

Refining Supervisory Practices in the Field of Behavior Analysis: Introduction to the Special Section on Supervision

Linda A. LeBlanc¹ · James K. Luiselli²

Published online: 28 October 2016
© Association for Behavior Analysis International 2016

Abstract The rapid growth in the number of behavior analysts and aspiring behavior analysts creates an imperative for effective and efficient supervisory practices. Many behavior analysts receive little to no explicit instruction and mentoring in supervision practices while they are in training themselves. Those behavior analysts may then be expected to provide supervision for a range of individuals soon after graduation and certification and throughout the remainder of their career. The papers included in this special issue offer guidance for establishing and maintaining supervisory relationships, understanding the importance of each of the ethical guidelines for supervision, structuring group supervision experiences, managing problems that can arise during the course of a supervisory relationship, and arranging models of supervision within human service organizations.

Keywords Ethics · Mentoring · Supervision · Supervisor · Training

The dictionary defines training as the “activity leading to skilled behavior” and supervision as the “act of overseeing, inspection” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/citation>). In our field, the term training is generally used to refer to the procedures used to establish new skill sets (e.g., implementation of a specific procedure, knowledge of basic

behavioral principles). The literature base supporting effective training practices is vast and long-standing (Reid, O’Kane, & Macurick, 2011). Procedures such as instructions, live or video modeling, rehearsal with feedback to an established performance criterion, and ongoing performance monitoring with booster sessions are well-established and recommended training practices (Parsons, Rollyson, & Reid, 2012). The term supervision refers to the broad set of activities that constitute ongoing oversight of a supervisee’s work. Supervision may involve training in new skill sets (e.g., discussing behavioral procedures with professionals from other disciplines), oversight of the implementation of previously learned skills with clients, and modeling in making data-based clinical decisions, among other activities. The literature base on effective supervision practices in the field of applied behavior analysis (ABA), in stark contrast, is nearly non-existent. Other disciplines (e.g., clinical psychology, social work) offer some guidance (APA, 2015; Kraemer-Tebes et al., 2011), but our discipline needs a literature of its own to guide the practice of one of the most important things any behavior analyst might do.

Effective supervision is critical to the overall development of our field in that it facilitates delivery of high-quality behavioral services as well as the professional development of both the supervisor and supervisee. The supervisor is responsible for oversight all aspects of the applied behavior analytic repertoire of the supervisee including assessment and treatment skills and ethical decision-making among others. Thus, the supervisor must stay abreast of current research in behavior analysis in order to effectively support the supervisee. The supervisor also serves the mentoring role of helping to establish professional values, coaching interpersonal social skills, and shaping effective organizational and time management skills that facilitate success in employment settings.

The rapid growth in the number of behavior analysts and aspiring behavior analysts over the last decade creates

✉ Linda A. LeBlanc
lleblanc@tbh.com

¹ Trumpet Behavioral Health, 390 Union Blvd, Suite 300, Lakewood, CO 80228, USA

² North East Educational and Developmental Support Center, Tewksbury, MA, USA

an imperative for refined, effective, and efficient supervisory practices. Any Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) should expect to provide supervision for others, potentially beginning almost immediately upon becoming degreed and credentialed. In addition, the new supervision and experience requirements of the Behavior Analyst Certification Board create additional imperative for the development of the supervisory repertoires. The BACB now requires completion of at least 8 h of training based on a curriculum covering training and supervision practices before a BCBA can supervise others (BACB, 2012). In addition, ongoing continuing education units must include coverage of the topic of supervision in each recertification cycle.

While a minimum of 8 h of training is a start towards improved supervision in our field, this training is an acknowledged minimum requirement rather than the full preparation and mentoring that one needs to become an effective supervisor. The BACB also provides a variety of guidelines covering the timing, documentation, content and structure of the supervision, and practice of those engaging in ongoing practice of behavior analysis or the accrual of experience hours towards a credential. However, these requirements and guidelines represent the *form and structure* of supervision rather than the *functional components* that are likely to produce well-trained young professional behavior analysts. Effective supervision is far more than a meeting that meets the basic requirements established by our credentialing body. One functional component of effective supervision is the establishment and maintenance of a meaningful, sustained relationship that is predicated on clear and reasonable expectations of both the supervisor and supervisee. Our field needs conceptually sound supervision practices that can be tested for effectiveness and refined based on those experimental evaluations.

We are pleased to feature seven papers in this Special Section of *Behavior Analysis in Practice*. Each paper covers some common supervision practices but also particular components which contribute to supervision implementation and effectiveness.

Sellers, Valentino, and LeBlanc present several recommended guidelines for conducting individual supervision with ABA practitioners. Their proposed procedures emerged from an initiative to standardize practices at a human service agency. Accordingly, the recommendations are informed by practical considerations that prevail in most applied settings. The paper includes useful appendices for following the practice guidelines.

Turner, Fischer, and Luiselli construct a practice model for behavior analytic supervision which is linked to the BCBA Supervision Training Curriculum Outline (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, 2012) and the Professional and Ethical

Compliance Code for Behavior Analysts (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, 2014). Notably, they emphasize that competency-based models allow for systematic measurement and evaluation of supervisor and supervisee behavior throughout the supervision process.

The focus of the paper by Sellers, Alai-Rosales, and MacDonald concerns the ethics of supervision in behavior analytic practice. They examine the seven subsections of the behavior analyst as supervisor section of the BACB Professional and Ethical Compliance Code for Behavior Analysts (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, 2014). With emphasis on ethical distinctions and challenges, various case examples illustrate specific issues related to supervisory activities.

Sellers, LeBlanc, and Valentino detail several problems that may arise during supervision, sometimes within the supervisory relationship itself, or due to a supervisee's interpersonal and professional skills. This paper proposes strategies to identify and overcome the barriers to successful supervision. The authors also advise supervisors about steps that can be taken to continuously monitor and improve supervisory competencies.

Group supervision, the topic reviewed by Valentino, LeBlanc, and Sellers, is frequently implemented with ABA practitioners. The paper discusses some of the unique characteristics associated with group learning formats and how they can motivate performance of supervisees. Several recommendations are included for organizing group supervision sessions with maximum benefit.

The two remaining papers focus on supervision models within human service organizations for individuals who have autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Hartley, Courtney, Rosswurm, and LaMarca describe an apprenticeship arrangement between supervisors and future behavior analysts in order to meet the supervision standards that the BACB requires. The paper presents data which document the effects of this supervision model. Dixon et al. also report data from a study that evaluated the impact of supervision intensity, supervisor qualifications, and caseload on several ABA treatment outcomes. Their findings have several implications for following and possibly revising the current BACB supervision guidelines.

In summary, the papers contained in this special issue of *Behavior Analysis in Practice* highlight many considerations for conducting high-quality behavior analytic supervision. Moving forward, more research is needed to evaluate the impact of supervision practices on the behavior on supervisees, learning objectives achieved by service recipients, and process variables such as frequency and amount of time devoted to supervision. Presently, we have little to no evidence support for most of the reasonable and face-valid supervision guidelines presented and recommended in these papers.

Similarly, it would be valuable to design and test assessment protocols that supervisors and supervisees can use to evaluate distinct components of supervision. In effect, we might envision a functional behavioral assessment of supervisory practices. Such assessment, through rating scales, behavior checklists, and perhaps direct observation, would have the objective of isolating procedures and conditions that are associated with exemplary performance, procedural fidelity, and social validity.

Supervision practices and guidelines will be advanced further by surveying supervisors, supervisees, and trainees in different settings (e.g., public schools, human service organizations, colleges-universities) and with reference to different supervision requirements (e.g., BCBA, BCaBA, RBT). Numerous practical exigencies apply here, for example, the number of individuals being supervised, other responsibilities of supervisors, the ever-changing profiles of service recipients, available resources, and administrative decision-making, to name just a few. We should not expect supervision practices and outcomes to improve without soliciting feedback and direction from the individuals conducting and receiving supervision.

Our hope is that this special issue of *Behavior Analysis in Practice* promotes more widespread knowledge about supervision within ABA, the factors that govern effective supervision, measures of supervision success, and the complimentary and distinctive perspectives between supervisors and supervisees. As other disciplines have recognized, there is a rigor and science to delivering supervision (American Psychological Association, 2015; Frank et al., 2010; Kraemer-Tebes et al., 2011). The same priority is apparent within ABA. Accelerating the study of supervision will produce better behavior analytic services, new generations

of skilled supervisors, and fertile ground for further refining optimal practices.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

References

- American Psychological Association (2015). Guidelines for clinical supervision in health service psychology. *American Psychologist*, *70*(1), 33–46. doi:10.1037/a0038112.
- Behavior Analyst Certification Board (2012). *Supervisor training curriculum outline*. Littleton: Behavior Analyst Certification Board.
- Behavior Analyst Certification Board (2014). *Professional and ethical compliance code for behavior analysts*. Littleton: Behavior Analyst Certification Board.
- Frank, F. R., Snell, L. S., tenCate, O., Holmboe, E. S., Carraccio, C., Swing, S. R., et al. (2010). Competency-based medical education: theory to practice. *Medical Teacher*, *32*(8), 638–645. doi:10.3109/0142159X.2010.501190.
- Kraemer-Tebes, J., Matlin, S. L., Migdole, S. J., Farkas, M. S., Money, R. W., Shulman, L., & Hoge, M. A. (2011). Providing competency training to clinical supervisors through an interactional supervision approach. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *21*(2), 190–199. doi:10.1177/1049731510385827.
- Parsons, M. B., Rollyson, J. H., & Reid, D. H. (2012). Evidence-based staff training: a guide for practitioners. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, *5*(2), 2–11.
- Reid, D. H., O’Kane, N. P., & Macurick, K. M. (2011). Staff training and management. In W. W. Fisher, C. C. Piazza, & H. S. Roane (Eds.), *Handbook of applied behavior analysis* (pp. 281–296). New York, NY: Guildford.