Repairing the ruptured supervisory alliance: Humility as a foundational virtue in clinical supervision

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ABSTRACT
In this article we contend that supervisor humility is a critical variable in making rupture repair increasingly likely and give consideration to how that is so. Humility is defined and its research is briefly summarized. Humility’s definition is then applied to supervision, specific ways by which supervisors display humility in the supervision relationship are identified, and some researchable supervisor humility hypotheses are proposed. Two case examples are presented, one showing the effects of a lack of supervisor humility in instigating alliance rupture, the other showing the power of supervisor humility in instigating alliance repair.

KEYWORDS
Humility; supervision; alliance; rupture; repair

Paine, Sandage, Rupert, Devor, and Bronstein (2015) proposed that humility is an important psychotherapeutic virtue, presented a compelling case for why that is so, and identified several ways by which humility supports best practices in treatment (e.g., by increasing the likelihood of therapeutic alliance rupture repairs). We similarly propose that humility—involving openness, other-orientation, accurate self-assessment, and recognizing one’s own imperfections—is important as a clinical supervision virtue and subsequently attempt to mount a case as to why that is so.

We examine one particular reason that humility may matter most: making the repair of supervisory alliance ruptures increasingly possible. Because such ruptures have the power to disturb, derail, even destroy the supervisor-supervisee alliance (Bordin, 1983; Fleming & Benedek, 1964; Friedlander, 2015), the development of better understanding about what contributes to their repair would seem eminently valuable. We believe that the humility literature can prove highly instructive in that regard. Why is it that some supervisors may have difficulty acknowledging or correcting their rupture-inducing behaviors (i.e., behaviors that cause an alliance tear or strain), whereas other supervisors seem to have no such difficulty at all? Is there a variable or set of variables that, if in place, makes such corrective efforts far more likely to occur? We subsequently consider those questions, contending...
that humility is a necessary variable that opens the door wide to supervisory alliance repairs.

Watkins, Reyna, Ramos, and Hook (2015), integrating the apology/forgiveness and rupture/repair literatures, recently examined the power of supervisor apology on alliance repair. Our article is a follow-up and complement to theirs, in that focus is given to humility as being a necessary pre-condition of alliance repair. We integrate the humility and rupture/repair literatures and consider their supervision significance. Because the supervisor routinely is in a power position vis-à-vis the supervisee, sets the tone for the relationship, and is considered primarily responsible for conflict management (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Borders & Brown, 2005; Creaner, 2014), our focus is on supervisor as opposed to supervisee humility. Specifically, our focus is on situations where supervisors have committed alliance-rupturing behaviors, are open to considering their mistakes or errors, and desire to remedy them.

Although humility has long been recognized as an important component of good practice in feminist, multicultural, and reflective/competency-based supervision perspectives (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2015; Degges-White, Colon, & Borzumato-Gainey, 2013; Nelson et al., 2006; Porter, 2009; Tsui, O’Donoghue, & Ng, 2014), it has not been considered with a high degree of specificity or only some of its facets have been emphasized. To best understand the components of good supervision practice, defining and specifying the identified components of good practice would seem a critical first step. We hope to complement feminist, multicultural, and reflective/competency-based supervision perspectives by offering a more specific view on humility, its components, and its supervision benefits.

Two limitations of our proposals bear mention. First, although humility has been considered primarily with regard to religion and spirituality (Paine et al., 2015), its relationship with other diversity variables (e.g., race/ethnicity, culture, age) has been the subject of minimal research thus far; only recently has that begun to change (e.g., Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013; Krause, 2015). That lack of attention to diversity and humility should be borne in mind in considering what follows. Second, our own perspective on humility and rupture repair is inevitably Western influenced, and our treatment of those subjects may most reflect that Westernized perspective. Better understanding of how cultural differences—Western and non-Western—impact the humility and alliance repair relationship is a significant supervision issue yet to be addressed. Our subsequent proposals, based on the contention that humility is cross-culturally relevant for supervisory alliance repair, are offered as stimulants to further discussion of that issue.
Repairing the ruptured supervisory alliance

Supervisory alliance, alliance ruptures, and alliance repairs defined

The supervisory alliance is defined by three components: (a) the supervisor-supervisee bond; (b) the goals that guide the supervision process; and (3) the tasks that facilitate pursuit of supervision goals (Beinart, 2014; Bordin, 1983; Fleming & Benedek, 1964, 1966). The supervisory alliance is trans-theoretical, trans-cultural, empirically supported, and viewed as substantially impacting supervision process and outcome (Inman et al., 2014; Son & Ellis, 2013; Watkins, 2014a, 2014b; Wong, Wong, & Ishiyama, 2013). Any reflective supervision experience perhaps is only as good as the supervisor-supervisee alliance (Watkins, 2015).

A supervision alliance rupture is a tear or strain in the supervisor-supervisee alliance, where the quality of their working interaction is adversely affected (Friedlander, 2015; Ladany, Friedlander, & Nelson, 2005; Scaife, 2009). Ruptures can be highly problematic, but “to date authors have had little to say about alliance ruptures in supervision” (Friedlander, 2015, p. 178); that unfortunate reality needs correction. All supervisees will potentially experience a supervision rupture at some point during training (Creaner, 2014). Three major sources of supervision rupture are (a) mismatched expectations and miscommunications, (b) developmentally normative conflicts, and (c) problems of interpersonal dynamics (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). Role conflict, where supervisor and supervisee expectations are at odds, may be the most common source of alliance ruptures (Friedlander, 2015). If unaddressed, ruptures can fester and have corrosive alliance effects (Watkins et al., 2015). Because conflict can occur in any supervision relationship, supervisory alliance rupture appears to be a cross-culturally relevant concept (e.g., Bang & Goodyear, 2014; Tsui et al., 2014).

Rupture repairs are efforts that address and resolve the rupture-inducing issue (Ladany et al., 2005; Scaife, 2009). At least two steps are involved in rupture repair: (a) bringing up the rupture issue for discussion; and (b) discussing it openly with the supervisee (Grant, Schofield, & Crawford, 2012; Nelson, Barnes, Evans, & Triggiano, 2008). Those steps make alliance restoration increasingly likely. Through rupture repair, the supervisor models effective relationship repair behavior that reflects the Platinum Rule in action: Do unto others as you would have others do unto others (Pawl & St. John, 1998).

What role does humility play in alliance rupture repair?

Supervisor humility has been identified as one aspect of supervision rupture repair (Nelson et al., 2008; Scaife, 2009; Wade & Jones, 2015). But beyond simply recognizing its importance, the role of humility in supervisory rupture
repair has not been addressed. We propose that humility is a (if not the) critical component of any supervisory alliance rupture/repair effort and would like to consider how that is so.

**Humility: What is it? Why does it matter?**

Humility, long part of the philosophical and spiritual traditions of East and West, is a well-recognized warmth-based virtue and character strength within positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011; Tangney, 2009; Worthington & Berry, 2005). Humility conceptualization/research within the social sciences is largely a product of the past 20 years (Paine et al., 2015; Tangney, 2000). It remains commonplace for authors, when writing about humility, to use such descriptors as challenging (Exline, 2012), neglected (Tangney, 2000), overlooked (Paine et al., 2015), and difficult to define and measure (Davis et al., 2011; Davis, Worthington, & Hook, 2010). But important definitional, measurement, and research advances have been made, particularly within the past decade (e.g., Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Davis et al., 2011; Davis et al., 2010; Freitas, Martins, & Davis, 2014; Hook et al., 2013; Kruse, Chancellor, & Lyubomirsky, 2015).

**Humility defined**

Part of the difficulty in gaining a proper perspective on humility may stem from its two Latin roots, *humilis* and *humus*; *humilis* means on the ground, whereas *humus* refers to the earth. “From these lexical roots, humility could be construed as a somewhat negative characteristic synonymous with lowliness, weakness, or humiliation” (Rowatt et al., 2006, p. 198). Other characteristics mistakenly identified as aspects of humility include low self-esteem, meekness, unassertiveness, and self-deprecation (Tangney, 2000, 2009; Templeton, 1997). But as Emmons (1998) made clear, the humble person is anything but the “stoop-shouldered, self-deprecating, weak-willed soul only too willing to yield to the wishes of others” (p. 33 [from unpublished paper cited in Tangney, 2009]).

Building on Tangney’s (2000) original review, current conceptualizations identify at least four defining features of humility: (a) openness; (b) willingness and ability to accurately assess one’s own personal characteristics and achievements; (c) ability to recognize one’s own imperfections, mistakes, and limitations; and (d) other-orientation (Bollinger & Hill, 2012; Paine et al., 2015; Tangney, 2009; Worthington, 2007, 2008). Other frequently identified aspects of humility include having an appreciation of the value of others (e.g., prizing difference and diversity), having a low self-focus, and not feeling and acting pridelful and arrogant (cf. Tangney, 2009; Worthington, 2008). In contrast to past conceptions, humility is now viewed most favorably—a quality eminently life-enhancing in all respects.
As Paine and colleagues (2015) asserted, “Openness underlies all components of humility” (p. 7). Openness occurs on two broad fronts: (a) examining oneself and one’s characteristics, and (b) listening to and learning from others. The humble person is open to unfamiliar people, places, and ideas; that reality is captured in recent efforts to elucidate the cultural implications of humility (Hook, 2014; Hook et al., 2013; Hook & Watkins, 2015; Hook et al., in press).

Two other key features of humility—accurately assessing one’s own personal characteristics and achievements and being able to recognize one’s own mistakes and limitations—are inextricably intertwined. Both require being willing to look within and face the results of that which is seen. Humble persons work to improve what they can but also accept their humanness, that imperfection is a reality of life. The humble awareness and acknowledgment of limitations, considered important across our world’s major religions, are also viewed as important in nonreligious contexts and appear multiculturally robust (Paine et al., 2015).

Other-orientation refers to being healthily preoccupied with others. Although involving a low self-focus or being “unselfed” (Tangney, 2009; Templeton, 1997; Worthington, 2007), humility is more than those features alone: it is an ever-outward expansion of interest and involvement in the whole of humanity (Bollinger & Hill, 2012; Means, Wilson, Sturm, Biron, & Bach, 1990). Being other focused also means being able to keep in check any feelings of pride and arrogance (Worthington, 2008).

Humility is conceptualized as state and trait (Tangney, 2000, 2009). Trait/dispositional humility refers to humility’s being a stable character feature, relatively enduring in nature, that gets consistently displayed across situations and time. State/situational humility refers to humility’s being a varying character feature, affected by context, situation, and circumstance. “Personality and individual differences aside, most of us have humility in some situations, but not in others” (Tangney, 2000, p. 76). Theoretically, state humility is amenable to change, is teachable, and can be learned; through its being positively affected, trait humility accordingly can be positively affected and developed.

Why does humility matter?

“As a virtue [humility] can accomplish great effects. It can heal. It can inspire. It can help people to reach far beyond the limits they see constraining themselves” (Worthington, 2008, p. 273). But what do the data say? Humility research, still in an early phase (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Davis et al., 2011), has increased considerably across three domains: the personal/interpersonal, religious/spiritual, and work/vocational. When empirically tested, humility has generally functioned as theoretically expected. More such
research is clearly required (Davis et al., 2011; Davis et al., 2010; Exline & Hill, 2012; Hook et al., 2013), but humility may indeed have great effects, heal, inspire, and set the fettered free.

In the personal/interpersonal domain, humility has relatively consistently been associated with or found to be predictive of a host of prosocial behaviors, including forgiveness (Exline, Baumeister, Zell, Kraft, & Witvliet, 2008; Powers, Nam, Rowatt, & Hill, 2007; Shepherd & Belicki, 2008), cooperation (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009), gratitude (Kruse, Chancellor, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Rowatt et al., 2006), generosity (Exline & Hill, 2012), helpfulness (LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & Willerton, 2012), ego resilience (Dwiwardani et al., 2014), better relationship quality and relationship outcomes (Farrell et al., 2015; Peters, Rowatt, & Johnson, 2011), ability to receive help (Exline, 2012), avoidance of interpersonal deception (Ashton & Lee, 2005, 2008), and social justice commitment (Jankowski, Sandage, & Hill, 2013). Research also suggests that humility can be socially beneficial, relationship-buffering, and reparative (Davis et al., 2013; Van Tongeren, Davis, & Hook, 2014), that more humble as opposed to less humble individuals are perceived more favorably by others (Exline & Geyer, 2004), and that more humble as opposed to less humble individuals rate their physical health more favorably (Krause, 2010, 2012).

In the religious/spiritual domain, humility has been found to be positively associated with spiritual maturity and spiritual transcendence (Jankowski & Sandage, 2014; Powers et al., 2007), spiritual support (Krause, 2010), closeness to God (Krause, 2012), compassion and self-forgiveness (Krause, 2015; Krause & Hayward, 2015), and resilience and religious/spiritual coping (Krause & Hayward, 2012; Rowatt, Kang, Haggard, & LaBouff, 2014); it has also been shown to have a positive and attenuating impact on negative religious attitudes and behaviors (Hook et al., 2015; Van Tongeren et al., 2015). Conversely, humility has been found to be negatively associated with spiritual instability, spiritual grandiosity, hunger for idealization, and an insecure attachment to God (Jankowski & Sandage, 2014; Sandage, Paine, & Hill, 2015). In the work/vocational domain, humility has been found to be positively associated with better course grades (Rowatt et al., 2006), job performance (Johnson, Rowatt, & Petrini, 2011), and effective leadership behaviors (Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005; Ou et al., 2014; Owens & Hekman, 2015); it has been found to be negatively associated with leaders’ moral disengagement (Ogunfowora & Bourdage, 2014). Owens, Walker, and Waldman (2015) found that humility can have a tempering effect on leader narcissism and promote better follower outcomes.

These identified studies (a non-exhaustive list) attest to the power and robustness of humility: it appears to have a number of beneficial effects personally, interpersonally, and spiritually and contribute to both mental and physical health. Since Tangney’s (2000) seminal review, study of humility has increased substantially, useful humility models and measures have been proposed (e.g., Davis et al., 2011; Hook et al., 2013; McElroy et al., 2014; Owens,
Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013), and at least seven research programs are now active (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013). Although most of this work has focused on trait humility, promising efforts to study state humility have begun to emerge (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Davis et al., 2015; Kruse et al., 2015; Weidman, Cheng, & Tracey, 2015). All indications are that far more humility research will be forthcoming (Davis & Hook, 2014).

The implications of humility for the clinical supervision relationship and rupture repair

We believe that this humility material has relevance for the supervisory experience. Where any supervision rupture is repaired, we contend that humility is a (if not the) most important variable in making that possible. Extrapolating from the four-feature definition of humility (see Humility Defined section) and reviewed body of humility literature, we develop a picture of supervisor humility and elaborate upon five proposed statements about the humility-rupture repair relationship. Our proposed picture contains researchable hypotheses about supervisor humility. Because there is empirical precedent for comparing high (or more) versus low (or less) humble individuals (e.g., Krause, 2015; Van Tongeren et al., 2014), our hypothesis wording reflects that contrast. With there being no humility-supervision research as yet, perhaps these hypotheses will stimulate such study.

1. Supervisor humility is forever anchored by an infectious sense of openness. If openness is the foundation for therapist humility (Paine et al., 2015), we assert that it is no different for supervisors. Openness conceivably influences supervisors’ willingness and ability to (a) reflect upon their own supervisory behaviors and internal experience, (b) attend to what is taking place interpersonally in the supervisor-supervisee relationship, and (c) attend to what is taking place within the therapist-client relationship and consider its supervisory relationship impact. Because openness is viewed as making the accurate perception of self increasingly possible (Tangney, 2000, 2009), it would seem likely that highly humble (compared to less humble) supervisors would be (a) more open (less defensive) to perceiving and assessing the supervisory self accurately and (b) more willing to consistently engage in the process of supervisory self-examination and assessment. Supervisor openness would also extend to supervisee feedback receptivity. Because openness is viewed as substantially contributing to feedback receptivity (Paine et al., 2015; Tangney, 2000, 2009), it would seem likely that highly humble (compared to less humble) supervisors (a) would be more open to receiving supervisee feedback about improving their supervisory practice and (b) would accordingly be more apt to act on the received feedback.
2. *Humble supervisors understand that they are imperfect and acknowledge their supervision mistakes and errors.* Although openness is the foundation of supervisor humility, it alone is not enough. “Humble individuals are [also] willing to acknowledge their knowledge gaps and imperfections wherever they occur” (Paine et al., 2015, p. 6). Being able to recognize supervision fallibilities would be another critical defining component of supervisor humility. Supervisor errors and mistakes occur for a variety of reasons (e.g., inattention, neglect, unpreparedness) and can prove rupture inducing (cf. Ellis, Berger, Hanus, Swords, & Siembor, 2014; Watkins et al., 2015). Supervisors’ willingness to process mistakes with supervisees is an important element of relational repair (Grant et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2008; Nelson & Friedlander, 2001; Nelson, Gray, Friedlander, Ladany, & Walker, 2001); conversely, withdrawing, being angry, and being unwilling to take responsibility for one’s mistakes keep relational conflict alive (e.g., Nelson & Friedlander, 2001). Supervisor humility about shortcomings and errors would seemingly entail at least three interrelated components: (a) seeing the supervisory mistakes in question; (b) willingness to own those supervisory mistakes; and (c) willingness to openly acknowledge those mistakes to supervisees. We propose that *highly humble (compared to less humble) supervisors would (a) be more able to recognize and accept personal responsibility for their supervisory errors and (b) be more willing to acknowledge those errors in supervision.* That recognition, acceptance, and willingness sets the stage for action.

3. *Humble supervisors are most willing and able to take reparative actions to remedy any mistakes or errors that they have made in supervision.* We view humility as disposing supervisors to increasingly act to remedy supervisory alliance ruptures. Supervisor humility that results in reparative actions would seemingly entail at least two other interrelated components: (a) having the desire and willingness to remedy the supervisory errors or mistakes in question; and (b) concretely implementing desire and willingness by means of corrective supervision behaviors. Supervisor awareness without supervisor action would be of little if any value in rupture remedy. *We propose that in matters of conflict and rupture, highly humble (compared to less humble) supervisors would be more apt to initiate reparative discussions and implement reparative actions.* It may well be that “the only way to manage [supervision] conflict is to approach it” (Nelson et al., 2008, p. 182). A supervisor reparative action process would appear to involve initiating (discussion), processing (the rupture event), and intervening (correcting the rupture event) (Grant et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2008; Scaife, 2009; Wade & Jones, 2015; Watkins et al., 2015).
4. Being other-oriented, humble supervisors preeminently prize the supervision relationship and remain forever attuned to and privilege supervisees’ experience of that relationship. We posit that eminent valuation—the supervisor’s assigning the highest value to supervision as a crucial educational practice (Watkins et al., 2014)—is a guiding principle of the humble supervisor’s practice. Humble supervisors eminently value their supervisees’ developmental process, learning needs, and learning style and vigorously strive to foremost create a supervisory situation in which those variables are educationally accommodated. This other-oriented, high other-focus keeps the supervisee at the center of the supervisory process. We propose that highly humble (compared to less humble) supervisors (a) would assign higher value to the supervision relationship as being a crucial medium of supervisee change, (b) would assign higher value to the significance of consistently attending to the supervisees’ experience of the supervision relationship, and (c) would assign higher value to incorporating the supervisees’ experience of the supervision relationship into the supervision process itself. Such features would seemingly render supervisor-initiated ruptures less likely, more resolvable occurrences. 

5. Supervisor humility can be a powerful antidote to the relational instability that can result from the tensions aroused by the hierarchical nature of the supervisory relationship. Davis and colleagues (2011) contend that humility is most apt to be challenged or compromised in three situations (or some combination of the three): (a) when receiving an honor or recognition; (b) when conflict occurs; and (c) where hierarchical roles exist (e.g., teacher-student, supervisor-supervisee). The last two challenges are particularly germane for the matter of supervisory alliance rupture and its repair. The conflict/humility interface exists within a hierarchical relationship. Supervision is power-disproportionate, with the supervisor being in a power position (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Borders & Brown, 2005; Nelson et al., 2006). Supervisees still are expected
to take risks, be vulnerable, and be receptive to feedback (Nelson et al., 2008), rendering the supervisory situation “rife with the potential for conflict” (Wade & Jones, 2015, p. 161).

Where conflict or fear of exploitation arise, supervisees can understandably remain silent and forge ahead in the face of such adversity. As Nelson and colleagues (2006) have aptly indicated, “Supervisors have tremendous power to negatively affect the future of their supervisees, either through negative evaluations, delay of supervisees’ progress through their programs, or both. Supervisees may often feel that the potential for supervisor discomfort and consequent negative evaluation of them is so great that it is not worth bringing up sensitive issues” (p. 111). Ideally, we as supervisors would create a situation where supervisees’ silent struggle need not be the case. We view supervisor humility as providing one such antidote, able to counteract hierarchical-inspired supervision conflict and having relationship reparative effects (cf. Davis et al., 2011; Nelson et al., 2006). We propose that highly humble (compared to less humble) supervisors are more sensitive to the hierarchical nature of the supervision relationship and its impact on the supervisee. Because of that heightened sensitivity, we further propose that highly humble (compared to less humble) supervisors are more apt to readily initiate discussions about the power-disproportionate nature of the supervisory relationship with their supervisees. From our perspective, that heightened sensitivity substantially contributes to supervisors being more apt to engage in relational repair (referred to earlier in point 3).

**Measuring humility in supervision research**

Research reviews about humility measurement indicate that (a) four approaches —self-reports, social comparisons, implicit measures, and informant ratings— are typically used to assess humility; and (b) no one approach is problem free, with each having its own set of strengths and weaknesses (Davis et al., 2011; Davis et al., 2010). Using multiple methods of measurement is ideal, though not always feasible. We see the relational humility model (RHM) and its accompanying Relational Humility Scale (RHS; Davis et al., 2011; Davis et al., 2010) as being quite supervision friendly and wish to empirically emphasize that model here. The RHM gives focus to humility as a subjective personality judgment. Relational humility is defined as a relationship-specific judgment that an observer makes about a target person; that observer judgment is made about the target’s (a) other-oriented-ness in relationships; (b) tendency to express positive other-oriented emotions (e.g., empathy, compassion, and sympathy); (c) ability to regulate self-oriented emotions (e.g., pride or excitement about one’s accomplishments); and (d) having an accurate view of self (Davis et al., 2010). Based on studies involving more than 1,500 participants, the RHS has been validated as a personality judgment measure (Davis et al., 2011) and found
to have cross-cultural applicability (Freitas et al., 2014). Scale items include the following: He/she “has a big ego”; “is self-aware”; “knows his/her strengths”; and “knows his/her weaknesses” (Davis et al., 2011). We believe the RHS could be easily adapted for supervision research, with supervisees providing a rating about the supervisor’s humility (and vice versa). The personality judgment approach, though not without limitations (e.g., subject to social desirability and moderation concerns; Davis et al., 2010; Kruse et al., 2015), seemingly offers a viable empirical starting point for supervision/humility research.

Two case examples

The first example is about a lack of supervisor humility and its impact on alliance rupture, and the second is about the presence of supervisor humility and its impact on alliance repair. These examples reflect the importance of supervisor humility in (a) providing a model of professionally responsible and healthy behavior (e.g., acknowledging and correcting one’s mistakes, accepting one’s humanness, having self-compassion) and (b) reducing supervisees’ performance-inspired feelings of anxiety, shame, and self-doubt. During the early period of therapist development, supervisees often are concerned that they are not doing the work of treatment well and, consequently, can experience much shame, anxiety, and self-doubt; having those experiences humbly understood and normalized by the supervisor can be highly facilitative (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2013; Skovholt, 2012). Some of the identifying information and content have been altered to protect the identities of the involved parties and render the crucial points of the case most salient. Both examples are presented from the perspective of the supervisee. Because learning begins from the supervisee’s frame of reference (Carroll, 2014), and because the supervisee’s frame of reference plays a highly significant role in the totality of her or his learning experience, we have chosen to accentuate the supervisee’s viewpoint here. Furthermore, this focus on supervisee perspective allows us to best illustrate our ideas about supervisor humility. However, by only presenting one side of the supervision relationship equation, we recognize that our case examples are limited in that regard. Case examples that emphasize the supervisor’s perspective or that take into account both simultaneous perspectives would also be useful humility/rupture-repair additions to consider.

When supervisor humility is missing: Case example 1

Participants and setting

The supervisor, a 45-year-old male counseling psychologist, identified as Caucasian; he had been providing group and individual supervision for approximately 10 years. The supervisee, a 25-year-old male, identified as
Mexican-American; he was completing his third year of doctoral training in an American Psychological Association (APA)-accredited counseling psychology program. The supervision took place in a university counseling center.

Description of events

The supervisee and supervisor shared a similar theoretical orientation but had few interactions prior to starting supervision. Supervision generally evolved positively. Meetings were helpful, discussions were rich, and useful feedback was provided. But the relationship was not problem-free. Most issues that emerged were minor (e.g., edits required on progress notes), but two situations occurred that proved more bothersome to the supervisee. First, the supervisee raised the possibility of using a specific grief intervention with a bereaved client only to have his idea dismissed as being “not worth discussion.” The supervisee felt “shot down,” made to feel small. In the second situation, the supervisor reacted negatively to the supervisee’s having his legs crossed during treatment. The supervisee explained that keeping his legs crossed was purely for pain relief, a result of a sports injury. But the supervisor continued to bring up the matter to the supervisee on occasion, recommending that he display an open posture. The supervisee felt that the supervisor was dismissive of the physical realities with which he had to deal. Despite these two incidents, the supervisee, who was quite understanding and forgiving, still had a generally favorable view of the supervisor and the supervision relationship. He saw these as but two unfortunate incidents that did not define an otherwise positive supervisor-supervisee experience.

At the end of the semester, supervisor and supervisee were required (by work setting) to complete a formal evaluation. The supervisor was to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the supervisee’s clinical work (e.g., therapeutic skills), and the supervisee was to evaluate the supervisor. In their evaluation meeting (final session of the semester), the supervisee highlighted the supervisor’s many strengths and the positive nature of the supervision experience, providing one piece of constructively critical feedback. He noted that on rare occasions the supervision seemed to get lost in case details and his clinical work did not get sufficiently reviewed. The supervisee acknowledged that he also sometimes got lost in details and shared in that responsibility. The supervisor acknowledged the comment’s validity and reported that he would attempt to integrate this feedback into his future supervisory work.

Days later, the supervisor asked the supervisee to step into his office. He stated the following: “As I have thought about your feedback, I could not think of an instance in which we got lost in the details. I am sorry that you felt that way. If issues arise during supervision, it is your responsibility to bring those issues up. You did not do that. If you wanted something to be different, you should have said so. I cannot now change your evaluation, but your lack of
speaking up and taking responsibility are personal issues that you should consider working on in your future training."

The supervisor did not ask for the supervisee’s thoughts. The supervisee described feeling discouraged, embarrassed, shameful, frustrated, and angry. He felt attacked, that all responsibility had been deflected onto him, and regarded this as a significant relationship rupture with no repair opportunity.

**Commentary**

Assuming accuracy of the supervisee’s account, this case example allows us to consider the impact of humility on the supervisor’s response. Could the supervisor’s reversal in opinion be a direct reflection of his feeling under threat, perceiving his authority as being challenged, and then responding accordingly to protect and reassert his hierarchical relationship power over the supervisee (Davis et al., 2011; Davis et al., 2010)? As this situation evolved, the critical defining features of supervisor humility—openness, other-orientation, accurate self-perception, and ability to acknowledge mistakes and limitations—are not displayed. Instead, the supervisor appears to have retreated (become self-oriented), closed off (to the supervisee), and become defensive and dismissive (failing to acknowledge having made mistakes). A divide was opened, the wound remained in place, the rupture unaddressed. As humility recedes, the occurrence of unrepaired ruptures may well exponentially escalate. This case seemingly is an example of that possibility realized.

**When supervisor humility is present: Case example 2**

**Participants and setting**

The supervisor, a 55-year-old Caucasian female, was a clinical psychologist who had been providing supervision services for more than two decades. The supervisee, a 35-year-old bi-ethnic male, was in his second year of doctoral training in an APA-accredited clinical psychology program. The supervision took place in a university psychology clinic.

**Description of events**

The supervision relationship began favorably. The supervisee described his supervisor as being dynamic, passionate, dedicated to helping clients, and providing quality supervision. But as supervision progressed, those positive features began to be seen with some negativity. The supervisee began to feel “crowded out” by the supervisor’s excitement and enthusiasm. For instance, while watching therapy sessions, the supervisor would frequently stop the videotape to say what should have been done differently, what should be done next. When the supervisee presented client updates, the supervisor again interrupted frequently, asking, “Did you try this . . .?” or “Did you say
that …?” This supervisor pattern persisted session after session. The supervisee did not feel ownership of supervision, had minimal opportunities to share ideas, never received feedback about positive changes, and began to feel mounting doubt about his abilities.

Over time, the supervisee began to disengage and withdraw. His involved presence faded. The supervisor noticed and commented upon the supervisee’s changed presentation, asking what might be wrong. The supervisee shared how the supervisor’s high degree of directiveness had affected him, that his confidence was shaken, and that he needed to hear he was making progress. The supervisor responded positively and apologized, saying, “Of course I think that you are doing well, or I would not send you in there with clients. I am sorry that was not coming across. By offering you multiple suggestions, I mistakenly thought that would be a confidence booster. But I now see how that could make you feel barraged and overwhelmed instead. I surely did not intend to leave you feeling disheartened and discouraged.”

Buoyed by discussion and apology, the supervisor and supervisee were able to start anew and begin building a collaborative relationship.

**Commentary**

What we see here nicely captures supervisor humility in action. Although many factors conceivably contributed to this favorable outcome (e.g., supervisee willingness to risk), the supervisor’s response reflects other-oriented-ness (noticing and asking about changed supervisee presentation), openness (to supervisee thoughts and feelings), and willingness to acknowledge and apologize for her own mistakes. The supervisor demonstrated that correcting errors is part of professionally responsible practice.

**Two suggested supervision practice/education recommendations**

Developing humility is not an easy feat. For example, a host of experts in multicultural psychology recently indicated that developing cultural humility is indeed quite possible but a highly challenging, lifelong endeavor (Gallardo, 2014; cf. Foronda, Baptiste, Reinholdt, & Ousman, 2015). So it is with the broader concept of humility. It seems most important that, in training supervisors, humility awareness and intentionality be prioritized. Simple awareness about humility and its impact can heighten sensitivity and motivate action toward that dimension as never before (Paine et al., 2015). Furthermore, an attitude of intentionality—where humility is valued and there is desire to make it reality—increases the likelihood of humility development: “If … [supervisor trainees] develop intentions to cultivate humility, they may engage in deliberate reflection, study, and practice, and thereby grow, over time, their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral repertoire in this domain” (Paine et al., 2015, p. 11). Thus, actively making humility an integral and intentional part of
the supervisor trainee’s educational seminar experience is recommended. Ways to do that would include reviewing humility’s definition, reviewing its empirical support, and providing opportunities for discussing its personal and relational repair relevance. Supervisor modeling of humility (e.g., sharing one’s own journey to humility and identification of humility blind spots) would also be facilitative. If humility is to be developed, awareness, commitment, self-reflection, and perseverance are all required. Where those features are put in play, persistent engagement in humility action can strengthen humility as both a state and trait.

Two practice/education recommendations about humility and supervisory alliance repair are as follows:

1. Where not already the case, it is recommended that supervisors add humility/relational repair information to their existing alliance rupture/repair fund of knowledge and intervention repertoire; and
2. In teaching supervisors to supervise, it is further recommended that humility/relational repair information and its supervision intervention implications be incorporated into supervision seminars and the supervision of supervision experience.

Conclusion

We have made an effort to place the core features of humility squarely within the supervisory context. Openness, accurate self-assessment, recognizing one’s own limitations and mistakes, and being other-oriented have vast implications for supervision, and we have attempted to specifically show how that is so with regard to alliance rupture repair. Humility’s importance for supervision has not been addressed in any substantive way in the supervision literature. This article is an attempt to fill that void. Our key contentions are these: (a) supervisor rupture repair efforts, to be successful, must begin with and be driven by the supervisor’s humility; and (b) where that is not the case, the likelihood of rupture repair decreases significantly. We hope that our proposals will stimulate further conceptual and empirical attention to the role of humility in supervision.

References


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