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Mental Health Professionals' Nonclinical Roles as Informed by Attachment: A Systematic Review of Research

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Abstract

While attachment informs the quality of the therapeutic relationship, which is the basis of all therapeutic work for professional counselors and related mental health professionals (MHPs), less attention has been given to the role of attachment in MHPs' nontherapeutic roles. This systematic review analyzed 33 research studies that investigated MHPs' attachment in the context of nontherapeutic roles, including professional development, supervision, and teaching. Findings are discussed in the context of four emergent themes: professional functioning and well-being, supervisory relationships, self-awareness, and empathy. There is considerable evidence that MHP attachment style is relevant across professional roles. Findings are discussed, implications for counselor education and supervision practice are identified, and recommendations for additional research are provided.

Significance to the Public

This article provides implications and recommendations for counselor educators to better attend to attachment across their professional roles based on the diverse findings of mental health providers. These specific suggestions may enhance counselor education and training experiences, which could support the development of more well-prepared counselors.

Keywords: Attachment, Clinical Supervision, Counselor Education, Empathy, Therapeutic Relationship

Much is known about client attachment in therapeutic relationships, and emerging findings indicate the significance of the attachment patterns of MHPs (e.g., Brugnera et al., 2021; Brugnera et al., 2023; Dinger et al., 2019; Fleischman & Shorey, 2016; Leitmo et al., 2020; Mehmet, 2021; Peter & Böbel, 2020; Reyna & Barrio Minton, 2023; Rizq & Target, 2010a, 2010b; Wiseman & Tishby, 2014; Yusof & Carpenter, 2015). While emphasis has been placed on the attachment patterns within therapeutic relationships, supervision relationships exhibit isomorphism (De Shazer, 1982), the interrelational similarities between the counselor–client and counselor–supervisor relationships, which justifies further examination of the attachment styles of supervisors, educators, and

counseling students to better understand the extent to which attachment styles inform counselor professional identity development, supervision, training, and education. With a previous focus on client attachment, the aims of this review are to identify what is known about MHP attachment styles and the impact of that attachment on nonclinical roles, such as supervision, teaching, and professional development.

Attachment in Therapeutic Relationships

Attachment style has been the focus of much research related to counseling and therapeutic relationships (e.g., DePue et al., 2016; DePue et al. 2022; Fleischman & Shorey, 2016; Mehmet, 2021).

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According to attachment theory, attachment patterns are formed early in life, resulting in specific attachment behaviors (Ainsworth, 1969), and are typically categorized as secure or insecure. Secure attachment is characterized by a general sense of safety and comfort in the relationship, while insecure attachment, including anxious and avoidant attachment, is characterized by a sense of fear, discomfort, or hyperfixation with the relationship (Ainsworth, 1969). These attachment styles solidify into schemas, shaping how people make meaning of experiences across their lives (Fleischman & Shorey, 2016). While attachment theory research initially focused on caregiver–child relationships, and later on attachment dynamics in the context of intimate adult partnerships, a newer body of evidence supports the idea that attachment behaviors are activated or deactivated through interactions with others, including in therapeutic or supervisory relationships (Neswald-McCalip, 2001).

A number of studies have demonstrated compelling findings that highlight the importance of attending to attachment in therapeutic relationships. A meta-analysis identified more favorable outcomes for clients with secure attachment styles (Levy et al., 2018), while insecure attachment has shown a negative correlation with adaptive mental health and positive affective experiences (Zhang et al., 2022). Security in client–counselor attachments contribute to stronger bonds within counseling relationships, improving efficacy and outcomes (DePue et al., 2016; DePue et al., 2022). Much attachment research has focused on exploring the attachment styles of clients, positioning mental health professionals (MHPs), including counselors, psychologists, psychotherapists, and social workers, as an assumed secure base (e.g., Daniel, 2006; Levy et al., 2018; McIntyre & Samstag, 2022; Mikulincer et al., 2013; Watson et al., 2020; Wiseman & Tishby, 2014). MHPs' attachment security informed their ability to function as a secure base for clients, enhancing therapeutic progress (Mikulincer et al., 2013). This could also facilitate the client's development toward more secure attachment patterns (Mikulincer et al., 2013).

Dozier and colleagues (1994) demonstrated that MHPs with insecure attachment attended more to preoccupied clients than to dismissing ones. Given the existing knowledge of the impact of the MHPs' attachment style on therapy outcomes, the question arises of how MHPs' attachment styles impact their other professional roles, such as supervisor/supervisee, educator, and other extratherapeutic roles. Although attachment-related findings vary, the collective body of research indicates that attachment is important for functioning across MHP roles. Attachment impacts MHP roles, but it is hard to identify exactly *how* it does so. Many scholars concluded that attending to attachment in counselor education and supervision is critical (e.g., Greggo & Becker, 2010; Gunn & Pistole, 2012; McKibben et al., 2023; Mesrie et al., 2018; Trusty et al., 2005), though little attention is given to how attachment informs engagement in MHP education. There is consensus that securely attached MHPs demonstrate consistently higher efficacy across roles than insecurely attached MHPs, despite scholars' lack of agreement on the effects of anxious versus avoidant attachment styles. A strong supervisory relationship may also mitigate detrimental impacts of professional stressors and increase supervisee resilience. Therefore to enhance MHP functioning and improve service to clients, increased attention to attachment across MHP professional roles is warranted.

Purpose of the Study

Emerging attention to attachment in counselor supervision suggests the need for more widespread consideration of attachment styles of counselor educators and students alike, as these impact student development (McKibben et al., 2023). Drawing parallels between attachment perspectives in therapeutic practice, supervision, and teaching practices helps to unify preparation and field experiences (Greggo & Becker, 2010), making for better prepared and more securely attached counselors. Exploration of attachment in the context of counselor/MHP education and supervision may also inform development of evidence-based

recommendations for counselor professional development (Greggo & Becker, 2010; McKibben et al., 2023). Thus, the purpose of this systematic review of research was to explore the body of evidence regarding how MHP attachment styles impact or inform their development in nonclinical professional roles, in hopes of identifying implications for counselor education and supervision (CES). Specifically, this review sought to identify: (a) MHP roles investigated; (b) methodologies followed; and (c) findings and implications of existing studies.

Method

This systematic review of research was conducted following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to comprehensively investigate what is known about MHP attachment across professional roles. The PRISMA structure promotes transparency across the research purpose, process, and reporting of findings (Page et al., 2021). Specifically, we utilized PRISMA guidelines to inform a systematic search process, title and abstract screening, full text review, and data expectation.

Eligibility Criteria, Information Sources, and Search Strategy

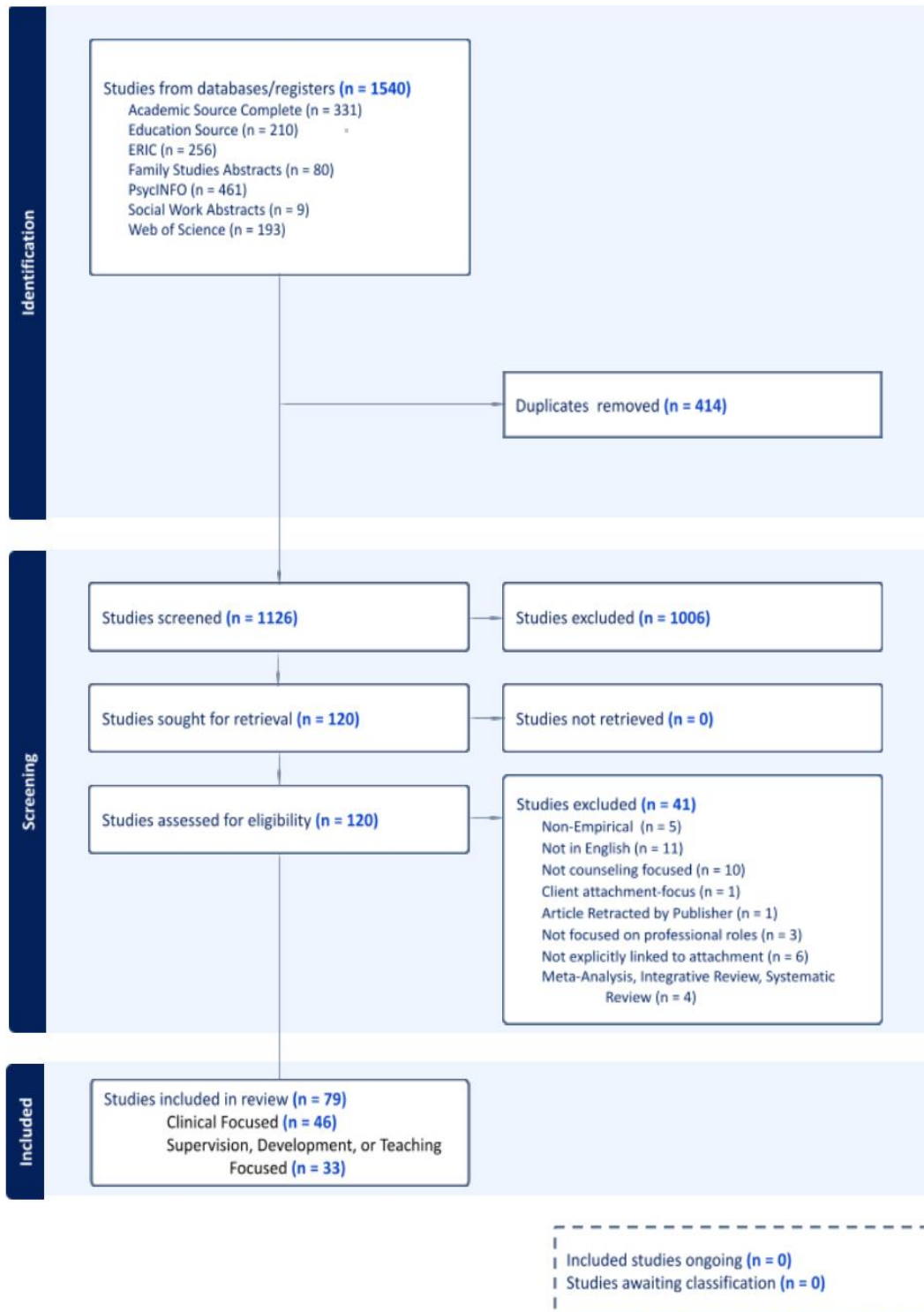
An initial search for attachment specific to counselor education and supervision yielded minimal results, with nearly all articles focused on supervision. In attempts to build a more robust knowledge base and in recognition of shared research and theory across professions, we decided to expand searches to include related mental health professions, including psychology, social work, and marriage and family therapy. Inclusion criteria included empirical, peer-reviewed articles that addressed the attachment of MHPs within their professional roles. Articles that were not empirical, peer-reviewed, and available in English, and those not directly addressing attachment of MHPs within

these professional roles, were excluded. We excluded integrative reviews and meta-analyses because the empirical articles cited were already included in the review. Specific MHP roles addressed within each study informed the grouping of articles for synthesis.

Databases were last searched on July 9, 2023, and included: Academic Source Complete, APA PsycINFO, Education Source, ERIC, Family Studies Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts, and Web of Science. Search syntax was adjusted for each database as required, but the search terms for all remained the same: (Attachment) AND (counsel* OR psychologist OR psychotherapist OR “social work” OR “social worker” OR therapist OR “Mental health professional” OR Clinician OR Practitioner). Search results were delimited to keywords or subject terms only. If a database offered to expand the search using similar concepts, this option was deselected. No date restriction was used in the search. Articles were de-duplicated automatically in Covidence prior to screening, and again manually for any duplicates missed during the initial screening. We then proceeded through full-text review and data extraction protocols as illustrated in Figure 1.

Selection Process

The first and third authors independently screened titles and abstracts for inclusion using the above criteria. Each screener’s ratings were compared to calculate interrater reliability ($r = 0.91$, $k = 0.59$), indicating the upper end of moderate agreement (McHugh, 2012). The screeners met in person to resolve all conflicts for the initial screening process, collaboratively agreeing on 100% of the final decisions prior to moving on to full-text screening. Next, the first and second authors independently verified inclusion criteria through full-text review. Articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded. The two independent full-text screeners’ ratings indicated almost perfect interrater agreement ($r = 0.94$, $k = 0.87$).

Figure 1*Study Selection PRISMA Diagram*

Data Extraction and Synthesis Methods

Of the 79 articles included in the initial review, 46 investigated attachment in clinical relationships, whereas the remaining 33 examined MHPs' attachment across all other roles. For this study, we extracted and synthesized the subset of 33 publications focused on MHP development, supervision, and teaching. The extraction protocol included attention to study methodology, MHP role assessed, research question, constructs investigated, assessments used, participant characteristics, attachment-related findings, implications, and limitations. Where applicable, drop-down lists of options were provided. The protocol provided open-ended text entry for categories such as research questions or findings. After building the extraction protocol, the first author piloted four study extractions to ensure appropriateness of the data collection form. No changes were required to the extraction protocol after initial piloting.

Data extraction was completed independently by the first author using the data collection form. The third author audited 30% of data extraction points using the same data collection form, surpassing the recommendation of 10% for auditing procedures (Smela et al., 2023). Data were compared across each researcher's form and consolidated into one composite document based on agreement between both researchers. While 80% agreement between raters is acceptable (Belur et al., 2021), our interrater agreement was 96.7%, with 100% agreement in nature of participants, assessments used, and attachment styles discussed, and 90% agreement in findings relevant to attachment, author implications, recommendations, and limitations. Such high interrater reliability justified extraction by only the first author.

Finally, the first author used inductive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) to generate initial categories, and then applied deductive thematic analysis to consolidate themes and findings. The choice for thematic analysis came from the desire to maintain the theoretical and foundational concepts within findings from other disciplines, while allowing for a more customized and nuanced application to practices within CES in particular.

The first author identified initial categories by listing all extracted articles and pulling major themes or constructs from each article's findings (e.g., activation of attachment strategies, attending personal counseling, responding to feedback, and supervisory working alliance [SWA]). Given that this PRISMA review relied on qualitative methodologies in analysis, generalizability was not our goal. However, findings from related professions provide clear direction for future research and emphasize the existing gap in CES literature. The findings from themes and subthemes were grouped together in meaningful ways, which constructed the overarching themes reported next.



Results

Study Selection and Characteristics

The 33 studies of focus are summarized in Table 1. Of these, 18 articles investigated MHP development, 12 investigated supervision, and three explicitly investigated teaching in MHP education. Only 8 included samples exclusively of professional counselors or counseling students. Findings demonstrated the influence of attachment in MHP professional functioning, development, and supervision, although there is a noted lack of attention to attachment in teaching. Although aims, samples, and results varied, four distinct themes emerged across findings: (a) professional functioning and well-being; (b) supervisory working relationship; (c) self-awareness; and (d) empathy. Findings are discussed in descending order of strength of themes across studies. Findings were situated within the unique nature of attachment in an instructional context.

Nature of Attachment Within MHP Roles

The nature of attachment in MHP roles is unique compared to caregiver or partner relationships (Hiebler-Raggar et al., 2021; Marmarosh et al., 2013; Trusty et al., 2005). Rek et al. (2018) identified a higher-than-average occurrence of secure or anxious attachments in psychotherapy

Table 1*Summary of Included Articles*

In-text citation	Population (n)	Role Addressed: Supervision (S), Development (D), or Teaching (T)	Method	Research Focus
Brugnera, et al. (2021)	Master's and doctoral level psychotherapists (n = 416)	D	Quantitative	Attachment security, reflective functioning, and well-being
Brugnera et al. (2023)	Master's and doctoral level psychotherapists (n = 40)	D	Quantitative	Longitudinal investigation of well-being, reflective functioning, insecure attachment, distress, and burn-out
Chen & Mallinckrodt (2002)	Counseling psychology graduate students (n = 76)	D	Quantitative	Attachment theory within a group therapy class experience
Cook & Welfare (2018)	Counseling students (n = 146)	S	Quantitative	Social judgment, SWA, supervisory nondisclosure, and avoidant and anxious attachment styles
Deal et al. (2011)	Social work supervisors (n = 100) and students (n = 64)	S	Quantitative	Relationships between training, student attachment patterns, and alliance and competency ratings
Dinger et al. (2019)	Telephone emergency service volunteers (n = 261)	D	Quantitative	Relationships between attachment characteristics, changes during training, and competence
Evers et al. (2019)	Psychotherapy students (n = 184)	D	Quantitative	Healing/stressful work involvement, training context, professional attributes, and personal attributes
Fleischman & Shorey (2016)	Licensed psychologists (n = 290)	D	Quantitative	Theoretical orientation, attachment, and working alliance
Gnilka et al. (2016)	Master's and doctoral counseling students (n = 170)	S	Quantitative	Counselor attachment styles, perfectionism, client and supervisory working alliances
Gunn & Pistole (2012)	Master's and doctoral counseling students (n = 480)	S	Quantitative	Supervisory alliance bond, task, and goals, attachment, and disclosure.
Hiebler-Ragger et al. (2021)	Mixed sample of MHPs and medical professionals (n = 346)	S	Quantitative	Supervisory relationship, MHPs' well-being, burnout, sense of coherence, and general attachment patterns
Howard et al. (2017)	Child welfare professionals (n = 228)	D	Quantitative	Self-reporting of ACEs and attachment style
Huber et al. (2010)	Counseling psychology doctoral students (n = 109)	D	Quantitative	Advisee attachment orientation, frequency of meetings, advisee-advisor pairing, and advisory working alliances
Kuhnley et al. (2023)	Mixed sample of MHP graduate students (n = 64)	T	Mixed Methods	Impact of empathy workshop on empathy, attachment, well-being, self-esteem, narcissism, emotional intelligence, and mindfulness
Leitemo et al. (2020)	Mixed sample of MHP and medical professional trainees and trainers (n = 61)	D	Quantitative	Relationships between attachment anxiety/avoidance and interpersonal distress
Marmarosh, et al. (2006)	Master's counseling students (n = 3)	S	Qualitative	Insecurely attached supervisees' stories of attachment-related behaviors, feelings, and ideations in supervision
Marmarosh et al. (2013)	Graduate psychology students (n = 57)	S	Quantitative	Adult romantic attachments, supervisory attachment, SWA, and trainees' counseling self-efficacy
McKibben et al. (2019)	Mixed sample of graduate MHP and counseling students (n = 93 total)	S	Mixed Methods	Perceptions of supervisory feedback validity by attachment patterns
Mehmet (2021)	Counseling psychology undergraduate students (n = 460)	D	Quantitative	Relationships between therapeutic skills, attachment styles, and self-regulation skills
Mesrie et al. (2018)	Psychology graduate students (n = 120)	S	Quantitative	Relationship between trainees' anxious/avoidant supervisory attachment and their counseling self-efficacy
Montagno et al. (2011)	Mixed sample of MHPs and graduate students (n = 76)	T	Quantitative	Impact of EFT training on EFT knowledge, competence, self-compassion, emotional processing, attachment style, and personal relationships
Mosley et al. (2022)	MFT Supervisors (n = 18) and supervisees (n = 30)	S	Mixed Methods	Telehealth supervision, attachment anxiety/avoidance, and frequency of supervisory tasks
Nissen-Lie et al. (2021)	Psychotherapists (n = 1243)	D	Quantitative	Personal and professional well-being, attachment avoidance/anxiety, and personal burdens
Peter & Böbel (2020)	Psychotherapists (n = 430)	D	Quantitative	Personality styles of securely and insecurely attached psychotherapists
Rek et al. (2018)	Psychotherapy students (n = 285)	D	Quantitative	Attachment styles and interpersonal motives of psychotherapists
Renfro-Michel & Sheperis (2009)	Master's counseling students (n = 117)	S	Mixed Methods	Supervisee attachment orientation and perception of the SWA

Table 1 (continued)

In-text citation	Population (n)	Role Addressed: Supervision (S), Development (D), or Teaching (T)	Method	Research Focus
Rizq & Target (2010a)	Counseling psychologists (n = 12)	D	Mixed Methods	Attachment status, reflective functioning, personal therapy, and the therapeutic relationship
Rizq & Target (2010b)	Counseling psychologists (n = 12)	D	Mixed Methods	Attachment status, reflective functioning, and personal therapy in the context of psychologists' counseling practice
Rogers et al. (2019)	Master's counseling students (n = 6)	D	Qualitative	The impact of learning about adult attachment on personal/professional growth and perceptions of relationships
Rogers et al. (2015)	Master's counseling students (n = 73)	T	Quantitative	Relationships between anxious/avoidant attachment, use of cognitive distortions, and difficulty with feedback
Trusty et al. (2005)	Master's counseling students (n = 143)	D	Quantitative	Developing an adult attachment model of emotional empathy
White & Queener (2003)	MHP supervisor-supervisee dyads (n = 67)	S	Quantitative	Supervisors' and supervisees' self-reported attachment styles and impact on perceptions of the SWA
Yusof & Carpenter (2015)	Family therapists (n = 11)	D	Qualitative	Relationship between adult attachment styles, influences on career choices, and approach to therapy

trainees compared to the general public, noting that avoidant attachment patterns may lend themselves less naturally to the role of an empathic psychotherapist. Some researchers adjusted for the unique nature of attachment within professional roles by qualifying interpretations of attachment-related findings (e.g., Hiebler-Ragger et al., 2021; Trusty et al., 2005). Alternately, to better understand attachment within supervision, Marmarosh and colleagues (2013) measured adult attachment and supervisory attachment in trainees, finding only one positive, moderate strength correlation between adult attachment avoidance and fearful attachment to the supervisor, confirming the unique nature of each construct.

The unique nature of attachment in the supervisory relationship overlaps with reciprocal and complementary types of attachment (Neswald-McCalip, 2001), but the MHP supervisory relationship cannot solely be explained as an attachment bond (Hiebler-Ragger et al., 2021). Specific connections within therapeutic and supervisory relationships may be more relevant than general adult attachment, especially for MHPs in the initial stages of forming their professional identities (Hiebler-Ragger et al., 2021). In all, attachment in MHP development is not yet fully understood, and attention to attachment between MHP trainees and educators is essential.

Professional Functioning

Insecure attachment is inversely related to MHP well-being. Insecurely attached psychotherapists demonstrate potential for increased personal and professional challenges (Brugnera et al., 2021) alongside decreased well-being and efficacy (Brugnera et al., 2023). Attachment avoidance was associated with increased interpersonal problems among counseling psychology students (Chen & Mallinckrodt, 2002). Likewise, anxious attachment was strongly correlated with MHPs' interpersonal distress (Leitemo et al., 2020) and a strong predictor of psychotherapists' distress 1 year later (Brugnera et al., 2023). It was also negatively related to psychotherapy trainees' interpersonal skills (Evers et al., 2019).

Several studies point to relationships among attachment, burnout, and engagement. Anxious attachment predicted psychotherapists' burnout symptoms over time (Brugnera et al., 2023). Burnout was moderately correlated with attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, with attachment anxiety predicting experiences of burnout in MHPs, especially those with poorer supervisory relationships (Hiebler-Ragger et al., 2021). Attachment anxiety was also moderately negatively correlated with social work students' motivation and autonomy (Deal et al., 2011).

MHP attachment style also appears to play a role in clinical skill development and self-efficacy. Higher supervision attachment anxiety was correlated with social work students' lower-than-average ability to focus on their clients (Deal et al., 2011). Similarly, psychology students' avoidant attachment was moderately linked to lower self-efficacy, while anxious attachment had no relationship with self-efficacy (Mesrie et al., 2018). Anxiously attached social work students initially scored lower on self-evaluations of performance, but their scores increased faster than those with other attachment styles (Deal et al., 2011). Conversely, social work students with avoidant attachment styles had slower increases in autonomy and motivation (Deal et al., 2011). Relatedly, volunteer emergency phone counselors with anxious attachment styles increased skills and decreased in anxiety compared to those with avoidant attachment (Dinger et al., 2019).

Other evidence suggests that attachment styles influence how MHPs navigate their professional roles. Positive correlations between secure attachment and emotional regulation suggest that securely attached psychotherapists experience less distressing emotional volatility (Brugnera et al., 2023; McIntyre & Samstag, 2022). Securely attached family therapists were more aware of their own distress and of their clients' distress compared to insecurely attached therapists (Yusof & Carpenter, 2015). In contrast, supervisors should be aware of distress in counseling students, as it can take a toll on fledgling professionals (Trusty et al., 2005).

Supervisory Working Relationship

Scholars investigated the impact of attachment in the supervision relationship (often addressed as the SWA, supervisory attachment, or supervisory bond) on supervisee outcomes. Counseling supervisees' (Gnilka et al., 2016) and psychologists' (Fleischman & Shorey, 2016) anxious and avoidant attachment styles correlated weakly and negatively with clients' ratings of the working alliance. At the same time, avoidant and anxious attachment styles correlated weakly with poorer evaluations of the SWA (Gnilka

et al., 2016; Huber et al., 2010; Mehmet, 2021). MFT students' avoidant attachment also correlated with difficulty identifying a lack of relational connection in the supervisory relationship (Mosley et al., 2022). Counseling student attachment style predicted 11.6% of the variance in supervisory alliance score (Renfro-Michel & Sheperis, 2009). Lower levels of initial attachment avoidance and greater decreases of avoidance during training predicted better working alliances for paraprofessionals (Dinger et al., 2019).

Secure SWAs promote better outcomes for all parties. Supervisor attachment security moderately and positively influenced counseling students' ability to focus on their clients (Gunn & Pistole, 2012). Counseling supervisors' ability to form secure attachments informed both supervisors' and supervisees' perceptions of the quality of the SWA (White & Queener, 2003) and was positively related to the strength of the supervisory bond, explaining 75% of the variance in rapport (Gunn & Pistole, 2012). Supervisor-supervisee attachment interactions impacted counseling psychology student perceptions of the SWA (Huber et al., 2010).

Supervisees' attachment styles impact their communication and ability to receive feedback. When asked about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), child welfare professionals with avoidant attachment reported fewer ACEs than were assessed in the adult attachment interview (AAI), whereas those with anxious attachment reported more ACEs, indicating a moderate to large impact of attachment style on disclosure (Howard et al., 2017). A more secure and positively rated SWA correlated with higher validity ratings of supervisor feedback, while higher attachment avoidance was negatively related to feedback validity ratings (McKibben et al., 2019). A secure supervisory relationship decreased the likelihood of intentional nondisclosure by student counselors (Cook & Welfare, 2018; McKibben et al., 2019) and strongly predicted the strength of the SWA and supervisee disclosure (Gunn & Pistole, 2012).

Self-Awareness

Attachment self-awareness appears to inform MHPs' professional efficacy and therapeutic choices. Counseling students' insecure attachment styles predicted unhelpful beliefs about their clients' responses to group therapy (Marmarosh et al., 2006). Psychotherapists' attachment insecurity also correlated with lower scores on personality facets considered necessary for positive therapeutic relationships, such as sociability and trust in others (Peter & Böbel, 2020). This correlation necessitates psychotherapist development of self-awareness of relational tendencies to aid in the development of therapeutic relationships (Peter & Böbel, 2020). Conversely, psychotherapists' awareness of their own attachment styles, behaviors, and patterns was associated with improved clinical mentalization and empathy skills (Brugnera et al., 2023). Family therapists with secure attachments demonstrated the ability to acknowledge their own experiences and use those experiences to benefit their clients (Yusof & Carpenter, 2015).

Empathic attachment with one's clinical supervisor fostered exploration and development of psychotherapist self-awareness, self-care, and improved patterns of attachment behavior (Brugnera et al., 2023). Likewise, immediacy in supervisory relationships allowed supervisees to explore their internal working models of attachment and relationships built from childhood as they discussed current supervisory relationships (Lucas et al., 2022).

Several studies explored the impact of family of origin (FoO) and attachment experiences on MHPs' approach to their professional roles. When interviewed about their first supervisory experiences, insecurely attached supervisees reported being strongly impacted by early attachments and relationship occurrences that impaired their ability to trust, believe in, and feel safe with others (Lucas et al., 2022). Family therapists with avoidant attachments struggled to connect FoO experiences with their present clinical work, while those with secure or preoccupied styles emphasized the influences of their early family experiences (Yusof & Carpenter, 2015). Counseling

students with a range of attachment styles were better able to understand the impacts of their past relational and attachment experiences on their present clinical work after completing and reflecting upon the Adult Scale of Parental Attachment self-assessment (Rogers et al., 2015). The ability to draw clinical connections from one's personal life may also link to Howard and colleagues' (2017) findings about supervisees' self-disclosure of ACES, suggesting that limited self-awareness could impact the accuracy of self-report.

Based on the emerging body of evidence, MHPs benefit from attending their own counseling or therapy. Engagement in personal counseling or therapy with a strong empathic bond may support increased self-awareness and self-care, decrease the risk of distress and burnout, and improve internalized attachment working models (Brugnera et al., 2023). Personal therapy may help to deactivate self-protective attachment behavioral systems that lead counselors to withdraw from the supervision process (Lucas et al., 2022). Even engagement in one's own personal therapy may be influenced by attachment, as insecurely attached psychologists saw only superficial benefits, but securely attached psychologists noted more nuanced ways of connecting with their clients after their own therapy (Rizq & Target, 2010b).

Empathy

Findings on empathy varied significantly by attachment style. Perspective-taking and processing abilities of others' experiences is discussed in the literature as "reflective functioning" (RF) or "mentalization." Higher levels of psychotherapists' insecure attachment may reduce RF (Brugnera et al., 2021), while psychologists with secure attachment scored higher in RF (Rizq & Target, 2010a). Family therapists with insecure attachment styles demonstrated challenges with mentalization and exhibited more countertransference with clients (Yusof & Carpenter, 2015). Counseling students' attachment avoidance strongly and negatively correlated with empathy scores, versus those with high anxiety and low avoidance (Trusty et al., 2005). Lower attachment anxiety in MHPs may

reflect improved RF or empathy (Leitemo et al., 2020).

Approaches to help MHP students develop secure patterns of attachment were explored in the literature. Employing an empathy education program decreased avoidant attachment scores in MHP students, but it did not impact anxious attachment (Kuhnley et al., 2023). An empathic attachment with one's supervisor may further support the development of internalized secure attachment working models (Brugnera et al., 2023), thus supervisors should also continue to develop their empathy skills. Secure attachment patterns in supervisors and supervisees can then improve counselor self-efficacy, emotional regulation, mentalization, and overall well-being.

Discussion

This systematic review identified that scholars largely agree that insecure attachment styles are connected with additional challenges in counselor professional function (Brugnera et al., 2021; Hiebler-Ragger et al., 2021), interpersonal skills (Chen & Mallinckrodt, 2002; Evers et al., 2019; Leitemo et al., 2020), self-awareness (Peter & Böbel, 2020; Yusof & Carpenter, 2015), and empathy (Brugnera et al., 2021; Trusty et al., 2005; Yusof & Carpenter, 2015). The inverse relationship between insecure attachment styles and MHP well-being (Brugnera et al., 2023); interpersonal relationship skills (Evers et al., 2019); and student motivation, autonomy, and ability to focus on clients (Deal et al., 2011; Gunn & Pistole, 2012) indicate agreement among researchers on the importance of attending to attachment styles in MHP student education and training. Likewise, the positive relationship between insecure attachment and psychological distress (Leitemo et al., 2020) and burnout (Brugnera et al., 2023; Hiebler-Ragger et al., 2021) assert the importance of minimizing insecure attachment tendencies in MHP students. Secure MHP attachment was positively correlated with emotional self-regulation and experience of less emotional volatility (Brugnera et al., 2023;

McIntyre & Samstag, 2022), which, as a critical skill for counselors, suggests the importance of developing secure attachment patterns in counseling students.

The review also demonstrated that effective supervisory relationships promote secure exploration, development, and connection within the professional context (Bennett & Saks, 2006; Brugnera et al., 2023), but specific findings on attachment within clinical supervisory relationships have been contradictory. One point of agreement among scholars on attachment in the supervisory relationship is the impact of attachment on self-disclosure and communication by supervisees (e.g., Cook & Welfare, 2018; Gunn & Pistole, 2012; McKibben et al., 2019). However, while most studies found correlations between counseling supervisee adult attachment styles and supervision outcomes (e.g. Brugnera et al., 2021; Deal et al., 2011; Evers et al., 2019; Leitemo et al., 2020; McIntyre & Samstag, 2022; Yusof & Carpenter, 2015), another found no relationship between counseling supervisee attachment style and SWA satisfaction, instead showing a relationship between supervisor attachment style and perceptions of the SWA (White & Queener, 2003). Authors called for supervisors' increased awareness of their supervisees' needs (Trusty et al., 2005). To develop a more holistic understanding of supervisory relationships and to expand upon the existing knowledge of attachment in supervision, supervisors may benefit from self-reflection to increase self-awareness of their own attachment styles and how those impact supervisory relationships.

There is strong evidence that attachment impacts clinical skills and empathy (e.g., Kuhnley et al., 2023; Leitemo et al., 2020; Montagno et al., 2011; Rizq & Target, 2010a), as well as preliminary evidence that instructors can indeed impact students' engagement through their attachment behaviors (e.g., Reyna & Barrio Minton, 2023; Rogers et al., 2015). Preliminary findings from the literature indicated that formal professional development programs focusing on empathy or emotions can help attachment-avoidant students

reduce avoidant behaviors (Kuhnley et al., 2023; Montagno et al., 2011), which aligns with findings that explicit instruction on attachment can increase student self-awareness (Rogers et al., 2015). After data collection and extraction for this study were complete, an additional article investigating the use of attachment training in counselor education was published. Reyna and Barrio Minton (2023) utilized the AAI and a multi-week reflection process as a promising strategy for enhancing attachment awareness within the context of counselor education. Such instructional tools may support the development of more secure attachment behaviors in MHPs and could support the development of best practice recommendations for counselor education. The time-bound nature of these studies suggests the feasibility of implementing impactful educational experiences to counselor education with minimal disruption to existing programming. Initial findings indicate the value of attachment education in counselor education programs. These preliminary findings should be expanded upon to better understand the full impact of each instructional intervention.

Limitations

This study was not without limitations. Inclusion criteria required articles to be published in English, thus introducing a potential cultural bias to the findings. The lack of research regarding attachment beyond counselor–client or supervisor–supervisee relationships led us to expand inclusion criteria to adjacent professions, which may not accurately depict the nuances of the counseling profession. Thematic analysis also introduces researcher bias in findings, despite attempts to minimize bias in findings through the use of researcher agreement.

Implications

For Counselor Education and Supervision

There is preliminary evidence that attachment education in the counselor education classroom and other preparation spaces provides foundational

knowledge of attachment, enabling supervisors to initiate discussions regarding attachment more easily. Supervisors should keep in mind that students' attachment styles inform self-disclosure, defensiveness, self-confidence, and how they will receive feedback. The use of immediacy and vulnerability in addressing unhelpful attachment patterns may ease the tension of what a student might experience as correction or confrontation. For students who need a more indirect approach, the mutual use of attachment self-assessments in supervision could offer a degree of emotional distance from students' behaviors. Additionally, allowing a student to pace the conversation around attachment can provide another degree of safety during vulnerable self-exploration. Attachment-informed supervisory practices may then translate to supervisees' work with clients through isomorphism (De Shazer, 1982). Such practices aid in developing securely attached counselors, which may improve counselor efficacy and client outcomes.

By adjusting their approach based on supervisees' attachment styles, supervisors can help supervisees to feel safe and supported during this challenging period of personal and professional growth. Facilitation of secure attachment is most critical for early counseling students, as their professional identity is still forming (Hiebler-Ragger et al., 2021). Attending personal counseling or therapy can help MHPs increase their self-awareness and improve attachment behaviors in personal and professional roles (Brungnera et al., 2023; Lucas et al., 2022; Rizq & Target, 2010b). Educators can also engage students in structured self-awareness exercises regarding attachment dynamics in the counseling process (Mehmet, 2021). These may include using attachment assessments and ongoing reflections such as those investigated by Reyna and Barrio Minton (2023) and Rogers and colleagues (2015), or other training programs such as empathy or EFT-specific curricula (Montagno et al., 2011). There are few studies of strategies for fostering more secure connections within professional contexts, so additional research may provide better insights into how to best support healthy attachment development in aspiring MHPs.

For Future Research

Though minimally explored, there is compelling evidence to suggest the critical nature of supervisors' attachment styles, warranting further exploration. Preliminary findings demonstrate that even short-term instructional interventions impacted student attachment patterns and clinical skill development. Future studies could investigate larger samples and long-term impact of such interventions on counselors' efficacy, empathy skills, and attachment behaviors within counseling and supervision relationships. Many studies in this review included samples of psychologists or psychotherapists, and focused specifically on professional functioning and well-being; researchers may replicate these studies with a focus on professional counselors.

Many scholars agreed that attachment patterns are activated or deactivated within the supervision context (Fitch et al., 2010; Lucas et al., 2022; Mesrie et al., 2018; Neswald-McCalip, 2001); however, little attention is given to the possible activation of attachment patterns within the counselor education classroom. Exploration of students' experiences of supervisors or instructors with different attachment tendencies could provide insights into attachment activation patterns in classroom settings. McKibben and colleagues (2023) noted how attachment styles informed the counseling supervisory working alliance but did not explore the influence of andragogical and evaluative elements present in the supervisory relationship. Research that contextualizes attachment behaviors in educational power differentials may help to provide a deeper understanding of the nature of attachment in the counselor education context, as well as its impact on students' development. For example, exploration of different CEs' experiences of attending to attachment in teaching may inform educational best practices or provide valuable insights into what works for counseling students at various stages of development. More specifically, a stronger understanding of MHPs' tendencies in intentional nondisclosure (Cook & Welfare, 2018; Gunn & Pistole, 2012; Howard et al., 2017; McKibben et al., 2019) could better prepare

supervisors to support students in their clinical experiences and skill development.

Conclusion

Adult attachment styles of counselors, clients, and supervisors all influence the dynamics within professional counseling relationships and roles. Although specific findings vary, attachment plays a significant role in the development and efficacy of counselors. The continued development and application of attachment theory across counselor roles is supported. As counselors, it is our ethical duty to grow, develop, and hone our clinical skills, including the use of attachment-informed approaches in all roles, including clinical, supervisory, and teaching.

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