

# Applying Bowen's Theory to Intern Supervision

Jeff A. Tysinger, Dawn P. Tysinger

**Abstract**—The aim of this paper is to theoretically apply Bowen's understanding of triangulation and triads to school psychology intern supervision so that it can assist in the conceptualization of the dynamics of intern supervision and provide some key methods to address common issues. The school psychology internship is the capstone experience for the school psychologist in training. It involves three key participants whose relationships will determine the success of the internship. To understand the potential effect, Bowen's family systems theory can be applied to the supervision relationship. He describes a way to resolve stress between two people by triangulating or binging in a third person. He applies this to a nuclear family, but school psychology intern supervision requires the marriage of an intern, field supervisor, and university supervisor; thus, setting all up for possible triangulation. The consequences of triangulation can apply to standards and requirements, direct supervision, and intern evaluation. Strategies from family systems theory to decrease the negative impact of supervision triangulation.

**Keywords**—Family systems theory, intern supervision, triangulation, school psychology.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE school psychology internship is critical in the training of school psychologists. It is the culmination of a school psychology students' training. Three key individuals are involved. The relationship of these individuals determines the success of the internship. The purpose of this article is to explore these supervisory relationships using Bowen's family systems theory [1]. Internship can be stressful for all individuals involved. When there are three individuals, two of the three people may resolve stress between them by triangulating or bringing in a third person [2]. School psychology intern supervision occurs with an intern, field supervisor, and university supervisor. Applying the idea of this family systems, these relationships set all up for possible triangulation.

A stable two-person relationship can be destabilized by introducing a third. On the other hand, an unstable two-person relationship may draw in a third to dilute the anxiety, either by having a person to blame for the issue (scapegoat) or to recruit support for his or her position in the conflict. Triangulation is typically done in an attempt to resolve the issue, but in fact, can worsen the condition. Although the triad may set the three up for potential problems, Bowen [1] considers the triangle the smallest stable relationship system. Therefore, the triad may relieve discomfort and maintain optimal boundaries. This

article will attempt to briefly discuss the potential pitfalls of the triangle of intern supervision and possible ways to avoid them.

## II. BASICS OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY INTERN SUPERVISION

School psychology training is a blending of knowledge, skills, and dispositions. It involves many hands-on activities and field experiences. These experiences may be course requirements or part of practicum. Practicum occurs earlier in a student's training than the internship. It is strongly connected to the university and the specific experiences required for completion. They are highly focused on specific roles and duties. In contrast, internship occurs at the end of the students' training and incorporates all roles and duties of a school psychologist. Typically, it is the final year of the students training, and they are immersed in a school system.

According to the graduate training standards of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), the internship experience must be a total of 1200 hours in field-based experience [7]. At least 600 of those hours must be completed within the schools. The internship may be completed full-time over the course of one school year, or part-time over the course of two consecutive school years. With regard to supervision, the intern must receive a minimum of two hours per week of direct supervision.

Research on school psychology supervision typically focuses on the intern and field supervisor. The issues and challenges discussed often do not include the university supervisor. Functional supervision comes from the field supervisor in the school psychology internship, while university supervisors review assignments, logs, supervision plans, and ensure completion of appropriate activities. They engage in coordination of intern assignments and collection of data for approval bodies. The university supervisor may have group supervision with several interns; however, topics are typically general in nature and not case specific.

Case specific supervision does not typically occur from university supervisors due to geographic distance, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)/Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), lack of connection to client setting, etc. An exception to this is when interns present cases as case studies. When this occurs, identifying information is not included, key elements of the case a clear conceptualization, and intervention plans are presented and discussed. Case specific individual supervision comes from the field supervisor. Consequently, supervision issues are discussed by specific topic or focused on the relationship between intern and field-based supervisor [3]. For example, [7] uses game theory to describe issues in supervision and elaborates on Kadushin's [4], [5] games in

J. A. Tysinger is with Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA 30460 USA (corresponding author, phone: 912-678-6936; fax: 912-478-7104; e-mail: jtysinger@georgiasouthern.edu).

P. D. Tysinger is with Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA 30460 USA (dtyssinger@georgiasouthern.edu).

social work supervision. Supervisees may attempt to reduce demands, prohibit a real evaluation, and avoid exposure of limited skills or knowledge by engaging in specific games.

### III. INTERN SUPERVISION ISSUES

The school psychology internship structure makes it vulnerable to complications across the individuals involved and the multiple settings involved in this capstone experience. Issues can and will arise during internship due to these complicated yet necessary logistical circumstances. The triad may create vulnerability for the participants concerning an issue, but that is not to imply that the triangulation is intentional on anyone's part. The context of the triad must be considered as well as each member's focus/need or in terms of Bowen's theory, "anxiety." The anxiety surrounding the situation is what drives the configuration of the triad.

There are four possible configurations of the triad. The first is a healthy supervisory relationship in which the university supervisor and the field supervisor have a strong connection, and both have a good connection with the intern, see Fig. 1. The second is triangulation of the university supervisor. Here the field supervisor and intern have a strong connection and neither have a good connection to the university supervisor, see Fig. 2. The third is triangulation of the intern. In this one the university supervisor and the field supervisor have a strong relationship, but do not have a good connection to the intern, see Fig. 3. The final one does not occur often, and it is when the university supervisor and intern have a strong connection but they both do not have a good connection with the field supervisor, see Fig. 4.

Day-to-day contact and considerable internship related stress occur at the Local Education Agency (LEA) and thus, affect the intern and field supervisor. In addition, it is uncommon that the field supervisor and university supervisor would triangulate the intern. An example might be if both supervisors were biased against the intern (gender, ethnicity, religion). Otherwise, a close relationship between the field and university supervisor can be advantageous. A close relationship and communication between supervisors will increase the probability of a great internship experience. Given the contact and stress, it seems more viable to consider the intern and field supervisor as the "couple." The university supervisor is either the potential ally or scapegoat. Considering the triad, when the university supervisor is the ally, the field supervisor is functionally the scapegoat; when the university supervisor is the scapegoat, the field supervisor is functionally the ally.

### IV. BASICS OF BOWEN'S THEORY

Bowen [1] describes individuals on a continuum of differentiation and fusion. Differentiation occurs in two manners, recognition of the separation between the self from others and the separation of intellectual and emotional functioning. The more an individual understands these separations, the more resistant they are to triangulation. On the other end of the continuum is fusion.

With emotional fusion, the self uses emotion to guide the decision-making process, is not objective, is inconsistent, and lacks logical reasoning. In Bowen's theory, individuals are positioned on the continuum, from his or her experiences in his or her family of origin. Personality styles can easily be seen from family to individual and all members of the triad should be aware of their style to diminish potential conflict. However, this is not enough. Bowen [2] explained that even the most differentiated dyad would destabilize under chronic stress, and internship could easily qualify as chronic stress for all parties. In addition, the structure of school psychology internship, amplifies the possibility of triangulation. Within the structure and experience of internship, there are three domains that have considerable anxiety around them for the triad: standards and requirements, direct supervision, and evaluation.

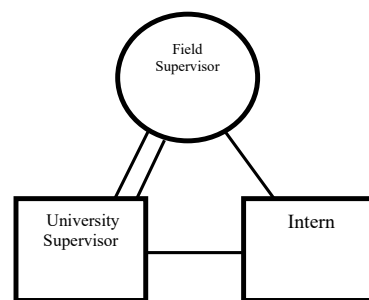


Fig. 1 A healthy supervisory relationship. The university supervisor and the field supervisor have a strong connection, and both have a good connection with the intern

### V. STANDARDS, REQUIREMENTS, AND ANXIETY

The first domain deals with NASP Standards/University requirements as they relate to the duties, role, and function of the school psychologist. Universities typically focus on ideal role and function of the school psychologist with limited recognition of the LEA's current role, function, and resources. This domain spans the entire internship from establishment to completion and is surrounded by anxiety. Many Education Specialist (EdS) programs allow the intern to set up potential internships within the university's parameters. This requires a great deal of coordination between the university, intern, and LEA. The negotiations may occur before a field supervisor is even identified. The university supervisor must then ensure that the field supervisor meets minimal qualifications, accepts the responsibility to have an intern, and agrees to the requirements of the internship.

Direct contact and intern liaison are the two main methods the data are gathered for the evaluation of the internship site and supervisor. We consider this coordination and how misunderstanding and judgment may come into play. For example, all parties may react differently to requiring interns to have an experience that matches the complete role and function spelled out in the NASP standards. The intern has a strong emotional connection to the development of this particular internship and has an emotional reaction to anything that might prohibit or change it. He or she is asking for a

position and then must relay conditions of the requested position. On the other hand, the field supervisor may see the conditions as a judgment of how they (the LEA) provide services. The university supervisor may not appreciate these alternative perceptions due to the strong emphasis and constant contact with the role of the school psychologist. This “ivory tower syndrome” may blind him or her to the possible triangulation. In this domain, the university supervisor may be considered the scapegoat or ally. The intern and field supervisor may triangulate the university supervisor and treat him or her as a scapegoat. The attempt at blaming the university supervisor and/or acquiring support by the field supervisor may play out in several ways, but the rationale behind the intern’s actions is equivalent. Basically, it is the avoidance of university requirements with the justification of working with real children and real issues. The actions may be slowness in getting paperwork completed, resistance to assignments, lack of or pointed communication with the university supervisor, university meeting tardiness/absences, and limited experiences in specific roles. The other condition is the university supervisor triangulated and considered an ally by the intern. In an attempt to resolve the anxiety, the intern may disapprove of the LEAs role and function and seek the university supervisor support for his or her belief. He or she may also have anxiety about his or her ability/skills in those roles and therefore attempt to avoid them by blaming the LEA, stating that “school psychologists don’t do... at this LEA.” In this instance the intern may present the limited role as an explanation of low field supervisor ratings, problematic university supervisor observation, lack of preparedness for LEA meetings, LEA meeting tardiness/absences, reliance on other professionals in the LEA, and pointed communication with the field supervisor.

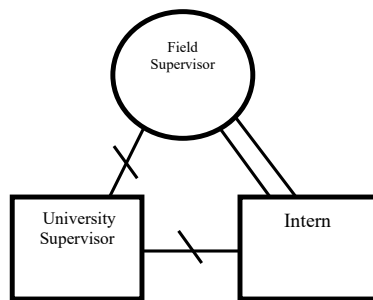


Fig. 2 Triangulation of the university supervisor. The field supervisor and intern have a strong connection and neither have a good connection to the university supervisor

#### VI. DIRECT SUPERVISION AND ANXIETY

The second domain deals with direct supervision, both conceptual/clinical supervision and administrative supervision. Conceptual supervision involves the creation of a supervision plan and adhering to that plan. In addition, it is case specific and consists of discussing the understanding of a case, actions involved, and outcomes. It also involves discussing and resolving the intern’s emotional, cognitive, and behavioral

reactions. Administrative supervision consists of the LEA procedures and required documentation for a school psychologist in that LEA. It also includes signing all intern signed documents. Administrative supervision requires experience in that particular system. It is more observable or quantifiable and with that comes comfort. The field supervisor must provide both conceptual/clinical and administrative supervision. The University supervisor should recognize that field supervisors are volunteers, and they have a heavy workload in addition to the supervisory duties. They may also have limited training in supervision. Field supervisors have limited LEA support; they may recognize their lack of training as a supervisor; they may question their own knowledge and skills; and they may have a limited understanding of conceptual/clinical supervision versus administrative supervision. The intern may view supervision as a grade-based evaluation of his or her performance. In this domain the intern’s relationship is tied closely with the field supervisor, which sets up potential triangulation with the university supervisor. The end result or observable behaviors for this domain are the same. There may be need for constant clarification of supervision, supervision plan and/or activities during supervision. The intern may be slow in turning the supervision plan, slow to log activities, log too few or too many supervision hours, have limited communication with the university, and/or limited participation in or attendance of university group supervision discussions.

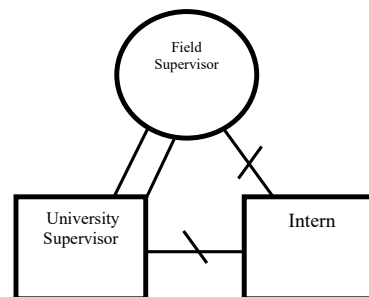


Fig. 3 Triangulation of the intern. The university supervisor and the field supervisor have a strong relationship but do not have a good connection to the intern

#### VII. EVALUATION AND ANXIETY

The final domain is evaluation. Within the school psychology internship experience, the evaluation of the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions of the intern must be evaluated in order to ensure adequate progress toward mastering the roles and functions of the practicing school psychologist. Intern evaluation often occurs at multiple intervals during this capstone experience. Often, there are at least four points of evaluation over the course of the 1200-hour intern experience. These points of evaluation are usually dispersed equally over the year such that the intern is evaluated at the midterm and final point of each of the two semesters of the internship experience. The evaluation form is created by the university supervisor but most frequently

completed by the field-based supervisor who has more regular and direct observation of the intern's skills. These evaluations are critically important to everyone involved in the process. For the university supervisor, the intern evaluation provides vital information regarding the intern's ability to apply the concepts from coursework into field-based practice. For the field supervisor, the evaluation provides an opportunity to reflect on the overall internship requirements, the goals toward independent practice for the intern, and the intern's strengths or areas of improvement within those goals. For the field supervisor, the evaluation can also serve as a progress monitoring tool and communication document that allow the intern to see competencies that have been mastered versus those that continue to be in need of development. Finally, for the intern, the evaluation is often a final key to graduation. Nearly all graduate training programs in school psychology require a successful field-based evaluation (among other performance-based assessments) in order to clear the intern for graduation.

Evaluation may be adverse for all involved, but it is necessary to ensure that interns have the necessary knowledge, skills, disposition, and experiences to function as a school psychologist. Once again, the university supervisor may be triangulated in the form of a scapegoat. This domain does not typically lend itself to the university supervisor being an ally. The intern may not want to be evaluated for knowledge and skill deficits or dispositional issues. Even if his or her performance is great, being evaluated creates some anxiety. The field supervisor may be overloaded with work, not clear how the evaluation will be used, and not comfortable discussing it with the intern. Thus, it would be easy to focus on the demands of the LEA and not on the needed paperwork. Triangulation can appear in the form of asking for clarification of evaluation categories, verbal evaluation may not be commensurate with the written evaluation, evaluations may be high in all areas, areas of the evaluation may not be completed, limited or no explanation of the rating, the evaluation may be late, and limited communication among the triad.

#### VIII. REDUCING ANXIETY

School psychology internship is stressful for all parties involved, and the very structure of internship increases the possibility of triangulation. Bowen's [2] ideas about therapeutic resolution can be used to prevent and/or resolve the possible triangulation and reduce the triad's anxiety. There are two basic goals for therapeutic resolution of Bowen's theory (1) reduction of anxiety and (2) increased differentiation of all parties [6]. These can also be applied to intern supervision to reduce potential issues. There are a few simple ways to avoid triangulation. The first is being aware of your own family of origin and where you are positioned on the continuum of differentiation and fusion. The second is recognition and/or awareness of the anxiety by the triad. The third is to foster the relationship between university and field supervisors. There are typically no real potential issues if supervisors are strongly connected. Therefore, a way to

improve overall intern supervision is to increase direct contact between supervisors and clarify roles, duties, and responsibilities. In addition to these simple steps, the university supervisor may need to take on the role of the triadic-based therapist. In triadic-based therapy, the therapist is more of a mediator who sets the rules and tries to be objective and neutral [8]. In this role, he or she models appropriate communication, directs the therapeutic process, and reduces the "pathogenic relating" between parties. If the therapist allows himself or herself to be triangulated, differentiation of the parties will be diminished, and the anxiety will not be reduced. Given the strong possibility of triangulation, the university supervisor should take this role on. They should communicate directly with both the intern and field supervisor. All requirements and the purpose should be explained. Communication between all members should be increased, clear, and open [3]. Using the intern as a liaison may exacerbate the possibility of triangulation. At the first hint of a possible problem, the university supervisor should contact the intern and field supervisor and mediate the resolution. Providing training for field supervisors may also prevent misunderstandings and increase confidence. However, this must be done in a form that will not burden the field supervisor. Support from university should be responsive, constructive, and encouraging. Engaging in these activities can reduce the potential issues, specifically triangulation, that could arise in a school psychology internship.

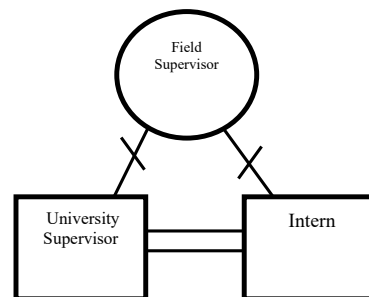


Fig. 4 Triangulation of the field supervisor. The university supervisor and the intern have a strong relationship but do not have a good connection to the field supervisor

#### IX. SUMMARY

In summary, the school psychology internship is a crucial experience for the school psychologist in training. The nature of the internship allows for some common issues and typical responses. Applying Bowen's family systems theory will help with the understanding of these issues and help in their prevention and resolution.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Bowen, M. (1976). Theory in the practice of psychotherapy. In P. J. Guerin, Jr. (Ed.), *Family therapy: Theory and practice* (pp.42-90). New York, NY: Garner Press.
- [2] Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York, NY: Jason Aronson.
- [3] Harvey, V. S. & Struzziero, J. A. (2008). *Professional Development and Supervision of school psychologists: From Intern to Expert* (2nd ed.).

Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press & NASP.

- [4] Kadushin, A. (1968). Games people play in supervision. *Social Work*. 13(3), 23-32.
- [5] Kadushin, A. (1976). *Supervision in social work*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- [6] Kerr, M. & Bowen, M. (1988). *Family Evaluation: An approach based on Bowen theory*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- [7] Peterson, D. W. (1981) Games in school psychology supervision. *School Psychology Review*. 10(4), 445-451.
- [8] Zuk, G. H. (1981). *Family therapy: A triadic based approach* (Rev. ed.). New York: Hyman Sciences Press.