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Exploring the Relationship Between the Supervisory Alliance and the Development of Reflexive Self-Awareness: A Mixed Methods Approach

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Abstract

The study used embedded design to explore the relationship between supervisory alliance and perceived change in reflexive self-awareness in graduate trainees following counseling and psychotherapy programs (n = 48). Linear regression analyses were used to measure the predictive value of alliance on the development of supervisees' reflexive awareness. Qualitative reflexive thematic analysis was also conducted on critical incident reports of supervisees who perceived low versus strong alliances to gain greater in-depth understanding of the quantitative data. Results showed that the alliance does not directly predict observed changes in reflexive awareness. While alliance was found to create favorable conditions to support the development of reflexive self-awareness, it did not promote supervisees' engagement in such development. Consequently, the results suggest it is important to consider difficulties in emotion regulation that may be inherent in the supervisory process to promote reflexive self-awareness in supervisees.

Significance to the Public

This research aims to better understand the relationship between supervisory alliance and the development of reflexive awareness in graduate trainees in counseling and psychotherapy programs. The outcomes indicate that the alliance creates favorable conditions for the development of reflexive awareness, but not sufficiently enough to promote effective engagement in such development in some cases. Discomfort due to difficulties regulating emotions triggered by supervision could help explain these results.

Keywords: supervisory alliance, reflexive self-awareness, trainees, mixed methods

Clinical supervision is seen as one of the most effective and efficient educational interventions for training in the field of counseling and psychotherapy (Watkins, 2020). Clinical supervision is the signature pedagogy of the mental health profession (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Supervision is recognized as a key support function for the development of supervisee competencies,

thereby promoting the quality of professional services and ensuring public protection (Falender & Shafranske, 2021; Milne & Watkins, 2014). Given the significance of the gatekeeping role, supervision occupies a prominent place in the educational curriculum and continues to merit scholarly attention (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Falender, 2018).

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Supervisory Alliance

It is generally accepted that the creation and maintenance of a strong supervisory alliance is critical for effective supervision (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Watkins, 2021). It has been established that the supervision alliance is one of the most important common factors in the change process (Ladany et al., 1999; Watkins, 2021). Bordin (1983) applied his concept of the working alliance to the supervision process, referring to the supervisee–supervisor collaboration as a means to effect change in the supervisee when based on mutually agreed upon supervision goals and tasks, combined with a strong emotional bond.

Research suggests that strong supervisory alliances can facilitate self-disclosure and a willingness to reveal oneself (Mehr et al., 2015; Sweeney & Creaner, 2014), contribute to supervisee satisfaction (Bambling & King, 2014; Ladany et al., 1999; Livni et al., 2012), and reduce anxiety in supervisees (Mehr et al., 2015). While these results seem encouraging for the professional development of supervisees, the link between the alliance and the development of intervention skills is yet to be established. Although the literature widely discusses the importance of the supervisory alliance for the effectiveness and outcomes of supervision, there is surprisingly little evidence to support this assumption, and even some evidence to the contrary (Milne, 2017). For example, an empirical study by Ybrandt et al. (2016) found that supervisees were able to create and maintain a strong working alliance with their clients while also negatively evaluating their supervision alliances. Furthermore, Rieck et al. (2015) found that supervisor agreeableness had a significant negative association with client change scores (agreeableness referred to trust, altruism, and modesty).

Moreover, Watkins' (2020) review of alliance studies highlights that only a small minority of studies address the fundamental assumptions regarding the alliance, such as whether a strong alliance influences supervisees' competence acquisition or their clinical effectiveness. In addition, the vast majority of studies have used retrospective and correlational research designs,

which provide little explanation of how the alliance contributes to outcomes. The lack of research and diversity in methodologies on factors contributing to the positive effects of supervision limits the implementation of promising practices for conducting effective supervision (Falender, 2018; Watkins, 2021).

Reflexive Self-Awareness

Reflexive self-awareness is often identified as a key component in the development and effectiveness of counseling and psychotherapy skills (Aron, 2000; Lecomte & Savard, 2012; Rønnestad et al., 2018). Reflexive self-awareness refers to the process of both experiencing oneself as a subject and reflecting on oneself as an object (Aron, 2000). Increasing awareness of self and one's impact on the therapeutic process is one of the goals of supervision (Bordin, 1983; Lecomte & Savard, 2012). As a result, it is not surprising that most supervision models emphasize this goal. As highlighted by Bernard and Goodyear (2019), it is generally expected that all supervision processes develop reflexive self-awareness.

Empirical research also supports the importance of developing reflexive self-awareness in supervisees. Qualitative studies suggest that the development of self-awareness and engagement in self-reflexive practice are important characteristics of the learning process in the supervisory context and for the development of competence (Johnston & Milne, 2012; Norem et al., 2006; Wilcoxon et al., 2005). Engagement in a reflexive process about oneself is a prerequisite for optimal professional development at all levels of professional experience (Rønnestad et al., 2018). However, engaging in such an approach requires establishing and maintaining an optimal alliance to create the safe space required for reflection about client interaction, a space where the supervisee feels able to risk learning, in particular by accepting to reveal oneself and share questions and doubts about their skills or competencies (Lecomte & Savard, 2012). Little research to date has directly studied reflexive self-awareness and its contributing factors. Moreover, few empirical studies have measured the

influence of the alliance on the development of supervisee reflexive self-awareness, despite the literature identifying this as a primary goal of supervision.

Aim of the Research

Previous research has only established partial links between alliance and supervisory outcomes, offering little explanation about how the alliance contributes to the development of intervention skills, particularly regarding the development of reflexive self-awareness. More empirical research is required to examine and gain greater knowledge about the links between alliance and the development of reflexive self-awareness. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) To what extent is the alliance associated with the development of reflexive self-awareness? (2) How do supervisees who reported weak versus strong early supervisory alliances experience the development of their perceived reflexive self-awareness?

Method

A mixed-methods design was used to answer the research questions. This approach “involves collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, integrating the two forms of data, and using distinct designs that may involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 4). The rationale underpinning this approach is that the integration of quantitative and qualitative data yields more insight than would be provided by either method alone. The use of these two methods can inform whether and how the alliance is associated with the development of reflexive awareness. In this research, qualitative data will be used to explain the quantitative results.

Theoretical Lens

This research is based on a pragmatic research paradigm. Pragmatic worldviews place primary importance of the question asked rather than the

methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The purpose of this study is to improve supervision practices by identifying and understanding the factors that are effective for supervision outcomes. This study attempts to capture a richer understanding of whether and how supervisory alliance is associated with the development of reflexive self-awareness. The research team consists of four professors of career or personal counseling. All four faculty members also have practical experience in supervision for initial training in career counseling or psychotherapy.

Research Design

Embedded design consisting of quantitative and qualitative data collection from the same participants simultaneously (Wester & McKibben, 2019) was used for this study. The use of both methods was planned a priori (i.e., fixed) to answer the research questions. Embedded methods make it possible to answer a subtopic connected with a primary research question (Kroll & Neri, 2009). Priority was given to the quantitative method. The data were used to measure the association between the quality of the alliance and the development of reflexive self-awareness. Qualitative data were embedded to provide a more in-depth explanation of the quantitative data.

Method data integration, that is, the moment when the mixing of data occur (Wester & McKibben, 2019), was conducted during the methodological procedures. The purposive sampling method was used to divide the sample into strata to meet the research focus based on quantitative data (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Two groups of supervisees were selected; one perceived a strong supervisory alliance and the other perceived a weak alliance. The groups were then used to conduct qualitative analyses to better understand the role of the alliance on the development of the supervisees' reflexive self-awareness. Dividing and comparing the sample in subgroups to address differences in supervision experiences is suggested by Hill et al. (2005). Using subgroups of participants sharing similar experiences provided for analysis of the phenomena with more homogeneous samples. This

method facilitates and enriches the contextual description of the functional phenomenon (Hill et al., 2005). The sample was divided based on the first measure of alliance as current research in counseling and psychotherapy suggests that early working alliance is significantly predictive of outcomes in career counseling and psychotherapy (Milot-Lapointe et al., 2018).

Participants

The participants were 48 graduate-level counseling and psychotherapy trainees in their final year of training from three Canadian universities. All three universities have onsite training clinics where trainees practice their clinical skills with a community population requesting career counseling or psychotherapy services. All participants were working with clients as part of their training, supervised by professors at the university or professionals working in the field who were hired as supervisors from outside of the university. The sample was predominately women (41 females and 7 males) of European Canadian origin (98%, and 2% Caribbean). Twenty-seven supervisee participants were enrolled in a career counseling program in a French-language university. Twenty-one participants were enrolled in a counseling and psychotherapy program in an English-language university. The average age was 32 ($SD = 12.37$). These supervisees worked with 16 supervisors. As supervisees participated in this study independently of their supervisors, no specific sociodemographic data concerning the supervisors was collected.

Data Collection

Quantitative and qualitative questionnaires were used for data collection. Informed consent was obtained from participants prior to data collection, with approval by the university research ethics boards. All data were collected online. Voluntary students were recruited through in-class presentations and information emails. No identifying information was recorded on the measures. Paired questionnaires were marked with a random alphanumeric code. The first data collection

time point occurred prior to the beginning of the supervision process (pretest), when supervisees completed a reflexive self-awareness questionnaire and a sociodemographic questionnaire. The same questionnaires were completed at the end of the supervision process (posttest). The supervisory alliance questionnaire and critical incident questionnaire (open-ended questions) were completed following three individual supervision sessions at the beginning, middle, and end of the supervision process (weeks 3, 8, and 12). A web link for completing the questionnaires was sent to each participant at the end of supervision. The names of participants used herein are fictitious.

Measures

Working Alliance Inventory – Short Form

Adapted from the Working Alliance Inventory (Tracey & Kokotovic, 1989), this shorter 12-item measure has been used in several studies related to the supervisory working alliance. The word “therapist” was replaced by “supervisor” when addressing supervision. The scale measures the three dimensions of alliance (Bordin, 1983): (a) mutual agreement and understanding of the goals; (b) each partner’s tasks for attaining the goals; and (c) the bond required for a sustained effort. Supervisees were instructed to rate items on a scale from 1 (never) to 7 (always). Examples of items include “I appreciate my supervisor as a person,” and “We are working towards mutually agreed upon goals.” A high score on each of the subscales reflects the perception of a quality supervisory alliance. Internal consistency estimates of alpha were .98 for the overall score. With this brief version, Tracey & Kokotovic (1989) recommend a single-score system for the three dimensions of the alliance.

For the French-speaking sample, the validated French version of the WAI-Short Revised by Corbière et al. (2006) was used. The items were translated with a consensus approach by a group of case managers working in mental health. Internal consistency estimates of alpha were .88 for the

overall score. Only the supervisee version was used in this study. A recent meta-analysis suggests that client perception has good predictive value of psychotherapeutic outcomes (Flückiger et al., 2018). In this case, priority was given to supervisee perspective. The alpha coefficient in the current sample using both versions ranged from .86 to .97.

Self-Reflection and Insight Scale

The Self-Reflection and Insight Scale (Grant et al., 2002) measures two factors that constitute self-awareness. The first factor, “self-reflection” (SRIS-SR), contains 12 items and includes two subscales: engagement in self-reflection (6 items) and need for self-reflection (6 items). The second factor, “insight” (SRIS-IN), contains 8 items. The SRIS has not been used in supervision, but it has been used in similar contexts such as studying the role of self-awareness in learning skills, particularly in medicine and mental health (Roberts & Stark, 2008). On a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), supervisees rated items such as “I am usually aware of my thoughts” and “I rarely spend time on self-reflection.”

A high score on the scales indicates higher levels of insight and self-reflection. Content validity for the SRIS was established by three content experts who constructed a pool of items designed to assess each dimension (Grant et al., 2002). Grant et al. (2002) report that SRIS has high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas of .91 (self-reflection subscale) and .87 (insight subscale). The French sample used a French version of the questionnaire translated by two bilingual professionals, a professor associated with the research and a PhD student, applying the back-translation method. The alpha coefficient in the current sample for both versions range for .97 to .84.

Critical Incidents

The Critical Incidents Questionnaire (CIQ; Heppner & Roehlke, 1984) was used to collect qualitative data on critical incidents that occurred in supervision. For the purpose of this study, a critical

incident was defined as an occurrence that results in significant perceived impact (positive or negative) on learning. It is recognizable as a turning point, resulting in perceived change in effectiveness (Heppner & Roehlke, 1984). In this open-ended questionnaire, supervisees were asked to answer the following questions: (a) Describe any such incident which occurred within this past 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 with previous ones? (e) What else occurred that was noteworthy?

The examination of critical incidents is often used to better understand and consider various psychosocial constructs contained in an individual's subjective and intersubjective experience (Leclerc et al., 2010). This method has been used on several occasions in the field of supervision (e.g., Forbes et al.) and is recommended by Williams et al. (2008) as a measure of reflexive practice, as the respondent can answer the questionnaire freely without worrying about the interviewer's perception.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 25). The hypothesis was tested using a series of linear regressions to measure the predictive value of the alliance on the change observed in the self-reflexive scores between pretest and posttest. Based on the results obtained and the alliance score at time 1, two groups were created: one group representing poorer alliances with supervisees who scored one standard deviation below the mean, and another group representing stronger alliances composed of all supervisees who scored one standard deviation above the mean.

Qualitative analyses were conducted using QSR Nvivo (version 12). Item responses were uploaded into Nvivo 12 qualitative analysis software. A time marker and information on the experiment site were introduced into the material to track participant development throughout the supervision process (time 1-2-3; site 1-2-3). Qualitative analyses were

conducted based on Braun and Clarke's (2012, 2022) works on reflexive thematic analysis (TA). Reflexive TA was used as the analytical method due to its epistemological flexibility, relative simplicity, and appropriateness for the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willig, 2013). This method systematically identifies, organizes, and offers 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). The output of this analysis is themes that help to understand key elements for the development of reflexive self-awareness in supervisees. Braun and Clarke (2012) identify six steps to conduct the reflexive TA.

The principal investigator first familiarized themselves with the entire data set. Systematic data coding, based on conceptual definitions of constructs studied in the research, was then conducted. The codes refer to linguistic manifestations of constructs. For example, alliance manifestations on goals ("I agree with the proposed direction"), tasks ("supervision was effective"), and the bond ("I trust my supervisor") are identified. For objective self-awareness, attention was given to expressions such as "I became aware of." Subjective awareness was linked to expressions such as "I felt," or "I explored my feelings." Subsequently, the first author created themes referring to links between the different constructs. The other authors audited the themes to include their input. This last step helped the authors to refine and define the themes. The transcripts were selected for their salient representation of the phenomena studied.

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 the results by the other researchers involved in writing this article. The first author maintained 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, which contributed to confirmability. Regular supervision was requested from the first author to ensure the transferability of the analysis. This step helped to clarify the different themes and led to reorganization of the thematic structure.

Results

Prior to testing the hypotheses, preliminary analyses were conducted to identify outliers (boxplot) and ensure that the distribution met the necessary conditions (e.g., normality, homoscedasticity, independence of cases; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). None of the questionnaires were missing any data. The initial paired samples *t*-test analyses indicated a significant increase in the reflexive self-awareness scores between pretest ($M = 95.07$) and posttest ($M = 98.64$; $t[38] = -2.182$; $p = .03$). Analyses were then conducted to determine the influence of possible covariates (ANOVA). The results suggest that gender and type of program had no effect on supervisee reported strength of early supervisory alliance and reflexive self-awareness. As a result, these variables were not measured in subsequent analyses.

To address the first research question of whether the alliance predicted the development of reflexive awareness, a series of linear regressions was conducted for each alliance measures on the difference in scores observed on reflexive self-awareness (between pretest and posttest). Results indicated that alliance at time 1, time 2, or time 3 did not significantly predict the difference in reflexive self-awareness scores, as shown in Table 1.

Results for the second research question about the experiences of supervisees who reported weak versus strong early supervisory alliances related to the development of their perceived reflexive self-awareness were as follows: Eleven supervisees were coded as having low alliance scores (less than one standard deviation from the mean); and 12 supervisees were coded as having high alliance

Table 1*Regressions of Alliance and Difference in Reflexive Self-Awareness*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
WAI – T1	-.123	.133	-.925	.361	-.394, .147
WAI – T2	-.136	.160	.847	.403	-.460, .189
WAI – T3	-.111	.165	-.672	.506	-.445, .224

Note. WAI = Working Alliance Inventory; T = Time; CI = Confidence Interval.

scores (more than one standard deviation from the mean). The use of standard deviation ensured that the groups were significantly different statistically. Table 2 presents descriptive data on measures of alliance and reflexive self-awareness. Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to explore the experiences of supervisees who reported weak versus strong early supervisory alliances for their perceived reflexive self-awareness. Results of the reflexive thematic analysis yielded five main themes and nine subthemes. Table 3 presents the themes and subthemes for each group.

Theme 1. Weak Alliances and No Change in Reflexive Self-Awareness

This theme was marked by supervisees who perceived a weak alliance throughout the process, which even deteriorated during the process in some

cases. This theme was also marked by the absence of progression to reflexive self-awareness. Two subthemes were observed: dissatisfaction with the relationship/supervision organization, and external to oneself. The first subtheme describes supervisees who reported significant alliance ruptures in their alliances at some point during their supervisory process. These ruptures were accompanied by negative emotions and dissatisfaction with supervision and/or with their supervisor. Several participants reported critical incidents that no longer concerned the development of competence, but focused on the supervisory relationship (e.g., lack of confidence in the supervisor) or dissatisfaction with the organization of supervision (e.g., lack of structure in supervision).

The second subtheme suggested that in the absence of alliance, competence development tended to

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics by Group on Supervisory Alliance and Reflexive Self-Awareness*

	Group With a Low Score on WAI					Group With a High Score on WAI				
	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
WAI (T1)	11	45	66	60.72	7.10	12	80	84	81.41	1.37
WAI (T2)	9	37	70	58.66	12.08	11	66	84	79.27	5.00
WAI (T3)	7	34	80	63.14	17.42	10	71	84	78.80	4.63
SRIS (pretest)	11	77	110	92	10.73	12	89	112	99.33	6.74
SRIS (posttest)	7	69	105	92.66	12.97	11	90	119	103.72	8.27

Note. WAI = Working Alliance Inventory; SRIS = Self-Reflection and Insight Scale; T = Time.

Table 3
Thematic Analysis of Critical Incidents Reported by Supervisees

Group With a Low Score on Alliance (<i>n</i> = 11)				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Themes	Subthemes
WAI	60.72	7.10	Weak alliances and no change in reflexive self-awareness (<i>n</i> = 5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissatisfaction with the relationship / the organization of supervision • External to oneself
SRIS (pretest)	92.00	10.73	Enhancing the quality of alliance, progression in reflexive self-awareness (<i>n</i> = 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alliance repair
SRIS (posttest)	92.66	12.97		
Group With a High Score of Alliance (<i>n</i> = 12)				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Themes	Subthemes
WAI	81.41	1.37	Alliance supports reflexive self-awareness (<i>n</i> = 5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alliance with parallel development of reflexive self-awareness • Evolution in supervision goals
SRIS (pretest)	99.33	6.74	Maintaining a strong alliance without progression in reflexive self-awareness (<i>n</i> = 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties regulating emotional intensity with client • Difficulties regulating emotional intensity in supervision
SRIS (posttest)	103.72	8.27	Reflexive self-awareness strains the alliance (<i>n</i> = 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the work on reflexive self-awareness • Threat / stagnation

Note. WAI = Working Alliance Inventory; SRIS = Self-Reflection and Insight Scale.

focus on goals external to the supervisee, such as goals oriented toward understanding the client or therapeutic processes, and acquiring technical skills rather than developing reflexive self-awareness. For example, Stephanie provided an illustration of these observations. Her comments at time 1 and time 2 exclusively reported disagreements between herself and her supervisor. Several manifestations of ruptures can be noted, and the supervisee explicitly stated that the “first session did not go well and was actually ruptured” and “the rupture was never addressed.” As a result of the rupture, the supervisee (time 3) stated she no longer wished to address certain topics when in supervision:

A fly on the wall would never imagine that the relationship was ruptured earlier on and that I will be leaving earlier than originally planned. Given our past issues and the ruptured supervisory relationship, I keep things light and bring issues that will not trigger her.

Moreover, the supervisee reports she did not wish to reveal aspects of herself, but preferred to discuss topics external to herself about understanding the client and the therapeutic process, signaling she did not recognize her supervisor’s expertise.

Theme 2. Enhancing the Quality of Alliance, Progression in Reflexive Self-Awareness

Observation of this theme showed the supervision goals seemed to change when initially weak supervisory alliances became stronger. A few participants noted an improvement in the alliance and, at the same time, supervisory goals initially focused on external factors, such as understanding the client or therapeutic process and acquiring technical skills, shifted to developing reflexive self-awareness.

Critical incidents reported by Anna provide an example of these observations. At the beginning (time 1), Anna seemed to feel somewhat intimidated by the supervision context. As the alliance strengthened, she reported an increased tendency for self-disclosure (time 2). At time 3, the alliance continued to improve and Anna expressed her satisfaction with her supervisor, describing them as “amazing.” As the alliance strengthened, the goal of supervision also shifted, focusing more on herself and the development of her reflexive self-awareness:

I was able to be more open with my supervisor. We discussed countertransference and I had a discussion about how to manage countertransference in a session [...] accepting and normalizing countertransference as well as ways to handle emotional reactions in the session.

Theme 3. Alliance Supports Reflexive Self-Awareness

This theme was observed in the group that perceived a strong early alliance, which was maintained throughout the supervisory process. For these supervisees, the alliance supported the development of reflexive self-awareness. This theme includes two subthemes: alliance with parallel development of reflexive self-awareness, and evolution in supervision goals.

In the first subtheme, the maintenance of a strong alliance was parallel to the development of reflexive

self-awareness for several participants. For example, Claudie highlighted how alliance quality contributed to the development of her reflexive self-awareness from the beginning of the supervision process (time 1): “I feel as though she is shaping me as a more integrative psychotherapist. She gently makes me aware of important development points. [...] I felt supported in understanding personal and professional challenges.” For other supervisees, maintaining a strong alliance contributed to the evolution of supervision goals over time. When supervisee goals initially focused on external factors, they seemingly shifted as the process advanced to focus on more internal factors such as the development of reflexive self-awareness.

Theme 4. Maintaining a Strong Alliance Without Progression in Reflexive Self-Awareness

In contrast with the previous group, some participants maintained strong alliances throughout the supervisory process but did not report an increase in their reflexive self-awareness. Two subthemes were present in their reports: difficulties regulating emotional intensity with clients, and difficulties regulating emotional intensity in supervision.

Difficulties in regulating emotional intensity with clients appeared to limit the supervisees’ focus solely on supervisory goals that were external to themselves. For example, Charly (time 1) experienced significant difficulty with a client they considered to be aggressive: “It was the first time I’d felt personally attacked and vulnerable in a session. I needed guidance and reassurance.” A strong alliance was also seemingly present at this time, with the supervisee emphasizing that the supervisor showed “authentic care and concern” about the situation. A similar situation occurred at time 3, as Charly reported, “A client expressed extreme anger toward me.” The supervision process in this case focused on emotional support and understanding of the therapeutic process with the client. In this situation, there appeared to be little room for the development of reflexive self-

awareness in supervision. The supervisee noted still being aware of her subjective experience but did not engage in a process of self-reflection.

However, Léa's challenge to regulate emotion appeared to be related to the supervision process, because the alliance seemingly allowed for emotional regulation, making the supervision process more tolerable for her. Léa stated, "All I want is not to be demolished and not to have zero confidence when leaving supervision" (time 2). It was also noted that Léa only requested help in developing technical skills from her supervisor. This left little room in supervision for the development of reflexive self-awareness, but the alliance appeared to have supported the supervisee in their attempts to regulate their emotions.

Theme 5. Reflexive Self-Awareness Strains the Alliance

Some supervisees reported strains in the alliance when the focus of supervision shifted to working on oneself. Two subthemes were present: support for working on reflexive self-awareness, and threat/stagnation. In some cases, the support offered by a strong alliance facilitated working on reflexive self-awareness. For example, Kelly's responses illustrate this first subtheme. After indicating a strong alliance at time 1, Kelly reported a tension in the alliance when, prompted by the supervisor (time 2), supervision focused on her countertransference. Time 2 was also marked by a more negative perception of the alliance by the supervisee ("This was the first time we had strongly differing views"). However, the support offered in supervision seemed to have facilitated her work on reflexive self-awareness, which continued even after this period:

It was more about my overall internal experience as a counselor, supervision was more about use of the whole self. [...] I needed support in this session and an exploration into my experience as a counselor, less focus on a specific client. I felt a lot of support and understanding from my supervisor.

Other supervisees appear to have found working on the self threatening, which contributed to

stagnation in the development of reflexive self-awareness. It appears that difficulties in emotion regulation regarding the development of reflexive self-awareness tended to orient their goals of supervision toward understanding clients, the therapeutic process, and learning technical skills. Deborah's case illustrates this dynamic. For her, the difficulties regarding emotion regulation stemmed from her experience of client sessions and subsequently influenced the process of supervision and her perceived alliance. For example, at time 3, Deborah's critical incidents suggested that the supervisor attempted to focus on or encourage the development of reflexive self-awareness, which she seems to have experienced as destabilizing. Deborah noted that the supervision was "emotionally charged" because the content and focus was "related to my identity and personal development." Manifestations of alliance rupture were also seemingly present. Deborah reported "abruptly" ending the supervision, which she reported surprised her supervisor. In this context, misalignment in supervisor and supervisee focus was observed, with the supervisee stating she wanted to refocus supervision on understanding the client, the therapeutic process, and learning technical skills (e.g., "I wanted to have more concrete ideas of how I could work with the client and models of technical skills").

Discussion

This study used an embedded mixed-methods design to explore the relationship between supervisory alliance and perceived change in reflexive self-awareness of graduate trainees in counseling and psychotherapy programs. Regarding the first research question, quantitative analysis found no association between the quality of alliance and the development of reflexive self-awareness. Qualitative analysis of a selection of supervisees partially confirms this conclusion. Regarding the second research question, analysis revealed that the experiences of supervisees who perceived a weak or a strong alliance in both groups varied. More detailed analysis of the results showed that the

alliance created favorable conditions that support the development of reflexive self-awareness in some cases. However, in some cases, the alliance did not sufficiently promote supervisees' engagement in this development.

Themes mentioned by the supervisees shed light on the relationship between the alliance and the development of reflexive self-awareness. First, the results suggest that supervisees who reported low alliance quality at the beginning of the process and who continued to experience strained or deteriorating alliances during the supervisory process experienced no change in reflexive self-awareness. Ruptures of alliances were observed in these cases, which seemingly directed the focus of supervision to external factors, such as understanding the client and the process, or acquiring technical skills, rather than on internal factors of competency development, such as developing reflexive self-awareness. This result is consistent with previous research that reported alliance ruptures can negatively impact the supervisee learning process and the quality of interaction between supervisors and supervisees (Safran & Muran, 2000; Watkins (2021). Research has also found that weak supervisory alliances may limit the disclosure of supervisees, which is considered essential for professional development (Hess et al., 2008; Mehr et al., 2015). Furthermore, Watkins (2021) noted that when ruptures are left unaddressed, they have the potential to further deteriorate the supervisory alliance.

Further extending these observations, it seems that repairing ruptures in the supervision process can lead to the development of reflexive self-awareness. Data from this study suggest that for some supervisees, alliance repair was also accompanied by a shift in the goals of supervision, from a focus on external factors to developing reflexive self-awareness. The data presented suggest that when supervisors are perceived as open and understanding, and they provide a validating experience, supervisees are more likely to explore their own affective states (subjective awareness), which is one of the goals of supervision. These perceptions also helped to restore the alliance. As

outlined by Eubank et al. (2019), successful alliance repair can help to strengthen the affective bond and is linked to positive outcomes. Creating a safe supervisory space, characterized by the supervisor's openness, nondefensiveness, humility, and goodwill, seems critical for repair to occur (Watkins, 2021).

The data also suggest that for some supervisees, strong alliances create favorable conditions to engage in a process of self-reflection. Maintaining a quality alliance also favored the development of reflexive self-awareness for part of the sample. While supervisory goals initially focused on factors external to the supervisee, these goals evolved to focus more on internal factors of the supervisee, such as developing reflexive self-awareness. This shift was seemingly facilitated by the maintenance of a strong alliance throughout the supervisory process. It seems that nurturing the supervisee's sense of security by helping them understand the client and how to proceed was conducive to providing a safe space to enable supervisees to engage in self-reflection. These findings align with Lecomte and Savard (2012), who highlight the importance of the alliance for the establishment of a safe space necessary for the risks inherent in self-reflection. Indeed, a secure and flexible alliance appears to be a critical condition for supervisees to risk being vulnerable and to share their doubts and fears regarding their competence, which is necessary for reflexive self-awareness (Lecomte & Savard, 2012). As Bordin (1980) highlighted, the alliance facilitates beneficial effects of intervention by creating optimal conditions.

While the alliance was found to create favorable conditions for the development of reflexive self-awareness for part of the sample, it seems that it was insufficient for achieving this goal in some cases. Some supervisees reported no development in reflexive self-awareness, despite maintaining a strong alliance. This may be explained by difficulties in regulating emotional intensity, which may be due to challenges experienced in client interventions, leading supervisees to seek support and focus their needs on external factors. Others had difficulty regulating the emotional intensity

generated by the supervision process. Such difficulties in emotion regulation left little room for self-reflection. Providing a supportive environment is important to foster safe and effective clinical practice (Milne & Watkins, 2014).

The results of this study also suggest that a supervisee's emotional tension may increase when a supervisor focuses on developing reflexive self-awareness. Some supervisees reported a need to be reassured and to feel more competent in understanding the client, the process, and how to proceed. In these cases, it seems the supervisor was misaligned with the supervisee's needs, particularly the supervision objectives. Thus, focusing on reflexive self-awareness may be perceived as threatening by some supervisees, straining the alliance. Supervisees who feel threatened may seek solutions to restore balance and internal cohesion. As Vance et al. (2021) reported, a supervisor's focus on the supervisee's self can create tension. Supervision is a hierarchical and evaluative relationship that often makes the supervisee feel vulnerable (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019) and many supervisees report harmful supervision experiences (e.g., violation of boundaries; Ellis et al., 2014).

Strengths and Limitations

The use of mixed methods in this research, allowing for the integration of different sources and perspectives, provided an in-depth understanding of the influence of alliance quality on the development of reflexive self-awareness in supervision. As Watkins (2014) suggests, applying varied research methodologies to better understand the oscillatory character of the alliance and its impacts are needed in the field of supervision. This research addresses this issue and contributes to a greater understanding of the links between the alliance and the development of reflective self-awareness. Using group comparison to explain a phenomenon, as suggested by Hill et al. (2005), is also an important approach to studying the impacts of alliance quality. This research highlights that creating such a group based on a single measure of alliance does not guarantee the homogeneity of participant experience and sheds interesting insight into the

conditions that foster the development of reflexive self-awareness.

This research also has limitations. The small size and homogeneity of the sample can be seen as limitations. The French versions of SRIS and SCS-SF have not yet been validated. However, the resulting internal consistency coefficients are strong. The CIQ is a self-report written instrument that is not conducive to probing questions, possibly limiting precision and details available on the dimensions of the constructs being studied. Furthermore, the alliance is recognized to be a collaboration between a supervisee and supervisor, but this study only considers the supervisee's perspective. The sample also comprises students from different training programs. However, this can also be a strength, as it helps capture interactions between alliance and reflexive self-awareness through different approaches to counseling and psychotherapy.

Implications for Supervisory Practice and Future Research

The results of this study indicate there is no direct link between the quality of an alliance and the development of reflexive awareness in supervisees in counseling and psychotherapy training. While alliance was found to create favorable conditions for the development of reflexive self-awareness, it seems it was not sufficient in achieving this goal in some cases. A supervisee's degree of difficulty in regulating emotional intensity may explain these results. The results suggest it is important to consider emotion regulation and difficulties regulating emotions raised by supervisees to provide a safe space that encourages engagement in self-reflection. Engagement in self-reflection is facilitated when supervisees feel secure (i.e., feel reassured and competent in understanding the client, the process, and how to proceed).

In light of our findings, and as suggested by Watkins (2021), supervisors and researchers need to take into account the impacts of ruptures in the supervision process. Repairing ruptures can significantly contribute to supervision goals,

including developing reflexive self-awareness. Conversely, failing to repair an alliance can have a deleterious effect on supervisees, leading them to focus on external factors. Future research needs to consider shifts or trajectories in the alliance, rather than focusing on single retrospective measures to understand supervisory outcomes.

Finally, the results of this study suggest the need to consider the theoretical and practical limitations of using satisfaction as an outcome indicator. Some supervisees gave a more negative evaluation to supervision that focused on reflexive self-awareness. This suggests that these periods can be destabilizing, but also significant for learning. As mentioned, difficulties in regulating this destabilizing experience can be a barrier to the development of reflexive self-awareness. Imposing the reflexive self-awareness process seems to have a negative result, with more positive results achieved by using the supervisee's initial concern or need as the starting point. Consideration must be given to how supervisees attempt to find balance when they feel their internal cohesion is threatened and interaction with their client and/or supervisor is destabilizing. In this case, their focus is directed toward how to proceed rather than reflexive self-awareness. This holds promise for future research into factors known to support the regulation of negative experiences.

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