

Excellence in Supervision: Theories of Supervision

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“We are what we repeatedly do.
Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

—Will Durant, often misattributed to Aristotle

Supervision is a process, not an act. It is a learning process as well as a pedagogical process. There is no doubt that “the learning process is extremely dependent on the quality of supervision.”¹ The issue of the quality of supervision provided in the ministerial formation of theological students is addressed squarely in the 1993 ATFE statement “Excellence in Supervision,” with particular attention to what we might call *a habit of reflective practice*:

The ministry of supervision does not dead-end in the practical action; its rhythm goes from reflection into considered action and back again into reflective assessment. The cadence has no final beat; called to act, it rests in neither deed nor thought but challenges both in the name of God’s justice and truth.²

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Supervision is here understood as an integrative process in which *theory* and *practice* are organically connected and even conflated with the result that “meaning is constructed through lived experience.”³ And this meaning-making process based on reflective practice is considered, in the words of Kenneth Pohly, “a theological task; to do supervision is to do theology in the midst of daily experience.”⁴ The goal, if not the soul, of supervision in theological field education, therefore, is to nurture *the process of theological reflection in context* and to help both the supervisor/mentor and the supervisee to engage in this habitual reflective practice in such a way that both learn and grow together spiritually.

A brief review of the history of supervision reveals that understandings of supervision developed in the helping/caring professions such as social work, psychotherapy, education, clinical pastoral education, ministry, spiritual direction, and nursing are interdisciplinary, cross-professional, collaborative, and even transformational.⁵ Among the many theories of supervision, we have selected the following for we believe they are helpful in identifying best reflective practices for educating, training, and forming site supervisors/mentors.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

Jack Mezirow, who initiated a *transformative learning movement* in the field of adult education, understands learning as “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to future actions”⁶ and notes that the meaning-making process of learning is a *transformative* process for adults whereas it is a formative process for children. What Mezirow means by a transformative learning process is “the [critical] process of *meaning becoming clarified*.”

Meaning becomes clarified when learners become more critically reflective of their assumptions and those of others in assessing contested meaning; when they are able to validate beliefs empirically or participate more fully and freely in discourse to arrive at tentative best reflective judgment; and when they gain insight on how to more effectively take action and do so reflectively.⁷

The end result of this meaning-clarifying process, based on *critical reflection* as well as on expanded awareness, validating discourse, and reflective action in adulthood,⁸ is a sort of *paradigm shift* (à la Thomas Kuhn) in the mind

of the learner, namely, the change in or the reformulation of what Mezirow calls a “meaning perspective” (or a “frame of reference”) that consists of a habit of mind and resulting points of view. Most often, researchers report, a perspective transformation is triggered by what Mezirow calls a “disorienting dilemma,” though the process of triggering a transformation turns out to be much more complex than Mezirow originally suggested.⁹ Geraldine Holton, who sees supervision as reflective practice, defines this trigger to critical reflection as “a dissonant experience that contradicts our existing meaning perspective and related habits of mind” and argues that “[t]he heart of the supervisory process is about challenging core beliefs which, if left unexamined, can keep one locked in society’s paradigms.”¹⁰ In short, a transformative learning theory is and should be a critical theory that uncovers hegemonic assumptions as well as power dynamics and relationships that saturate the soil of reflective practice in adult education for “transformative learning cannot happen unless critical reflection is involved at every stage.”¹¹

Suggested Readings

- Mezirow, Jack, and associates. *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.
- Mezirow, Jack, E. Taylor, and associates. *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

SYSTEMS APPROACH TO SUPERVISION

Systems approach theory enables one to understand the process of supervision by breaking the complexity of the interrelationship among supervisor/mentor, supervisee, care receiver, institution, and the sociocultural, political, and religious context into small units. During a pastoral ministry engagement as well as the supervision of pastoral ministry, there are power differentials at work. These are largely unfamiliar until explored. In the relationship between supervisee and care receiver, for example, they bring with them the distinctives of gender, culture, religious background, personality, and social diversity. The same applies to the relationship between supervisee and supervisor/mentor. Though separate and different, the goals of these relationships are mutual help and support: (1) the supervisee tries to support and minister to the needs of the care receiver in order to allevi-

ate suffering and to accompany them with the compassion and pastoral and interpersonal skills found in an integrated pastoral ministry; (2) while in supervision, the supervisee attempts to learn to sharpen their ministerial skills and grow in self-awareness even while the supervisor/mentor is enriched by better strategies for teaching and supervision. During this whole dynamic and possibly dialectical process, both supervisee and supervisor/mentor may influence each other in mutually beneficial ways.

A systems approach to supervision is built on learning alliances and on the therapeutic, interpersonal, and relational structures among supervisor/mentor, supervisee, care receiver, and sponsoring organization or institution. The functional nature of these relationships creates space for both opportunities and risks. For example, "[T]he evaluative and 'expert' aspect of the role can create a hierarchical relational structure that depends on *power over*. On the other hand, the creation of a learning alliance that encourages transparency, vulnerability, and trust requires a *power with* orientation in the relationship."¹² The healthy structure of supervisory relationships finds a balance between power and involvement and between the *power over* and *power with* alliance.

According to William Mueller and Bill Kell,¹³ the normal and healthy supervisory relationship passes through three phases: developing phase, mature phase, and terminating phase. As the relationship develops in a ministry setting, it comes to be characterized by the mature phase, which is marked by evaluative conversations, clear ethical boundaries, appropriate confidentiality, learning goals, ministerial empathy, and professional genuineness.

Suggested Readings

- Holloway, Elizabeth. *Supervision Essentials for a Systems Approach to Supervision*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2016.
- Mueller, William J., and Bill L. Kell. *Coping with Conflict: Supervisory Counselors and Psychotherapists*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972.
- Worthington, Everett L., Jr., and Avner Stern. "The Effects of Supervisor and Supervisee Degree Level and Gender on the Supervisory Relationship." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 26 (1985): 64–73.

CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACH TO SUPERVISION

Diversity plays an important role in a supervisory relationship. Since supervision is built on an interpersonal relationship, it's necessary for the supervisor/mentor to have the cultural competency to exercise effective supervision. Cultural diversity includes but is not limited to racial difference, gender difference and orientation, ideological/political difference, religious/denominational difference and orientation, cultural difference, language difference, economic difference, and educational difference.

Effective and culturally responsive supervision is mindful of the following factors:

1. Culture and ethnicity are active, ongoing, ever-changing processes essential to be addressed in supervision.
2. Care receivers, supervisees, and supervisors/mentors are all influenced by multiple cultures—local, regional, national, and global.
3. Supervisors/mentors must understand, appreciate, and respond to local and wide-ranging cultures that provide the context for, and influence the expression of, a care receiver's (whether an individual or family) behavior and mental (spiritual) and emotional processes.
4. All pastoral ministries and their supervision are predicated on epistemologies (ways of understanding our world). Epistemologies are culturally based and must be addressed and integrated into supervision.¹⁴

Suggested Readings

- Falender, Carol A., and Edward P. Shafranske, eds. *Casebook for Clinical Supervision: A Competency-Based Approach*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008.
- Benefiel, Margaret, and Geraldine Holton, eds. *The Soul of Supervision: Integrating Practice and Theory*. New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2010.

COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO SUPERVISION

A healthy collaborative relationship among supervisee, supervisor/mentor, the organizations/institutions to which supervisor/mentor and supervisee belong, and the peer group in which the supervisee participates is foundational to effective supervision. Mutual learning happens through such collaborative relationships, setting goals, active listening, and both receiving and sharing feedback. In this process, everyone is both a contributor and a learner. As collaborative learning could be uncomfortable, disturbing, and unwelcomed due to its evaluative and critical nature, “[S]upervi-

sors act as facilitators of collaborative learning who support and challenge supervisees' strengths, limitations and resources, and provide a safe learning environment in which the supervisee is helped to take responsibility for their own leaning and practice."¹⁵ Therefore, in a collaborative approach to supervision, the supervisor/mentor makes sure that the process is not built on a strictly subordinate relationship and instead creates a learning atmosphere for mutual and nonjudgmental sharing and learning. Collaborative supervision is proven to be very effective and rewarding as the supervisees benefit from social support, informal peer supervision, and exposure to a variety of practices.¹⁶

Suggested Readings

- Benefiel, Margaret, and Geraldine Holton, eds. *The Soul of Supervision: Integrating Practice and Theory*. New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2010.
- Bernard, Janine M. "The Discrimination Model." In C. Edward Watkins, Jr., ed., *Handbook of Psychotherapy Supervision*, 2nd ed., 310–27. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997.

DIALOGICAL METHOD

In Jane Vella's dialogue model, the learner becomes "an active participant in the learning process, bringing to the learning event all of her or his life experience to converse with the teacher in a genuine dialogue."¹⁷ Like Kolb's learning cycle in *Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization* and *Active Experimentation*,¹⁸ Vella's dialogue model consists of four stages: (1) *preparation*, which includes the discovery of contexts and learning needs and resources assessment, (2) *principles and practices*, creating a space of safety, affirmation, and accountability, (3) *process of learning*, which includes implementation and integration as a result of dialogue, and (4) *evaluation*, which allows for a transfer of the new learning into the context. While Vella stresses the importance of the learner's insights and practice, she also states the need for "assiduous preparation by the teacher"¹⁹ for the best learning outcome to occur.

Vella connects her dialogue model to Paulo Freire's contribution to experiential learning theory. Thus, learning occurs from "experience in a dialogue among equals, working with one another in a respectful and democratic way to achieve a deeper understanding of their lived experiences."²⁰ Open questions allow the learner to move toward a thoughtful response.

This thoughtful response is part of a learning task and is informed by peer group reflection, out of which new learning emerges. Such learning is then placed in context, informed by research, and integrated with the goal of implementation. Thus, her dialogue model applied to supervision becomes an intentional collaboration as supervisor/mentor and student engage in genuine deep dialogue, considering the learning outcome and engaging in the transformative “action-reflection-new action”²¹ process.

Suggested Readings

- Kolb, David A. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2015.
- Vella, Jane. “The Power of Dialogue in Adult Learning.” *Journal of Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 36 (2016): 95–101.

SPIRITUAL INQUIRY METHOD

Spiritual inquiry models are shaped by denominational theological understanding and practices in congregational and seminary settings. In addition, technology has opened the door to highly individualized spiritual inquiry, made its practices more accessible, and created new forms of community. As Charles Foster observes concerning seminary settings, there is “much more variation in ways of cultivating spiritual practice than [in] . . . classroom teaching.”²² And yet, as Henri Nouwen suggests, spiritual inquiry and reflection is the “crucial key to all the work in ministry . . . [because] reflection enables you to weave the integrative thread that you will then offer to the community as its members weave the tapestry of God’s missional purpose in its midst.”²³ Neil Sims proposes that applying spiritual inquiry and reflection to Kolb’s experiential learning cycle might take this form: (1) *sensing the presence and action of God*, (2) *discerning God’s purpose*, (3) *integrating God’s purpose into one’s own theology*, and (4) *deciding to co-operate with God*.²⁴ This raises the question: What does our continued ministry practice look like in light of spiritual reflection and inquiry?

Spiritual inquiry is important in supervision because it allows for integration of sociological, socio-economic, and psychological challenges with the theological and spiritual lens of God’s presence and activity among us. Thus, it becomes holy ground where all are “rooted in the pure, loving and creative self-giving of God who reveals this to us as the character of our true identity.”²⁵

Suggested Readings

- Foster, Charles R., Lisa E. Dahill, Lawrence A. Golemon, and Barbara Wang Tolentino. *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination*. Stanford, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006.
- Scharen, Christian. *Fieldwork in Theology: Exploring the Social Context of God's Work in the World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2015.
- Sims, Neil. "Theologically Reflective Practice: A Key Tool to Contemporary Ministry." *Journal of Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 31 (2011): 166–76.

WISDOM WAYS METHOD

Practical wisdom, according to Kathleen Cahalan, is based on "integrative knowledge that encompasses the full dimensions of human being, knowing, and acting."²⁶ Cahalan identifies eight ways of knowing that arise from integration and practice over time: "[s]ituated awareness, embodied realizing, conceptual understanding, critical thinking, emotional attunement, creative insight, spiritual discernment and practical reasoning."²⁷ As a practitioner develops from being a novice to becoming competent in practice, an acknowledgment and claiming of vocation occurs as well. As Cahalan suggests, competency development includes psychological and spiritual growth "when a person's sense of self is strong enough that they can surrender their own desires in service to others."²⁸ A wise practitioner will be humble and able to identify areas in which he or she is once again a novice in need of developing competency. Such wisdom is crucial for ministry because ministers require "the ability to slow down and contemplate what God is doing."²⁹

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza places wisdom development in the context of a community in which a "democratic learning space of wisdom"³⁰ is created that frees persons from social and political oppression. Wisdom is created when knowledge, science, law, social sciences, positive psychology, theology, mindfulness, and spirituality are integrated. Through integration in context, transformation occurs not only individually but also in community. This is an ongoing process. Perhaps that is why Schüssler Fiorenza describes wisdom ways as a liberating dance³¹ in which all contribute and where social constructs such as gender, race, and culturally dominant features are critically evaluated, deconstructed, and then reconstructed. Thus, all engaging in wisdom ways become witnesses to the ever-emerging new

vision of God's presence and work. Excellent supervision engages in this dance and is characterized by it.

Suggested Readings

- Cahalan, Kathleen A. "Integrative Knowing and Practical Wisdom." *Journal of Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 36 (2016): 7–21.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001.

CONCLUSION

Just as "the [promised] land is *given* [to Israel] unconditionally but is *held* [by Israel] conditionally,"³² several promising theories, approaches, and methods of supervision are given to supervisors/mentors and supervisees *independently* but, for the achievement of excellence in supervision, are to be held by supervisors/mentors and supervisees *interdependently*. Supervision is an integrative transformational process based on critical reflection in which the interactive and interdependent nature of the supervisor-supervisee relationship is affirmed, the cross-cultural/intercultural competence is nurtured, and the respectful and nonjudgmental collaboration for mutual sharing and learning is promoted. Learning during the integrative transformational supervisory process takes place through "dialogue among equals, a joint process of inquiry and learning that [Paulo] Freire sets against the banking concept of education."³³ Further, supervision in theological education is a joint process of *spiritual* inquiry and learning in which God's purpose, presence, and action hitherto unknown are to be discovered by asking the right questions and a decision for future action is to be made on the basis of the newly discovered spiritual consciousness. In this regard, the task of supervisors/mentors is the "meaning-making task or wisdom task . . . [that] challenges the supervisor-mentor to support supervisees as they develop their personal philosophies [or theologies]."³⁴ In addition, "Good [or excellent] supervisors learn to refine the questions [or to cultivate the skill of purposeful reflective questioning] rather than search for the right answers, thus balancing their desire to be 'wise' with their desire to be 'right.'"³⁵

Excellent and wise supervisors/mentors are "wise," are open to conflict, and are committed to "walking through conflicted situations with supervisees."³⁶ They are also open to new theories, approaches, and meth-

ods of supervision while remaining committed to the old. As they continue to critically reflect on differences and conflicts among supervisory practices, they will be able to balance the needs, interests, and opinions of themselves and their supervisees in order to achieve a common good (à la Robert Sternberg's balance theory).

NOTES

- 1 Jane Denniston, "Theory into Practice: A Challenge for Supervisors in Formation for Ordained Ministry," in *Enriching Ministry: Pastoral Supervision in Practice*, ed. Michael Paterson and Jessica Rose (London: SCM, 2014), 113.
- 2 "Excellence in Supervision," 1993, Association for Theological Field Education, <http://atfe.org/resources/excellence-in-supervision-1993/>, accessed October 23, 2019.
- 3 Denniston, "Theory into Practice," 111.
- 4 Kenneth Pohly, *Transforming the Rough Places: The Ministry of Supervision*, 2nd ed. (Franklin, TN: Providence House, 2001), 175. The title of the first edition of this book, which was published in 1977, was *Pastoral Supervision*. Pohly sees supervision as "a pastoral art" (xiv).
- 5 Margaret Benefiel and Geraldine Holton, Introduction to *The Soul of Supervision: Integrating Practice and Theory*, ed. Margaret Benefiel and Geraldine Holton (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2010), xii–xiv.
- 6 Jack Mezirow, "Learning to Think like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory," in Jack Mezirow and associates, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 5 (emphasis in original).
- 7 Collen Aalsburg Wiessner and Jack Mezirow, "Theory Building and the Search for Common Ground," in *Learning as Transformation*, ed. Mezirow and associates, 349, 350.
- 8 Mezirow, "Learning to Think like an Adult," 25.
- 9 Edward W. Taylor, "Analyzing Research on Transformative Learning Theory," in *Learning as Transformation*, ed. Mezirow and associates, 298–99.
- 10 Geraldine Holton, "Wisdom's Garden: A Metaphor for Cross-Professional Supervision Training," in *The Soul of Supervision*, ed. Benefiel and Holton, 10. Like the Socratic gadfly, a disorienting dilemma questions what has been unquestioned in life and makes those who experience it examine their own life. As Socrates put it, "The unexamined life is not worth living."
- 11 Stephen Brookfield, "Engaging Critical Reflection in Corporate America," in *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education*, ed. Jack Mezirow, Edward W. Taylor, and associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 125.
- 12 Elizabeth Holloway, *Supervision Essentials for a Systems Approach to Supervision* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2016), 17.
- 13 William J. Mueller and Bill L. Kell, *Coping with Conflict: Supervisory Counselors and Psychotherapists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972).
- 14 Adapted from Carol A. Falender and Edward P. Shafranske, eds., *Casebook for Clinical Supervision: A Competency-Based Approach* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008), 123.
- 15 Margaret Benefiel and Geraldine Holton, eds., *The Soul of Supervision: Integrating Practice and Theory* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2010), 17.

- 16 Janine M. Bernard, "The Discrimination Model," in *Handbook of Psychotherapy Supervision*, ed. C. Edward Watkins, Jr., 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997).
- 17 Jane Vella, "The Power of Dialogue in Adult Learning," *Journal of Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 36 (2016): 101.
- 18 David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2015), 50.
- 19 Vella, "The Power of Dialogue in Adult Learning," 98.
- 20 Kolb, *Experiential Learning*, 28.
- 21 Kolb, *Experiential Learning*, 28
- 22 Charles R. Foster, Lisa E. Dahill, Lawrence A. Golemon, and Barbara Wang Tolentino, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 274.
- 23 Neil Sims, "Theologically Reflective Practice: A Key Tool to Contemporary Ministry," *Journal of Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 31 (2011): 171.
- 24 Sims, "Theologically Reflective Practice," 172ff.
- 25 Christian Scharen, *Fieldwork in Theology: Exploring the Social Context of God's Work in the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2015), 58.
- 26 Kathleen A. Cahalan, "Integrative Knowing and Practical Wisdom," *Journal of Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 36 (2016): 9.
- 27 Cahalan, "Integrative Knowing and Practical Wisdom," 9.
- 28 Cahalan, "Integrative Knowing and Practical Wisdom," 17.
- 29 Cahalan, "Integrative Knowing and Practical Wisdom," 18.
- 30 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001) 7, 194.
- 31 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 166–67.
- 32 Walter Brueggemann, *Chosen? Reading the Bible amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 29 (emphasis in original).
- 33 Kolb, *Experiential Learning*, 41. Freire's alternative to the banking model of education is "problem-posing education," which he believes is the path to critical consciousness.
- 34 Holton, "Wisdom's Garden," 12.
- 35 Holton, "Wisdom's Garden," 18.
- 36 John C. Wade and Janice E. Jones, *Strength-Based Clinical Supervision: A Positive Psychology Approach to Clinical Training* (New Work: Springer Publishing, 2015), 162.