Triangulation—The Core of the Supervisory Process

There are many relevant dynamics, both skill-based and relational, embedded in the process of supervision. One of most important of these dynamics is the presence of triangulation. The very structure of supervision is triangular and the emotional tensions created by the relationships forming the triangle will often go unrecognized and, therefore, not discussed in the supervisory sessions.

Triangulation and Its Relevance

Supervision, by definition, involves a triangular relationship among supervisor, supervisee, and client. (“Client” is used from here on to mean individual, couple, or family). The more supervisors understand the triangulation in their own development, the more effective they will be in managing the triangulation of the supervisory process. Supervisors with knowledge of their place within the triangle will have a more accurate picture of the therapy and the supervision than those without that knowledge.

The behavior of each member affects the others in ways that may loosen or tighten the relationships within the triangle. There is a steady tension in the closeness or distance of each dyad in the triangle (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Papero, 1985). As the emotionality between members of one dyad increases, the third person, by words or actions, is pulled into the relationship or puts her or himself into it to diffuse the tension. At that point, the balance changes and that person becomes more active in the triangle.

Functionally, triangles preserve homeostasis and balance; they contain the naturally existing tension in the constellation. When triangles become fixed and rigid, they are dysfunctional. Supervisors who do not see their roles in these patterns will find supervision frustrating and unproductive. In a functional supervisory triangle, the client system and its attendant needs are the reason for its existence. The learning of the supervisee is the explicit goal of supervision, but so is the continued growth of the supervisor and client. Functionally, the supervisor will provide a clear picture of the client, the supervisor will respond accordingly to the theory and working contract, and the client in treatment will bring issues to the session that are presented within the realm of the supervisory system.

Functionality of Triangles

Triangles function in both positive and negative ways. The goal of the supervisor is to recognize and capitalize on those aspects which are positive and to intervene into those which are negative. Triangles are useful when they serve to preserve homeostasis and balance and are not rigid and fixed; they are flexible and adaptable, thus maintaining the flow of the process without generating undue anxiety. In this context, triangles maintain the tension of the relationship in a positive manner and allow for the expansion of relational boundaries.

Displacement of direct contact

between individuals in the triangle may be useful or it may be problematic. Often, the lack of direct contact between individuals allows for relief of uncomfortable levels of tension after which a more meaningful direct contact can be created. However, if contact is avoided for too long, the triangle becomes fixed and the supervisory process is no longer capable of a successful outcome.

More negative behavior is the avoidance of intimacy, both positive and negative, resulting in the inability to discuss real issues. In supervision, intimacy can be defined as working on the self of the supervisee and on the self of the supervisor, which will be reflected in the client system. By discussing “real issues,” both supervision and therapy are more likely to be successful. In each of these processes, boundaries, transference, and counter-transference are always present and must be considered by the constituents of the triangle.

Potential Disruptions Due to Triangulation

There are at least three ways in which dysfunctional triangle can create a disruption in the supervisory system.

1) One person in a tension laden dyad moves toward the third person. Upon hearing the supervisor’s input about the client, the supervisee may feel criticized and move closer to the client. If the supervisor recognizes that the supervisee is not following through with suggestions, he or she might consider the dynamics of triangulation and raise the issue of their relationship with the supervisee. There may be, in the supervisory relationship, unspoken problems which are subtly allowing the supervisee to move toward the client.

2) One person in the dyad isolates her or himself to the degree that the other member of the dyad is pushed toward the third person. The client may be withholding information about the problem, thus pushing the supervisor and supervisee into a collusive relationship that helps neither the supervisee nor the client to change. The supervisor who understands triangulation and his or her role in it will bring the possibility of this dynamic to the attention of the supervisee.

3) The third person in the triangle is involved in the tension filled dyadic relationship. A supervisor may try to intervene in a difficult relationship between the supervisee and client by giving directives and instructions
for change. However, change does not occur because the supervisor has added solutions to the process without understanding the emotional tension between therapist and client. Recognition of these processes prevents the triangle from becoming so rigid and fixed that change is impossible. Only if one of the components of the triangle challenges the tension will the rigidly loosen enough to allow learning and, eventually, change. Because of the hierarchical relationship in the supervisory process, it is incumbent upon the supervisor to recognize the dynamics of dysfunctional triangles and institute the necessary intervention to restore functionality to the relationship.

**Using Triangles in Supervision**
Behaviors resulting from triangulation are frequently evident in supervision. One of the most common and most useful behaviors is the formation of an alliance. In this dynamic, two members of the triangle work together to help the third member resolve a problem, such as the supervisor and supervisee bringing together their experience and knowledge to help the client. Theoretically, this is the purpose of supervision. However, the supervisor must be aware of this alliance and she cannot assume that supervision is working effectively, but must question the process so as not to become confluent with the supervisee.

This lack of exploration of the supervisory process could lead to another outcome of supervision which is not so useful. That dynamic is collusion in which two members of the triangular relationship are aligned against the third. While this behavior may be the result of the unexamined supervisory process, it can also occur between the supervisee and the client. If supervision is not live or video taped, the actual events of the session are conveyed by word of mouth and the supervisor depends on the report of the supervisee.

Relational problems in supervision can prevent the supervisee from reporting difficult events to the supervisor. Without a full account of the therapy session, the supervisor is prevented from suggesting needed interventions and behaviors and the client remains basically unchanged. Another role in which the supervisor may engage is that of mediator. One member of the triad arbitrates the relationship between the other two. It is unlikely that the client would assume the role of mediator, but the supervisor is frequently placed in this role. It is not so much to mediate between client and supervisee, but rather to mediate the supervisee’s perceptions of and feelings about the client. It is a way of moving from a rigid, fixed perception to one that offers alternatives and reframes of the client’s world view. This becomes especially important when the supervisee feels stuck in the therapeutic process or in the relationship with the client.

Triangles are an unavoidable foundation of the supervisory process. It is important for the beginning supervisor to accept this dynamic as fact and to take the necessary steps to deal with it. Learning to recognize the potentially negative effects of triangulation and to effectively use the positive aspects of triangulation is essential for competent supervision.

**Charleen Alderfer, EdD, NCC, LMFT** is a tenured associate professor in the Department of Counselor Education at The College of New Jersey in Ewing, NJ. She is the coordinator of the post-Master’s Educational Specialist Degree in Marriage and Family Therapy and faculty liaison to The Family Clinic. Alderfer is a Clinical Member of the AAMFT, an Approved Supervisor, and a site visitor for COAMFTE. She maintains a private practice for family therapy and supervision.

**References**

**“It doesn’t look good. They asked for separate checks.”**