It was essential to review how to interpret and communicate the results of this test before my next meeting. We didn't have time to talk about other things I thought were important. (site 3, time 2)

As mentioned earlier, shame and humiliation can be barriers to learning and the development of self-awareness.

## Discussion

For many supervisees, establishing and maintaining an optimal alliance facilitated the creation of a reflective space conducive to exploring and understanding tensions between their intentions, subjective experience, and professional behaviors (objective awareness). As mentioned above, fully acknowledging discordant experiences between intentions, internal subjective experiences, and professional behavior enabled supervisees to integrate learning and develop reflexive self-awareness (Lecomte & Savard, 2012). More specifically, the alliance facilitated disclosures of self-doubt, dissatisfaction, incompetence, anxiety, and vulnerability for many supervisees. Questioning and expressing self-doubt about competence and effectiveness is considered necessary for developing self-awareness and, concurrently, intervention skills. Conversely, lack of disclosure is likely to hinder the supervisory process and may interfere with the supervisee's learning (Ladany et al., 1996). This is consistent with the literature supporting the idea that an optimal supervisory alliance may contribute to self-disclosure (Hess et al., 2008).

For most supervisees in our sample, the nature of their learning evolved throughout the supervisory process. In those cases, early critical incidents concerned greater understanding of the client, skill acquisition, or process conceptualization. This period was marked by self-doubt regarding their competencies. Supervisees supported by a strong alliance, i.e., by a supportive and validating supervisor, reported more critical incidents about their awareness of their own psychological functioning and how this influenced their relationships with others. This shift in the nature of their learning led to deeper exploration and self-understanding, often resulting in a stronger sense of coherence and a more optimal

use of self in intervention. This contributed to a sense of growth among supervisees and improved their integration of theoretical, practical, and personal knowledge.

Our results therefore highlight the importance of engagement in reflexive self-awareness; to begin by establishing a working alliance by reassuring the supervisee, then focusing on concerns about their initial needs, (even if they were more related to goals of knowledge or skill). This seemed possible when supervisors addressed the supervisee's subjective preoccupations by providing validating support. This fostered their engagement in the learning process, the development of reflexive self-awareness, and competence, which in turn also strengthened the alliance.

To this end, it seems important to maintain the dynamic interaction between the three poles of supervision. As Lecomte and Savard (2012) point out, exploring tensions focused on the supervisee's objectives and needs often prompts them to look for external causes and solutions. Thus, the client's characteristics, for example, can be considered as an initial exploration that would lead the supervisee to seek more technical or theoretical solutions. Such reflexive and empathic exploration may gradually lead the supervisee to realize that these external elements are not the only cause of tensions experienced between the three poles of supervision. This enhances the supervisees awareness of their psychological and relational functioning (e.g., redundant relational patterns), leading them to consider the influence of their own characteristics on their relational and intervention processes. This observed progression of self-awareness is consistent with supervision developmental models (e.g., Stoltenberg & McNeil, 2010) and empirical research. For example, Johnston and Milne (2012) suggest using a post-measure design that shows supervised individuals progress along two continuums, namely competence and self-



awareness. Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) also suggest that supervision can have an "impact" on what they call the reflexive capacities of practitioners.

In many cases, while alliances may create favorable conditions for learning and for the development of reflexive self-awareness, they are also strengthened by the achievement of these goals. This is consistent with Bordin's (1983) model, which asserts that dimensions of the alliance interfere with each other. Accordingly, completing tasks to achieve goals also strengthens the alliance.

Our results also illustrate how ruptures can occur and the effects they may have on the supervisory process. In this context, supervisors who focus on the degree of competence, while neglecting the degree of coherence, risk creating a rupture in the alliance. Focusing on perceived discrepancies in professional behaviors creates tension about intentions and goals. This may lead to negative experiences for the supervisee, rather than offer a validating response. In view of our results, it seems important to address the supervisees' expectations from the very beginning of the supervision process. Some supervisees reported that their needs were not met in supervision. This provoked them to question the organization of the supervision, creating dissatisfaction with the learning process. In turn, this dissatisfaction seemingly strained the alliance. According to Safran and Muran (2000), alliance ruptures can negatively impact the supervisee's learning process and left unaddressed, can further deteriorate the supervisory alliance (Watkins et al., 2016).

Our findings also suggest that self-compassion supports learning and the development of self-awareness for some supervisees by helping them to recognize and regulate difficult experiences that emerge during supervision. Self-compassion also

seemed to help mitigate self-critical discourse and facilitate reframing experiences. This in turn helped to regulate negative self-talk and feelings such as shame, humiliation, and incompetence. Self-compassion in supervisees seems to promote a balanced appreciation of both their limits and resources, not focusing exclusively on difficulties and mistakes. Our research highlights that supervisors can play a role in engaging supervisees' self-compassion. These findings are consistent with previous research in which self-compassion practices by supervisees, such as meditation, were found to contribute to the development of reflexive self-awareness, emotion regulation, and self-acceptance (Boellinghaus et al., 2013; McCollum & Gehart, 2010).

Our results suggest that self-compassion can be particularly beneficial for supervision given that the process of learning to become a counselor or psychotherapist can generate significant anxiety and shame, which can interfere with, and even inhibit, the learning process (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992), and contribute to avoidance, withdrawal, and limit self-awareness (Ladany et al., 1996; Yourman, 2003). Research also indicates that anxiety can influence the quality of the supervisory alliance (Hess et al., 2008; Mehr et al., 2010, 2015), as well as feelings of shame (Bilodeau et al., 2012). Self-compassion can contribute to the regulation of such emotions especially for novice practitioners who worry about intervening appropriately, understanding their client sensitively, or formulating accurately (Gilbert, 2011).

This research has certain limitations. The CIQ is a written self-report instrument which limits the possibility of probing questions. This may limit precision and collection of details available on the constructs being studied. It was particularly difficult to identify mindfulness and subjective awareness. Moreover, the alliance is recognized as a

collaboration between a supervisor and supervisee yet this study was limited to the supervisee's perspective with no direct access to the supervisor's parameters to explain our results. Finally, our sample consisted primarily of female European Canadians, which limits the transferability of our results to other populations.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Our results provide indications on how to promote learning and on how self-awareness unfolds in supervision by exploring and understanding the possible tensions between subjective experience, intentions, and professional behaviors, and their impacts. By taking into account the supervisee's degree of satisfaction, coherence, and competence, the supervisor can promote the development of the supervisee's self-awareness. The creation of a safe space in an optimal alliance is conducive to reflection and promotes this work. Establishing favorable conditions encourages the supervisee to engage in reflexive self-awareness. Achieving this goal can strengthen the alliance. Our results highlighted the importance of considering supervisee expectations from the very beginning of the process, even when they concern gaining theoretical or practical knowledge. By doing so, the supervisor can promote a supervisees' learning by encouraging them to develop their reflexive awareness.

Supervisees can also benefit from cultivating their self-compassion. Self-compassion plays an active role in facilitating exploration, clarification, and awareness of vulnerable areas. It also helps to regulate negative emotions such as anxiety and shame, helping supervisees to stay open to feedback, learning, and engaging in self-awareness. A receptive attitude can also strengthen the alliance as it is conducive to achieving supervisory goals. Better regulation of negative emotions about the subjective experience

can also impact the supervisee's degree of satisfaction, competence, and coherence, thus facilitating reflexive self-awareness.

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