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INTRODUCTION

Building a Supportive Culture for Trainees Managing Competence Issues

REBECCA A. SCHWARTZ-METTE, EVELYN A. HUNTER, AND NADINE J. KASLOW

Supporting trainees with competence problems is a near-universal experience for trainers. These situations can be incredibly stressful for all involved—trainees faced with difficult feedback and remediation, trainers who grapple with their dual responsibilities of educating and gatekeeping, and administrators and other stakeholders who may have less direct experience with trainees with problems of professional competence (TPPC) but who uphold academic standards and assist trainees in their educational experience. Moreover, situations involving problems of professional competence are rife with assessment, evaluation, relational, ethical, and legal challenges. As such, the stakes are high for trainers to manage these situations well.

Although excellent resources exist to guide trainees, trainers, and training program facilitators through these challenging situations, no centralized, comprehensive source of information was available. Given our commitment to this work, alongside and with our colleagues over the past several decades, we sought to bring the incredible depth and breadth of knowledge, experiences, and practical guidance together in this volume.

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Supporting Trainees With Competence Problems: A Practical Guide for Psychology Trainers, R. A. Schwartz-Mette, E. A. Hunter, and N. J. Kaslow (Editors)

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THEMES IN THIS VOLUME

We have endeavored to infuse new energy into this area by expanding our existing conceptualizations of TPPC. Just as we expect our trainees to develop foundational and functional competencies toward becoming psychologists, we as trainers must develop, maintain, and extend our competence in supporting trainees who are struggling. In this vein, we briefly discuss several themes that informed the contributions to this book.

Embracing Communitarianism and Multiculturalism

This volume is an explicit challenge to historical models of training that are hierarchical, are top-down, and view trainers as the (only) experts. We encourage forward thinking that discusses opportunities for trainees and trainers to cocreate opportunities to tackle competence problems together. As such, we begin this book with attention to building a communitarian training culture, a paradigm shift toward a culture that infuses humility, reflective practice, collaboration, and supportive mentorship. In this context, we center the importance of multiculturalism (i.e., attention to diversity and intersectionality, equity, and inclusion) in the conceptualization and support of TPPC throughout this volume. Ignoring multiculturalism may inadvertently lead trainers to overpathologize the existence (or absence) of particular behaviors that are not reflective of majority culture as “problems,” when they may accurately reflect cultural differences. Importantly, the assumption of this book is that we are working *toward* values of communitarianism and multiculturalism, with an acknowledgment that programs may have different points from which the facilitators begin their work to achieve those goals.

Adopting a Supportive, Proactive Approach

The authors in this volume highlight the importance of supportive, proactive approaches to addressing competence problems, as opposed to punitive, reactive approaches. Proactive approaches include creating training cultures that highlight the developmental course of competency building; creating appropriate policies for assessment and identification of competence problems; and engaging remediation practices that are growth-orienting and behaviorally based.

Taking a Systems Perspective

Although individual (e.g., trainee, trainer) influences in dealing with competence problems are important, the authors expand their perspectives to

incorporate a systems view on competency, as individual, program, and societal culture can be highly impactful in these contexts. We avoid language and paradigms that directly or indirectly place competence problems squarely within trainees, particularly when competence issues may reflect systemic issues (including trainer competence issues). Systems perspectives engage a comprehensive approach to competence problems such that addressing issues involves consideration of the entire training system and potential impacts are better absorbed in the context of the training environment.

Focusing Across All Areas of Psychologists' Work

Competence problems can (and do!) appear across all training activities, including the mentorship relationship, clinical work, clinical supervision, research and publication, coursework, teaching, and supervision of undergraduate mentees. We include a broad focus in this volume so that the information contained within can be applied widely across contexts. We also endeavored to reference those individuals who teach, mentor, and/or clinically supervise as *trainers*, as opposed to using only the term *supervisors*. It is critical that we not limit our understanding or address competence concerns in the clinical area only.

Discussing Competence Across All Training Stages

As noted throughout this volume, competency building is necessarily developmental. As such, problems in professional competency develop across training stages and settings (i.e., new and advanced graduate students, interns, and postdoctoral residents). The chapters direct attention to commonalities as well as differences among training stages/settings, with an emphasis on providing an organizing framework for addressing what constitutes problems of professional competence and how differences in training stage necessitate adjustments to such definitions. Because of this broad focus, the term *trainee(s)* is used throughout, as opposed to *student(s)*, except where reference to individuals in student roles (e.g., graduate students) is appropriate.

Providing Information for All Stakeholders

Although the primary audience for this volume comprises training program facilitators (e.g., directors, supervisors, faculty), we aim to help a wide range of stakeholders. Typically, problems in professional competence ripple throughout systems and impact various stakeholders. As such, this volume is relevant for human resource supervisors and personnel, equal opportunity and Title IX officers, organizational counsel, disability and diversity service offices, and graduate and professional school administrators.

Attending to Ethical and Legal Considerations

Ethical and legal considerations appear, as relevant, throughout the volume. We also included stand-alone chapters dedicated to ethical and legal issues that cover these topics in greater depth. This “forest AND the trees” approach, we hope, helps to maintain a focus on ethics and legal issues as they apply to all aspects of the process when working with TPPC, as well as providing a more specific analysis of each that is not possible within each chapter.

Appreciating Dialectics

We know firsthand that TPPC situations require trainers to analyze and juggle multiple, and sometimes contradictory, ideas as they work to support struggling trainees. Like many concepts in psychology and ethics, competence issues are often murky and require that trainers balance competing goals. For example, we balance our roles as trainee supporter and gatekeeper. As another example, and as detailed extensively in Chapter 7, this volume (“Trainee Confidentiality: The Hidden Challenge of Competence Problems”), we value trainee privacy but may, in some circumstances, work to reduce secret-keeping surrounding TPPC in an effort to embrace communitarianism and preserve program culture.

Taking a Scholarly Approach That Is Practically Helpful

In addition to presenting a scholarly analysis of the existing literature, each chapter references and links to a variety of concrete, practical resources. Where possible, we reference various other locations that trainers may obtain consultation. Each chapter also presents various key challenges relevant to its domain. Finally, each author team assisted with generating a list of a series of common pitfalls that helped provide content for our final chapter of the volume (Chapter 11, “Troubleshooting Common Pitfalls”).

A SNEAK PEEK: A ROAD MAP OF THE BOOK

In Chapter 1 (“Creating a Communitarian, Multiculturally Sensitive, and Socially Just Training Culture”), Mendoza-Newman and Erickson Cornish give us the lens through which we hope health service psychologists aim to prepare trainees for competence. The authors provide a rationale and practical strategies for creating a training culture that illuminates these values, and particularly so when supporting trainees with competence issues. McGaffee,

Rasmussen, and Rodolfa use Chapter 2 (“Competencies in Health Service Psychology”) to help us precisely understand the competencies that are expected to develop in psychology trainees. This chapter provides a foundation for better conceptualizing the content of Chapter 3 (“Problems of Professional Competence”), by Lease and Grus. Mollen and Williams then underscore the central importance of taking a broad lens when conceptualizing competence issues in Chapter 4 (“Systemic Perspectives on Trainees with Problems of Professional Competence”). In Chapter 5 (“Identification and Assessment of Problems of Professional Competence”), Renninger and Cavalieri provide guidance with regard to the complex task of recognizing and evaluating competence problems. Schwartz-Mette continues detailing the processes involved in supporting TPPC to remediate, identifying alternate training options or, in rare cases, dismissal (Chapter 6, “Remediation, Counseling Out, and Dismissal”).

In Chapter 7 (“Trainee Confidentiality”), Forrest and Elman provide an in-depth and forward-thinking analysis of the challenges and possibilities with regard to confidentiality in TPPC situations. Next up are deep dives into ethical and legal considerations, respectively. Chapter 8 (“Ethical Issues in Working With Trainees With Problems of Professional Competence”), contributed by Barnett and Johnson, offers us extensive analysis of ethical issues in working with TPPC. Chapter 9 (“Legal Issues in Working With TPPC”), contributed by Shah and Fishel, details the myriad legal considerations trainers should be aware of when taking action in this context. Chapter 10 (“Building Program Policies in a Communitarian and Multiculturally Sensitive Training Culture”) brings us full circle, as Veilleux and Scafe help us practically visualize the creation, implementation, and maintenance of program policies that reflect our values and, ultimately, help us better support trainees. Finally, we crowdsourced from this impressive group of authors a variety of common challenges faced by trainers working with TPPC and present them in Chapter 11 (“Troubleshooting Common Pitfalls”). These challenges are exemplified in vignettes, each followed by brief analysis and practical guidance.

CONCLUSION

We appreciate your willingness to approach this challenging topic and your joining us to digest and reflect. We believe that the information in this volume will help you in your journey to competence in supporting TPPC. What is more, we hope that you recognize that no trainee or trainer is alone in this endeavor and that this book helps you situate yourself more securely in your competent community of colleagues. We certainly consider you a part of ours.

