The Supervisory Relationship from an Attachment Perspective: Connections to Burnout and Sense of Coherence in Austrian Mental Health Professionals

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Objectives

To explore the importance of supervision for Austrian mental health professionals, connections between the quality of the supervisory relationship, burnout symptoms, sense of coherence and attachment patterns were examined in this study.

Background

Supervision is an essential part of the training and work environment of mental health professionals, especially of psychotherapists. However, while the supervisory process is always a relational one, the importance of this relationship for the professional performance and the well-being of the supervisee has yet to be fully examined.

Materials and Methods

346 Austrian mental health professionals (81.8 % female) completed an online survey containing a demographic assessment, the Supervisory Relationship Questionnaire (SRQ) [1], the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) [2], the Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised (ECR-RD) [3] and the Sense of Coherence Scale (SOC-13) [4]. This was the first study to use a German version of the SRQ, translated in cooperation with the authors of the original version [1].

Results and Conclusions

During the last two years, 95.4 % of the participants had been in supervision (35.5 % in individual supervision, 59.8 % in group supervision).

A better supervisory relationship was related to more sense of coherence ($r = .34$) and fewer burnout symptoms ($r = -.35$; $p < .01$). While correlations of the quality of the supervisory relationship with anxious (AX, $r = -.19$) or avoidant (AV, $r = -.18$) attachment were relatively small, these attachment patterns were strongly related with sense of coherence (AX: $r = -.54$, AV: $r = -.39$) and burnout symptoms (AX: $r = .43$, AV: $r = .30$; all $p < .01$) (see Table 1).

Considering professional experience and number of supervision sessions as control variables, a better supervisory relationship negatively predicted burnout symptoms ($\beta = -.31$) but positively predicted SOC ($\beta = .31$, both $p < .01$). The final model, including Avoidant and Anxious Attachment as additional predictors, explained 30% of the variance in burnout symptoms and 41% of the variance in SOC (see Table 2).

The results underline the importance of the supervisory relationship and underlying attachment patterns for the well-being and the professional performance of mental health professionals. Different aspects of the supervisory relationship and their connection to the goals of supervision should be further explored in future studies.

References

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Table 1

Correlations between study variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. SRQ	-	-.19**	-.18**	-.35**	.34**	.13*	.17**
2. ECR AX		-	.43**	.43**	-.54**	-.15**	-.01
3. ECR AV			-	.30**	-.39**	-.05	-.03
4. MBI				-	-.63**	-.27**	-.13*
5. SOC					-	.28**	.11*
6. Experience						-	.13*
7. Sessions							-

Notes. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; SRQ = Quality of the Supervisory Relationship, ECR AX = Anxious Attachment, ECR AV = Avoidant Attachment, MBI = Symptoms of Burnout, SOC = Sense of Coherence, Experience = Professional experience (years), Sessions = Number of sessions with the current supervisor.

Table 2

Hierarchical regression analyses predicting MBI and SOC

Step and predictor variable	MBI			SOC		
	R^2	ΔR^2	β	R^2	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.09**	.09**		.09**	.09**	
Experience			-.26**			.27**
Sessions			-.10			.07
Step 2	.18**	.09**		.17**	.09**	
Experience			-.23**			.24**
Sessions			-.05			.03
SRQ			-.31**			.31**
Step 3	.30**	.13**		.41**	.24**	
Experience			-.18**			.18**
Sessions			-.06			.04
SRQ			-.24**			.20**
AX			.30**			-.40**
AV			.12*			-.17**

Notes. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; SRQ = Quality of the Supervisory Relationship, ECR AX = Anxious Attachment, ECR AV = Avoidant Attachment, MBI = Symptoms of Burnout, SOC = Sense of Coherence, Experience = Professional experience (years), Sessions = Number of sessions with the current supervisor.