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Philosophical Foundations for Clinical Supervision within a Christian Worldview

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Supervision has increasingly become a focus of psychological theory and research in recent years. However, exploration of the implications of a Christian worldview for supervision remains largely neglected. Domains of a worldview are outlined and illustrated with examples of distinctive Christian worldview beliefs. Philosophical implications and practice implications of a Christian worldview are discussed. Specifically, a Christian worldview can be addressed with regard to the means, motives, and goals of supervision. Examples of how a Christian perspective can also influence the personal life of supervisees and supervisors are also highlighted.

Clinical supervision, though formerly largely neglected, has increasingly become a focus of theory and research in the past few years. One impetus to this development was given by the National Council of Schools and Programs in Professional Psychology and by Bent, Schindler and Dobbins (1991), who noted that about half the professional training of a clinical psychologist involves supervised practice. Another impetus was the work of Elizabeth Holloway (1995) and Carl Stoltenberg (e.g., Stoltenberg, 2005; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987), pioneers in theory and research about supervision. Yet, despite the recent dramatic growth in theory and research on supervision, little has been written that addresses the unique concerns that arise from a Christian perspective. In the material that follows, I will first explore the philosophical foundations of a Christian worldview. A Christian worldview framework will then be employed to address practical considerations, and the personal life of the supervisor and supervisee/counselor.

Worldviews

While the precise definition and contours of a worldview vary among theorists, at their core worldviews involve a set of beliefs about humans and the world. Worldviews answer basic questions about what exists, how we know it, how things work, what is good and

bad or right and wrong, and who we are (or what it means to be human). These themes correspond to the philosophical topics of metaphysics, epistemology, cosmology, ethics, and anthropology respectively. Clearly the answers people give to these worldview questions are diverse. Just as Christians vary in terms of theology and denominational affiliation, they also vary in terms of their worldviews. Even the question of what constitutes a Christian worldview is a matter of debate. However, there is broad general agreement among Christians on many worldview issues.

Worldviews are developed very early in life. It is only later that we may learn to articulate and talk about them as we begin to recognize that others often hold somewhat—or even radically—different worldviews. Worldviews have important implications. Sometimes in subtle and other times in profound ways they shape our understanding of ourselves and of our world (Bufford, 1997; 2007). In the words of Bevan and Kessel (1994), "worldviews are like sand at a picnic; they get into everything" (p. 506). This habit of getting into everything, along with the tendency for worldviews to be an almost transparent ground against which we interpret events, is one of the reasons that worldviews underlie much of the conflict among people. Another complication is that most of us are exposed to and acculturated to multiple and even conflicting worldviews. Worldview tensions may contribute to both internal turmoil and interpersonal conflicts, often without our overt awareness.

The fact that worldviews get into everything is a basic reason that we need to explore the implications of a Christian worldview as it

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applies to our approaches to supervision and clinical practice. My proposal is that as Christian supervisors we seek to inform our approach to supervision by our Christian views in ways that are conscious and intentional rather than unconscious and coincidental. Thus, at a most specific level I will be articulating my own views in the material that follows. In the process, however, I hope to shed light on the ways in which Christian commitments may shape our approach to clinical supervision.

Christian Perspectives as Worldview

Religion, culture, and worldview are somewhat distinct but closely related concepts. The growing multicultural emphasis in psychology and the inclusion of cultural diversity in the American Psychological Association *Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct* (2002) has helped to open the door to an explicit recognition of the role of differing cultural perspectives in psychology. Religion is acknowledged as a cultural difference at several points in the *APA Code*, including Principle E and Ethical Standards 2.01 (b), 3.01, and 3.03 (APA, 2002). I believe our Christian beliefs contribute to each of the major domains of our worldviews (see Table 1). I also believe that each of the worldview domains has important implications for our supervision and clinical practice. The following comments are intended as illustrative rather than exhaustive.

What Exists

First, Christians have distinctive beliefs about what exists (e.g., God, Heaven). There is general agreement among Christians that what exists is both material and non-material (or spiritual). Christian views of what exists have several implications at a practical level for Christian supervisors, such as being mindful of and inviting divine direction. For example, as a supervisor I sometimes encourage supervisees to silently invite God's presence, guidance, and protection before beginning therapy sessions.

How We Know It

Christians believe that human knowing draws on two sources. We believe that God has revealed himself both in the Word (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pe. 1:21) and in the World (Ps. 19:1). Thus Christians believe we can learn from the world around us, including each other and human traditions. However, Christians believe we can also learn from direct, divine revelation. God's self-revelation comes through the world around

us. It comes through the Bible. It also comes through direct revelation as God spoke through the Holy Spirit to the prophets in the past and speaks to us today to instruct and guide us. Christian supervisors can be actively engaged in the reading and study of Scripture and can actively invite Godly wisdom and guidance. We can also encourage these activities in Christian supervisees.

How it Works

In terms of causality, Christians believe that God is an active personal agent who functions outside the physical universe in creating and sustaining ways. Christians also believe that God is free to act within the universe today and that he does so in ways that suit his purposes. Christians believe in both natural and supernatural causes. Christians generally believe that most events in the world occur because of the processes built into it by God's creating and sustaining actions. But they also believe that sometimes events in the world occur because of direct, divine interventions. For Christians, prayer is at times a petition for such divine action in earthly events. Christian supervisors can engage in petitionary prayer and encourage it among supervisees—and their clients—for whom it is appropriate. One example is when I propose that a Christian supervisee pray that God will give him compassion for a client with whom he finds it difficult to work.

What is Good and Bad

Christians believe that God has provided standards for human conduct, and often point to the Scriptures, such as the Ten Commandments, as a basis for their standards for moral and ethical practice. While there are wide areas of agreement among Christians about moral and ethical issues, there are numerous areas of disagreement among Christians as well. Further, Christian views of ethics and morality overlap in many significant ways with views held by those who do not profess to be Christian. Christians may also hold distinctive ethical and moral beliefs. Christian supervisors consult the Bible, church tradition, and theological or pastoral counselors on these themes. For example, I have often consulted with a former seminary colleague about various theological dilemmas that have surfaced in the supervisory triad. At times I may also recommend that a supervisee seek religious consultation or suggest that a client do so.

Table 1
Philosophical Foundations of Supervision

Domain	Philosophical Term	Uniquely Christian Beliefs	Action Proposals
What exists	Metaphysics	God, Christ, Holy Spirit, heaven and hell (eternal reward and punishment)	Acknowledge and seek divine presence; recognize spiritual conflicts
How we know what we know	Epistemology	Christian knowing includes God's revelation through the Bible and the active working of the Holy Spirit	Invite and seek Godly wisdom and guidance
How it works	Cosmology	The universe is created and sustained by divine decree but God remains free to act within and outside of creation	Supervisor and supervisee pray and invite or seek God's involvement in their work
What is good and bad	Ethics	The Bible and Christian traditions guide our understanding of right and wrong, including therapeutic interventions, goals, and motivations	Consult Bible, Church Tradition and pastoral counselors
Who we are	Anthropology	Humans bear the image of God, which affects our structure, function and relationships; God takes personally what we do to each other.	Recognize divine image in our clients; serve them as if we serve God himself

Who We Are

Christian beliefs about what it means to be human include the notion that people are created in the image of God (Imago Dei). To be made in the image of God connotes significance and worth. Precisely what that image entails is a matter of ongoing debate. One proposal is that the image of God involves our structure, functioning, and relationships (McMinn & Campbell, 2007). Specifically, humans reflect the image of God in their structure or being. Human rational and moral capacities reflect in a limited way the divine capacities for reason and justice. Human functioning includes managerial responsibility. Christians believe they are called to be God's servants and stewards of the earth, its creatures, and with respect to our fellow humans (McMinn & Campbell, 2007). Therefore, supervision can be understood as acts of stewardship in this context (cf. Mt. 12:40-42; Mt. 25:34-40). I proposed a practical application of this notion for counselors earlier in my discussion of consecrated counseling as an act of service to God and our fellow

humans (Bufford, 1997). Here I propose that supervision may also be consecrated as an act of service to God as we provide skilled supervision and insure that our supervisees provide ethical, skilled, and effective therapy.

Christian Perspectives and Supervision

In addition to philosophical implications for clinical supervision, a Christian worldview also has direct practice implications. Specifically, a Christian worldview can influence choices about the means, motives, and goals of clinical supervision. Furthermore, a Christian perspective can also have a significant impact on the personal life of supervisees and supervisors, and ultimately, the life of the client.

Means or Interventions

Christian beliefs shape our decisions about which supervision and therapy techniques should be employed and which avoided. For clients for whom it is appropriate in terms of their presenting problem, and who have given consent that Christian interventions be utilized,

we may explore a variety of spiritually oriented strategies. As Christian supervisors, we need to be aware of such strategies and be prepared to encourage our supervisees to consider their use in ethically appropriate and consensual ways. For example, as supervisors we may invite our supervisees to discuss how their Christian thoughts, beliefs, prayers, and engagement in other spiritual disciplines are related to challenges with a particular client. One colleague and fellow supervisor, for example, reports that much of his internal dialogue during a therapy session is prayer—for wisdom, insight, and grace—pertaining to the particular client currently in the room. Similarly, we may suggest that the supervisee encourage the client to: explore how God fits into an important decision or life circumstance; pray about an obstacle, challenge or decision; or read or reflect on Scripture related to a particular life theme or challenge.

Motives

As Christian supervisors we need to be mindful of motives—client motives, supervisee motives, and our own motives. In regards to Christian supervisors, the following are examples of positive supervisor motives:

- To practice the faithful wounding that is needed for constructive development of our supervisees (i.e., saying or doing things that are for the moment painful though necessary for professional development; Prov. 27:6);
- to speak the truth to them in love (Eph. 4:15);
- To correct supervisees with an attitude of graciousness, kindness, gentleness (Eph. 4:29-32) and humility, recognizing that we can, and usually have, made the same mistakes (Gal. 6:1);
- To have accurate appraisals of ourselves (Gal. 6:3-5);
- To esteem our supervisees better than we esteem ourselves (Phil. 2:3); and
- To be faithful stewards of the gifts with which God has blessed us (1 Cor. 4:1-2) and to likewise encourage such stewardship in our supervisees.

Goals or Ends

As Christian supervisors, we will also want to help our supervisees think through possible therapeutic goals both from their own Christian perspectives and from the perspective of their clients and the clients' worldviews. In turn this may facilitate the supervisee in learning how to

negotiate treatment goals in the context of different worldviews. Likewise, Christian supervisors should be available to help supervisees differentiate between their own personal beliefs and the personal beliefs of their clients. If common goals become difficult or impossible because of profound worldview differences between the supervisee and client, Christian supervisors can help supervisees try and work through such situations, or explore the possibility of referring.

The Personal Life of the Supervisee and Supervisor

A Christian worldview can affect the personal life of the supervisor and supervisee in both subtle and profound ways. As the earlier discussion about image of God suggested, a Christian worldview can transform our views of ourselves and our clients. I have heard on several occasions from supervisors in community agencies that students in Christian graduate programs where I have taught over the years were unusual in their genuine care for their clients rather than viewing them as just a job or as somehow inferior because of their mental illness or distress.

Perhaps the most important ways in which Christian supervisors should aspire to be different is in their engagement in spiritual disciplines and practices and in their active encouragement of such practices in supervisees. Among these disciplines are worship, service, prayer, and active engagement in a Christian community in ways that involve fellowship, service, and giving. Similarly, the internal dialogue of the supervisee is an important area for the Christian supervisor to explore. The way I think and talk about clients can be humanizing or dehumanizing. I can think of them as their disorders—she is nothing but a schizophrenic—or in terms of their humanness. If I think of the client as a person who was created by and is beloved of God, as a person who has dreams, hopes, aspirations, and disappointments much like me, but who is afflicted at the present time, it transforms my attitude about the person. As a supervisor it is important to encourage my supervisees to be developing such “habits of the heart” in which they are as circumspect about what they think and say of clients as they are about where and to whom they say things.

Conclusion

A Christian worldview can influence the interventions, goals, and motives of supervision. On

the whole, Christian beliefs often exist in the background of the supervisory process, subtly affecting what we do and say as supervisors. However, a Christian perspective can also become more prominent in supervision when the client, supervisee, or supervisor desires that Christian views be explicitly addressed. Moreover, a Christian worldview can affect the personal life of supervisor and supervisee in terms of the practice of spiritual disciplines and the cultivation of Godly attitudes and behaviors in our dealing with each other and with clients. Thus, being cognizant of our worldviews may not only give us more insight into the beliefs underpinning our supervisory roles, but also may lead to more effective supervisory relationships.

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