

## Attachment-informed Supervision for Social Work Field Education

C. Susanne Bennett

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**Abstract** Supervisory relationships present a new population for the application of attachment theory, and conceptualization of attachment-informed supervision training offers a new direction for study. This paper presents an 8-month model of supervision training for social work field instructors of MSW students. The training's design incorporates primary attachment concepts with an understanding of the supervisory working alliance and parallel process. An overview of the in-person and on-line pilot training is presented, including perceptions from the participants regarding the training's usefulness. This training program has implications for effective social work field education, and recommendations are suggested for future attachment research on supervision.

**Keywords** Attachment theory · Supervision · Social work field education · Supervisory working alliance

Over the past decade, Bowlby's (1969/1982, 1973, 1980) theory about the establishment, maintenance, and termination of human attachments has been actively applied to professional caregiving relationships. Bowlby (1988) noted that an infant's "secure base" with an attachment figure triggers the infant's exploration of the wider world, and similarly, a client's secure base with a therapist facilitates exploration within the therapeutic process. Recently, the implication of his theory for adult psychotherapy has provided a new focus to the conceptualization and empirical

research about clinical practice (Eagle 2003; Sable 2000; Slade 1999). A natural expansion of this focus has been the application of attachment theory to the supervision of clinical practice, and a small, but growing body of literature now centers on supervisory attachment processes (Bennett and Deal 2008; Bennett and Saks 2006; Foster 2003; Newswald-McCalip 1995; Pistole and Watkins 1995; Riggs and Bretz 2006; Watkins 1995; White and Queener 2003). Aligned with the original views of Bowlby and Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al. 1978), it has been suggested that the challenges of the supervisory process may activate the attachment system for a new supervisee, who may in turn seek the closeness and safe haven of the supervisor for support and guidance. Theoretically, the supervisee will feel confident to explore the environment and develop a professional sense of self when the supervisor's caregiving provides a secure base for learning.

An attachment theory framework is particularly appropriate for understanding dynamics in the relationship between social work graduate students and their field internship supervisors. The social work profession has long emphasized the saliency of the supervisory relationship (Kadushin and Harkness 2002; Munson 2002; Robinson 1936; Shulman 1993), especially in the field work internship (Nye 2002; Reynolds 1942; Saari 1989). Research on field education has suggested that the supervisor's support, availability, openness, and trust are characteristics that predict successful supervision in the eyes of new students (Fortune and Abramson 1993). The supervisor's ability to develop positive relationships with supervisees has been reported as the principal characteristic that social work students value (Kadushin 1992). Attachment theory is applicable to supervision because it provides an empirically-based framework for understanding both the nature of

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C. S. Bennett (✉)  
National Catholic School of Social Service, The Catholic  
University of America, 100 Shahan Hall, 620 Michigan Ave.,  
NE, Washington, DC 20064, USA  
e-mail: bennetts@cua.edu

relationships and the process of establishing a supportive, secure base for supervision.

Despite awareness of the value of the relationship, field education training has given limited attention to the process of developing quality supervisory relationships. Many social work supervision training programs have focused more intentionally on orienting new instructors to the sponsoring university's graduate school curriculum or educating instructors about adult learning theory (Davys and Beddoe 2000; Dettlaff and Dietz 2004), student developmental levels (Deal 2002), and the process of meeting concrete goals and building skills related to practice (Caspi and Reid 1998; Fortune et al. 2001). These focal points are essential for student supervision, but they may be secondary to the basic need to establish a positive relationship and working alliance between the student supervisee and the field supervisor. Indeed, in a classical and early conceptualization of the "supervisory working alliance," Bordin (1983) proposed that the relational bonds between the supervisee and supervisor are critical to an agreement about the goals and tasks of the supervision process. He believed that all supervisory approaches must "center around the feelings of liking, caring, and trusting that the participants share" (p. 36), although the goals and tasks may differ according to the type of supervision.

Based on the belief that a supportive and positive working alliance is vital to supervision's effectiveness, an 8-month supervision training program was created to highlight the supervisory relationship. Attachment theory served as the foundation for the training program due to its empirically-based focus on relationships and the evidence that attachment is linked to the supervisory working alliance. The current paper presents a brief overview of applicable attachment research, the training program's curriculum, participant perceptions of the program's effectiveness, and recommendations for future supervision training and research related to attachment theory.

## Literature Review

### Attachment Theory and Research

This training program was informed by the simple, but groundbreaking premise proposed by Bowlby (1969/1982) and Ainsworth et al. (1978) that humans have inborn biological needs for proximity to attachment figures in order to feel protected in times of stress. These theorists believed that a "secure base" of attachment to an attachment figure enables the young child's exploration of the wider world, and when frightened or distressed, the child seeks proximity and returns to the attachment figure for a "safe haven" of comfort and support. Recently described as a

"circle of security" (Marvin et al. 2002), these early relational experiences of exploration and careseeking become internalized by the child, creating an "internal working model" of attachment based on mental representations of the quality of the relationship. A child who has a "secure" model of attachment has an internal representation of a sensitively attuned and secure caregiver who has enabled the child to feel worthy of care and able to depend on significant others. However, the child with an attachment figure who is dismissing, unpredictable, or frightening develops an "insecure" working model, defined in childhood as an "avoidant," "resistant," or "disorganized" model of attachment, respectively (Bretherton and Munholland 1999). Over the past decade, neuroscientific research has confirmed that early attachment models shape infant brain development, influencing future affect regulation (Applegate and Shapiro 2006; Schore 2000). This contemporary research supports the original views of Bowlby (1988) and Ainsworth (1989) that attachment needs continue throughout the lifespan and patterns of relating in childhood shape one's sense of self and influence one's quality of relating in adulthood.

A new direction in the theory and research on attachment is the exploration of caregiving processes in adulthood (Feeney and Collins 2004; George and Solomon 1999; McCluskey 2005). Feeney and Collins (2004) have taken a lead in examining the complex interface between attachment (i.e., careseeking, also referred to as proximity-seeking), caregiving (i.e., the provision of safe haven), and exploration. For adults, true exploration may mean comfort exploring new areas of work or play; freedom to discover and create; or confidence in examining the internal emotional world of themselves or others. Feeney and Collins created an integrative model of the careseeking-caregiving-exploration process in adults, based on Marvin et al.'s (2002) model of the circle of security between parents and children. The preliminary research on their circle of security in adulthood model suggests the validity of Bowlby's original theories for understanding secure base processes in adulthood, particularly in romantic couples. As Feeney and Collins (2004) state, "Focused and productive exploratory activity is presumed to occur only when the individual does not question the security and availability" (p. 302) of the home base of security. However, not all careseeking and caregiving behaviors take place in the context of attachment relationships (Fraley and Shaver 2000). For example, the challenge of unfamiliar professional responsibilities in a field work internship might prompt new supervisees to seek the care and proximity of their supervisors, although supervisors do not meet the full definition of primary attachment figures.

In order for caregivers to provide the sensitive and appropriate care necessary to establish a secure base for

another person, it becomes imperative for caregivers to understand and be attuned to the other's attachment cues. Cues of secure and insecure attachment have been examined through a number of qualitative and quantitative measures, and though researchers use different terms for similar concepts, most agree on the definitions of the terms. In sum, an adult's "secure attachment" is thought to be signified by comfort with intimacy and closeness, capacity for empathy and emotional regulation, and self-reflection and coherence of speech (Fonagy 2003; Hesse 1999; Fraley and Shaver 2000). Insecure adults generally dismiss their attachment needs and are uncomfortable with dependency, closeness, or intimacy (i.e., "attachment avoidance;" more comfortable with distance); or they are anxious about rejection and preoccupied with attachment needs (i.e., "attachment anxiety;" more comfortable with careseeking and safe haven). Still other adults may be unresolved about loss and trauma and have a disorganized state of mind in terms of attachment. Although these internal models of attachment are established in early childhood, a meta-analysis of longitudinal data from infancy to young adulthood suggests that people tend to remain fairly stable over time in their general manner of relating (Fraley 2002).

Nevertheless, it has become evident in recent years that adults may have multiple mental models of attachment (Cozzarelli et al. 2000; Klohnen et al. 2005). They may have one global interpersonal style (e.g., "general attachment"), while having different specific styles of relating based on the relational dynamics with a particular person (e.g., "relationship-specific attachment").<sup>1</sup> This research suggests that in supervision, a supervisee could feel generally comfortable with closeness (i.e., "general secure attachment") but become distant with a supervisor who appears unsupportive in the face of the supervisee's attachment needs. The supervisor's lack of support may be shaped by the supervisor's general attachment style or by intersubjective factors related to their specific supervisory relationship. For example, a supervisor may be generally dismissive of close relationships or irritated with the time demands of the student, while another new supervisor may be uncertain about the supervisory process and appear anxious in the relationship. Even secure students may shutdown and feel insecure in the face of these factors because the student has no other point of reference for social work supervision.

Of further importance to the current training program is recent research examining the interaction between general attachment and relationship-specific attachment styles.

<sup>1</sup> General and specific attachment styles in field supervision may be determined through empirical research or perceived through interaction and observation. For detailed clinical illustrations of attachment styles and attachment processes in the field supervisory relationship, see Bennett and Saks (2006).

Creasey and Ladd (2005) found an interaction between these two styles of attachment when they explored conflict between romantic partners. Their study suggested that conflict in the relationship could be predicted if a partner had general insecure attachment, as well as insecure attachment linked specifically to the relationship. However, if one of the partners had a general sense of security, this general attachment had a moderating effect on the insecurity of the relationship. In the context of supervision, this suggests that a generally secure student or supervisor may be able to weather conflict that emerges in supervision, even if the supervisory relationship is experienced by one of them as insecure. In contrast, a generally insecure student or supervisor may face additional challenges in supervision, such as accepting or giving negative feedback. For example, a generally insecure supervisor may be especially confusing and difficult for the student, because of the power imbalance inherent in the supervisory relationship. Yet, if the student is secure, this attachment style may enable the student to tolerate the supervisory relationship's deficits.

#### Supervision Theory and Research Regarding Attachment

The first conceptualization of attachment processes within supervision was published a decade ago with a discussion of pathological attachment styles in psychotherapy supervision (Pistole and Watkins 1995; Watkins 1995). Drawing on Bowlby's ideas, but primarily emphasizing the supervisee, Watkins (1995) suggested that supervisees present challenges in both supervision and their clinical work when they have attachment styles leading them to be (a) compulsive in their self-reliance, (b) compulsive in their caregiving, or (c) anxious in their attachment. Taking a somewhat different direction, Bennett and Saks (2006) focused on the supervisory relationship, and based on the work of Marvin et al. (2002), they conceptualized the dynamics of a "supervisory circle of security." Rather than viewing attachment styles as pathological, they viewed attachment as variations in (a) comfort with a safe haven or (b) preference for exploration. They proposed that supervision is an interactive process influenced by the attachment styles of *both* persons in the supervisory dyad. However, the inherent power of the supervisory role gives the supervisor the responsibility for being responsive to the student. A secure supervisor-supervisee relationship is based, in part, on how well the supervisor can read the attachment cues of the supervisee and give appropriate and sensitive care in response.

Several empirical studies have begun to analyze the influence of attachment styles in supervision. Foster's

(2003) work examined both the supervisee and supervisor in terms of their secure or insecure attachments, looking at how the attachment relationship in supervision predicted the supervisee's development as a counselor. One of his significant findings was the presence of discordance in the way students and supervisors perceived their relationship. Students tended to view their relationship with the supervisor as insecure, while nearly all the supervisors viewed it as secure. Foster also noted that the student's relationship-specific attachment, and not general attachment, predicted the student's development as a counselor.

Three recent studies examined attachment styles and the establishment of the supervisory working alliance, defined as the goals, tasks, and bonds of supervision (Bordin 1983). White and Queener (2003) and Riggs and Bretz (2006) reported weak, but significant, associations between general attachment style and the working alliance. In a study of social work graduate students, Bennett et al. (2008) examined both general and supervision-specific attachment styles and looked at the association of these styles with the supervisory working alliance. Findings from this research suggested that all dimensions of the working alliance were strongly linked to the attachment that was connected to the supervision relationship. In addition, students were more likely to develop insecure attachment in supervision if they were avoidant in their general attachments.

In summary, this research review suggests that the nature of adult relationships can lead to the creation of multiple attachments within the same person. Further, differences can exist between a person's general attachment style and the attachment style the person develops in response to a particular relationship. These findings also suggest that general attachment and relationship-specific attachment styles are influential in supervision, but attachment that is specific to the supervisory relationship is a much stronger predictor of a positive supervisory working alliance. In other words, the attachment quality of the supervisory relationship is central to supervision outcomes. The more a student experiences a sense of secure attachment to a specific supervisor, the more likely a working alliance will be created. These theoretically-grounded and empirically-based ideas informed the framework of the following supervision training program.

## Overview of Training

### Training Format

This 8-month training program was designed to educate beginning social work field instructors about the basics of attachment theory and its usefulness for effective supervision in the MSW field internship. The training placed a

further emphasis on establishing and maintaining a positive supervisory working alliance, defined as the relational bond between the student and supervisor necessary for meeting the goals and accomplishing the tasks of supervision. Linked to current research on attachment theory, the working alliance, and social work field education, the five educational objectives of the training were: (1) to critically examine the supervisor's role in the context of the student's education; (2) to understand the components of a successful working alliance and effective supervision; (3) to understand how supervision may trigger attachment processes; (4) to increase the supervisor's skills for reading student attachment cues and learning needs; and (5) to understand the supervisory relationship as a circle of security facilitating development of the student's professional self.

The format of this training consisted of three in-person, day-long workshops, held at the beginning, middle, and end of the academic year; five on-line classes; and on-line conversations through use of an internet discussion board (i.e., Blackboard). The 10 participants (9 female; 1 male) were a combination of volunteer novice supervisors of foundation-year MSW social work students, as well as selected experienced supervisors who served as co-facilitators of the group discussions. The in-person and on-line modules included PowerPoint presentations created by the trainer, journal articles for participants to read, and questions to prompt on-line discussions between the participants and trainer. Participants received 25 free hours of continuing education credit in supervision for completing the training program.

A number of concepts were introduced and then expanded throughout the training year. Primarily, the concepts of secure base, exploration, safe haven, and secure and insecure attachment were defined, discussed in depth, and integrated into discourse about attachment's influence on the goals, tasks, and bonds of the supervisory working alliance. The training highlighted the importance of parallel process, defined as the manner in which the relational dynamics of the supervisor, student, and client potentially mirror each other (Ganzer and Ornstein 1999; Williams 1997). It was suggested that the student would be more likely to establish a secure environment for the client if the supervisor first modeled a secure environment for the student. Such ideas were based on neuroscientific attachment research suggesting that the mirroring relationship between infant and mother enables the child to internalize an "implicit relational knowing" (Lyons-Ruth 1998), which then influences affective, interactive, and cognitive self development and future ways of relating. Similarly, when there is mirroring between the student and supervisor, the student develops an implicit knowing about how to relate to clients. For example, a supervisor's relaxed

comfort with the affect and confusion of the student may be incorporated and implicitly modeled by the student who then facilitates a secure base for the client's affect to be expressed. Likewise, problems in the supervisory relationship may be mirrored in the clinical relationship, and vice versa, through a parallel process (Bennett 2008). These themes based on attachment research were highlighted throughout the training program. The following overview describes each of the eight training modules and gives participant reactions to the training, culled from the on-line discussions.

## Training Modules

### *Module 1 (In Person, All-day): Overview to Attachment and the Working Alliance*

In addition to introducing participants to the training agenda for the year, the September workshop had a two-fold purpose. First, it provided an overview of the basic tenets of attachment theory and the concept of parallel processes in supervision. Emphasis was placed on how a caring and supportive supervisor could, through a parallel process, serve as a positive model by attuning to the student, who is in the process of becoming a sensitively attuned practitioner. The second purpose of the workshop was to introduce participants to the concept of a supervisory working alliance. The role of the supervisory bond was presented as necessary for achieving the goals and completing the tasks of supervision. In follow-up to the workshop, the PowerPoint presentations which had been used and additional supplemental journal articles (Dettlaff and Dietz 2004; Fortune and Abramson 1993; Fortune et al. 2001; Williams 1997) were placed on the internet Blackboard for participants to review, read, and discuss.

Participants were encouraged to comment on-line regarding their experiences incorporating concepts from this first workshop. One new supervisor said she had learned the importance of accepting her student's imperfections; by giving the student the message that "mistakes are expected, she will be comfortable coming back to the base to process her experience and find further encouragement." This suggests the supervisor recognized the importance of providing a secure base and safe haven to regulate the student's affect, triggered by her insecurity about the work. Another supervisor thought that ideas about "exploration" had been clarifying. Her student was very cautious, felt "unsure about what to say," and "was having trouble asking emotional questions." This supervisor was able to understand her student's hesitation when the student disclosed in supervision that "in her family, they don't share their emotions; therefore, she is afraid to

ask people about theirs." These comments suggest the supervisor was attuned to her student's likely avoidant attachment style. The association between exploration and the dimensions of the working alliance was evident in another comment: "I think it became clear these past few weeks that our supervision time is for in-depth exploration and learning, even if it becomes uncomfortable because it's new territory. So hopefully by me being very clear about the goals and tasks, I am encouraging a good bond." This supervisor recognized that the provision of a secure base attuned to her student's particular attachment needs would facilitate the development of a strong supervisory working alliance. This comment also points out that clarity regarding supervisory goals and tasks helps to create a secure bond. Clearly, these supervisors were beginning to help their students regulate anxious affect stimulated by the novelty of the supervisory and clinical work.

### *Module 2 (On-line): Goals for Supervision*

The October module focused more directly on establishing the student's educational goals and identifying the supervisor's professional goals for supervision. The expectations of CSWE (Council on Social Work Education) and the field instruction goals of the school's MSW program were examined. The PowerPoint presentation included content about the process of student and supervisor working together to develop a learning plan and how this plan should be linked to the areas of competence expected by the school. This material was tied into attachment processes by emphasizing the importance of the supervisor's sensitivity to the student in the process of establishing these goals in a non-directive manner. It was suggested that a secure attachment within the supervisory relationship could emerge from mutual respect, with room for the student's exploration. If supervisors are authoritative, ambivalent, or distant in their delivery of the goals for supervision, this could potentially be detrimental to the supervisory relationship. In addition to the presentation on goal setting, participants received a copy of Saari's (1989) article on "The Process of Learning in Clinical Social Work."

In response to this module, one supervisor said: "Knowing when to just tell [my student] something and when she needs to explore something on her own is a tough decision to make." The supervisor added, "I have found myself, since developing the learning plan, stepping back and allowing [her] to express her thoughts." This comment suggests the supervisor was recognizing the challenge of being attuned to the student's readiness for exploration. Another supervisor found the learning plan process instructive about potential problems related to her student's attachment style. "I addressed certain competencies that I

would like her to focus on in working with clients—specifically her use of self,” the participant stated. But, this supervisor saw the student’s “reluctance to explore her feelings about the interactions” with her clients as “getting in the way” of the student’s learning process. In other words, the supervisor realized that the student’s hesitation, suggestive of an avoidant attachment, may have an association and detrimental effect on the student’s cognitive processes and academic progress.

#### *Module 3 (On-line): Mutual Tasks for Supervision*

The November on-line class focused explicitly and in-depth on the tasks of supervision. It was proposed that the supervisor and supervisee have different, but interrelated tasks that are necessary to implement in order to achieve the goals of supervision. It was clarified that many tasks are “concrete” (e.g., office or home visits to clients, individual or family interviews, process recordings, treatment plans, biopsychosocial assessments, role plays, referrals to agencies); but tasks can be “process” tasks as well (e.g., reflection, listening, thinking, feeling, empathizing, critiquing, evaluating). Special attention was placed on the supervisor’s responsibility for encouraging the process tasks by setting a secure frame for supervision that is somewhat similar to the clinical frame. That is, supervisors should stay focused on the student’s material, listen respectively, be empathic, and stay within the bounds of supervision; in addition, they should provide didactic information and constructive feedback, while affirming student strengths. It was noted that reflection and empathy, two of the process tasks, are characteristics of persons with secure attachment styles (Hesse 1999), and that regulation of the student’s affect is one of the primary process tasks of the supervisor. Participants were given an article that focused on the tasks and process of field supervision (Davys and Beddoe 2000).

In on-line discussions, several participants found the “framework useful at this point in the semester” because it helped them gauge where their students were in terms of learning the necessary tasks for their professional development. Unfortunately, one of the supervisors had a student discontinue her placement because the “concrete tasks were not getting done” and the student was having “a great deal of difficulty trying to think critically about her work.” Ultimately, this supervisor recognized that “our working alliance seemed to deteriorate,” and “though I tried to create a bond with this student, it somehow was not working.” The difficulties this supervisor experienced may illustrate the previously mentioned research suggesting that a person with an insecure attachment style (likely the student, in this case) has increased difficulty when conflict

arises in the relationship (Creasey and Ladd 2005). In general, this third module helped these supervisors consider “better ways to organize the supervision.” As one said, the training “made me think about what I had been doing” and what “areas I had been missing” in terms of establishing a secure base of supervision and facilitating the student’s exploration.

#### *Module 4 (On-line): The Supervisory Bond*

The December module moved deeper into a discussion of the supervisory bond, considered central to the working alliance. To reinforce the presentation from the first all-day workshop, the supervisory circle of security model was reviewed in more detail, and participants were given an article that conceptualized this model with detailed clinical illustrations (Bennett and Saks 2006). The presentation examined attachment cues indicating a student’s need for exploration, in contrast to a need for safe haven, and recommendations were made for appropriate responses to each. It was proposed that attunement to exploratory or safe haven needs would serve to maintain the supervisory bond and secure base of attachment for the student.

This fourth module marked the end of the fall academic semester and served as a time for participants to reflect on their supervisory experiences thus far. All postings on the discussion board confirmed their view of the supervisory bond as the most important dimension of the supervisory process and the supervisory working alliance. They felt as though “the bond is finally developing,” but they still expressed concern about how to approach persons with different attachment styles in order to make supervision a productive, educational experience. They wondered, in particular, “How do you create a secure base and begin generating a circle of security for a student who seems to be inflexible in their thinking or has a difficult time taking risks for fear of being uncomfortable?” This question served as the focus for the upcoming all-day training.

#### *Module 5 (In person, All-day): Identifying and Addressing Ruptures in Supervision*

The previous question from the fourth module served as an opening for the January mid-year workshop which focused on understanding and working through ruptures in supervision. It was proposed attachment serves as a foundation for the emergence of transference and countertransference dynamics in supervision, which can lead to ruptures (Bennett 2008; Schamess 2006); and discordant attachment styles between the supervisor and student are potential sources of supervisory ruptures (Bennett and Saks 2006).

However, ruptures in the supervisory bond, noted through changes in behavior, affect, mood, and motivation, are both inevitable and a source of opportunity for growth. Similar to the clinical process, mending ruptures between the supervisor and student can serve as learning moments that deepen the relational bond, establish a supervisory circle of security, and promote the student's development as a professional. Special attention was given to understanding the role of cultural countertransference (Perez-Foster 1998) and how cross-cultural and cross-racial supervisory relationships may present particular challenges that are best addressed in the context of a secure base of supervision. When significant cultural differences exist between a student and supervisor, and one or both persons are insecure, there may be increased likelihood for misinterpretation between them. Yet, a secure supervisory relationship can provide an environment that is conducive to exploring and resolving ruptures that emerge out of cultural differences. After the training, readings on countertransference in supervision (Tosone 1997), cross-racial supervision (Chang et al. 2003), and racial and gender biases in supervision (Chung et al. 2001) were placed on Blackboard to stimulate continued on-line discussion.

The in-person training evoked rich conversation among the racially mixed group of supervisors (six African-Americans, four Caucasians), many of whom were in cross-racial supervisory relationships with their students. There was disagreement among the participants about whether cross-racial supervision presented special challenges. However, it was proposed that a secure base of supervision could create an environment that would promote and encourage safe exploration of feelings surrounding ruptures, including misunderstandings due to cultural or racial differences. One participant wrote on Blackboard: "Supervisors in general need to demonstrate cultural competence, not because they went to a workshop, but [because they] intentionally addressed their own biases." Another participant said, "I think ignoring the differences and how that might affect how one experiences or views things is harmful. Would it possibly continue to perpetuate a type of silent racism?"

#### *Module 6 (On-line): Developmental Stages of Student Learning within Supervision*

The February class focused on understanding the developmental stages of learning in supervision and the influence of attachment processes within these stages. Deal's (2002) work on the topic of student development (e.g., expected differences in first and second year MSW students) was presented. It was proposed that it is important to understand the developmental process of learning, but it

is the relationship that provides the environment for this process to unfold. Just as a secure base between a parent and child promotes the optimal development of the child, a secure base of supervision promotes the optimal transition through the developmental processes of learning. In other words, students bring into the field experience their previously developed capacities for self-reflection, empathy, intuition—capacities that are strongly associated with their general attachment style. How students develop over time is founded on these innate capacities, and what the student internalizes from the supervisor is influenced by the quality of the supervisory relationship, shaped by the supervisor's attunement to the student. Attachment processes shape the student's capacity for maturation and development and influence the internalization of what the supervisor or field experience have to offer. This content resonated with the participants, all of whom could identify their students' successful development. As one said, "It is amazing to see the transformation." For an expanded discussion of these concepts, see the paper by this author and Deal (in press).

#### *Module 7 (On-line): Termination*

The March class focused on termination from supervision, as well as the student's termination with clients and the agency. Parallel process was again emphasized as a way to understand the feelings between supervisor, student, and client. Special attention was placed on attachment theory's significant contribution toward developing an understanding of separation and loss (Bowlby 1973, 1980; Fraley and Shaver 1999), and different modes of terminating or "detaching" were explored based on attachment styles. In order to help the supervisors prepare students for termination with clients, content was presented on working with feelings that can result from forced, premature terminations due to the ending of a student internship (Wall 1994). Participants freely expressed on-line their personal feelings about termination with their students, with some acknowledging "relief" and others feeling more mixed emotions due to the "joy" they had experienced working with their students. The ambivalent feelings about termination were tied to the perceived quality of the supervisory relationship. Supervisors of students that were challenging, in part due to perceived attachment avoidance, were admittedly relieved to have reached the end of the supervisory relationship.

#### *Module 8 (In person, All-day): Evaluation of the Supervision and Training Process*

The final April workshop focused on evaluation of both the supervisory experience and the year-long training. The

presentation addressed the process of giving critique to students in a way that would make the year-end evaluation part of their learning (Abbott and Lyter 1998). It was suggested that constructive feedback defines the boundaries and appropriate professional behavior for the developing student, just as attachment research suggests that clear boundaries create safety and security in the developing child.

Although many of these participants spoke of their first supervisory experiences as challenging, they were generally positive about the year and the progress of their students. Only one participant had an unsuccessful experience with a student, but she had a second student who provided the participant a more gratifying supervision experience. Some of the variables that the participants attributed to the success of their supervision were: (a) the supervision structure they provided, including the set time and agenda, (b) students who worked at linking theory to practice, (c) students who worked well with clients and staff, and (d) students “who were open and participated wholeheartedly in the learning experience.” One additional quality that made the supervision experience rewarding was the professional growth that these participants themselves experienced as supervisors. One person said: “I was able to learn more about me, my style of supervising, and ways to improve my approach. [My student] challenged me throughout the placement by making me question my own skills (and looking at ways that would work better with her).” Another said that supervising “made me reframe what we really do as social workers.”

The participants’ overall evaluations of the supervision training program were unanimously positive, and they spoke of several reasons why they believed this to be the case. First, the training helped them feel more a part of the social work school. One participant, who was not a graduate of the university’s MSW program, said that he had felt “like an outsider” prior to the training and had no connection to the school. The training brought him on board as an instructor and “offered intellectual stimulation.” Second, participants appreciated the increased knowledge about an empirically-based theory (i.e., attachment), and they liked access to journal articles that informed them of “best practices” in supervision. And third, several participants spoke of the value of self-reflection and “making you look at yourself,” both interpersonally and professionally. Several remembered the importance of the mid-year training that had facilitated conversations about cross-racial supervision. Another participant said that the training and the supervision experience “made me proud to be a social worker.”

The participants were not, however, completely enthralled with the on-line aspects of the training. Although they liked the structure, the PowerPoint presentations, and

the articles, they spoke of the challenges of “time demands” and “homework assignments.” Most said they would be hesitant to commit to another on-line course because they preferred the in-person group experience. Because of the lively dialogue, the all-day trainings “did not feel like a real class,” they said. In summary, they preferred the in-person training because “our attachment was here!”

## Discussion

As a model for professional social work, the supervisor is central to the success of the social work student’s field education experience. Thus, it is vital for field instructors to receive training regarding effective supervision, as well as continuing education regarding theoretically-sound and empirically-based practices. This training program attempted to meet both of these needs by focusing on attachment theory. Attachment theory is broadly accepted as one of the most comprehensive and widely-studied theories today in terms of understanding human development, close relationships, and interpersonal behavior. For this reason, this training program was designed to emphasize the usefulness of attachment theory for field supervision and to educate practitioners about its benefits for social work practice.

From the perspective of the participants, this program was a success and the participants grew in their confidence and skills as new supervisors. By their report, they were able to establish an environment that was conducive for their student’s learning and a relationship that served as a secure base for the student’s exploration. Many of these participants reported that their MSW education had been weak on theory, and none of them had acquired an in-depth knowledge of attachment theory. The training provided these supervisors with a deeper understanding of relational dynamics, and they appreciated the opportunity for continuing education that enhanced their effectiveness as clinicians, as well as supervisors. They learned basic tenets of attachment theory and could see attachment processes unfold in the context of supervision. When challenges arose in the supervisory relationship, the participants had a theoretical lens for examining possible reasons for student problems or supervisory ruptures.

In terms of the training format, it was assumed that busy supervisors would appreciate the opportunity to learn on their own time, and this assumption prompted the creation of the on-line modules. However, data from this training program did not support the assumption that on-line learning would be preferred. Participants reported being too busy to access the on-line modules, and they did not participate spontaneously or frequently in the discussion

board. This outcome may have been due to the participants' work demands, but it is more likely indicative of their preference for in-person, real-life relating over on-line, virtual communication. In contrast, the all-day workshops were clearly popular and confirmed how important group process can be for learning and how attachment relationships can develop when people feel understood and supported. Having the workshops spaced at different points in the academic year enabled participants to follow their own development as supervisors, as well as the development of their students. Since the workshops focused on interpersonal relationships and the participants were encouraged to be self-reflective, the trainings took on a climate of intimacy for the group members. The new supervisors felt understood by the trainer, the experienced supervisors, and by each other. Consequently, the group became its own secure base that enabled these participants to explore the new world of supervision. The participants appreciated using the group as a safe haven where they could talk openly about their ups and downs as beginning supervisors. These observations about the training format and group process provide implications for designing field education programs and suggest that in-person trainings, attuned to supervisory needs, are most effective and well-received. The observations also underscore the significance of attachment.

In general, there are benefits in using attachment theory as a framework for supervision because it enriches an understanding of other supervision concepts, such as the supervisory working alliance, and it enhances other supervision models that emphasize specific tasks, such as concrete skill-building. The current training focused on helping students meet the educational goals and acquire the necessary skills for becoming professionals, but these dimensions of training were always taught within the context of understanding attachments and the relationship. It should be noted that this attachment-based approach is congruent with recent research on the effectiveness of psychotherapy and psychotherapy training. Thirty years of research on psychotherapy models and techniques unequivocally suggests that relationship-enhancement techniques are most important for improving the therapeutic alliance and the outcome of psychotherapy (Ogles et al. 1999). In fact, "little evidence substantiates the benefit of technique-based training" (Ogles et al. 1999, p. 215), while some evidence suggests that too much adherence to specific skills and techniques can have negative effects on the treatment relationship. In terms of supervision, new social work supervisors generally need concrete assistance with teaching students to integrate theory into practice or with using process recordings as a mode for education; and additional information regarding adult learning theory and student levels of development can

improve the supervisor's skills. However, too much attention to skill-building outside the context of the supervisory relationship may be ineffective.

Finally, there are implications from this training for research on supervision and social work education. The size of this particular training, which was designed as a pilot program, was too small for evaluating its outcome using standardized measures and a controlled research design. Future training programs incorporating these ideas would benefit from evaluating the program model as well as the attachment styles of the participants. It would be useful to study both supervisors and students to assess their mutual impressions of the supervision training, the supervisory alliance, and attachments within the relationship. Social work field education directors could benefit from a better understanding of why some field arrangements succeed and other placements seem to fall apart. For example, a question for future research is whether more reticent, hesitant students have insecure attachments generally or if these are characteristics specific to the supervision relationship itself. Clues to this may emerge from research on the interface of attachment styles with factors such as the developmental level of the student, the experience and training of the supervisor, the diversity within the supervisory relationship, and the format of the supervisory frame. Further exploration of the interaction of general attachment and attachment specific to the supervisory relationship likely would deepen understanding of ruptures in supervision as well.

In other words, research on attachment offers opportunities for developing a more complex understanding of supervisory processes. The experiences of these participants seem to suggest that a relationship-centered approach to supervision training holds promise for developing supervisors who are particularly attuned to the learning needs and interpersonal styles of students. Similarly, the program suggests that supervisory dyads provide a new population and new direction for understanding attachment caregiving within professional relationships.

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#### Author Biography

**C. Susanne Bennett, PhD** is Assistant Professor at The Catholic University of America, National Catholic School of Social Service, in Washington, DC, and maintains a private practice in psychotherapy and supervision. She is on the Editorial Board for *CSWJ* and is Co-Editor of the Special Issue on Attachment.