
Leadership in Marriage and Family Therapy Programs is Under-Explored: A Thematic, Narrative Overview

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ABSTRACT

Institutions of higher education rely on identified leaders to continue the mission of the organization, hire and retain quality faculty and staff, and sustain and further develop vigorous academic programs that retain students and prepare graduates to enter the work force. Discipline specific departments are subject to many demands and resources are pulled in different directions. As a result, the body of literature on leadership in higher education is robust and diverse. However, research on leadership in graduate marriage and family therapy programs is paltry in addressing if a relationship exists between leaders and student capacity to employ skills in a field focused on relationships. This study was a thematic, narrative overview. An exhaustive search of literature was conducted over the span of four years. Articles were assessed for relevance and appropriateness, organized by theme, and the findings were consolidated and are presented within this article. The three identified themes were: leadership in higher education, rigor in marriage and family therapy programs, and leadership in marriage and family therapy programs and other mental health fields. Gaps were identified in the literature and include the role of leadership style identification and self-exploration, the extent to which program leaders interact with students, and how the relationship between administrators and students impacts the development of field related skills.

Keywords: leadership, higher education, marriage and family therapy, MFT programs, relational

Introduction

Research on leadership, and leadership in higher education specifically, is expansive. There are very few areas that have not been explored from the perspective of leaders and subordinates in institutions at large (Decuypere, 2018; Ersozlu & Saklan, 2016; Esen et al., 2020). Additionally, research on program efficacy across disciplines is robust. Marriage and family therapy (MFT) graduate programs are designed to lead students toward licensure as independently practicing therapists. Further, they cover a niche area in the larger domain of psychology and mental health treatment. The cornerstone of therapy and the MFT field is the relationship. Specifically, MFTs are concerned with power dynamics, relational exchange, and how to keep systems in a homeostatic state (Avila et al., 2017). Given the relational nature of the field, and the rigor by which its academic programs are evaluated, it is surprising that a miniscule amount of literature explores leadership units in MFT programs and their role in the development of therapists. This research aims to collect, analyze, and report on the existing data via a thematic, narrative overview so to assess the need for and value of further research in this area. Gaps were identified in the literature and include the role of leadership style identification and self-exploration, the extent to which program leaders interact with students, and how the relationship between administrators and students impacts the development of field related skills.

Discussion

Methods

Narrative overviews are used to provide a narrative synthesis of the literature available on a specific topic or phenomenon. They span over an extensive period during which data is collected, reviewed, analyzed, and presented. They allow for several areas of research to be pieced together in a readable style, which can then support further inquiry (Green et al., 2006). This study is a narrative overview which aims to synthesize the existing literature on leadership in marriage and family therapy programs, to identify gaps in the literature, and to provide recommendations for practice and future research.

To conduct this narrative overview, data was collected from several online databases which included ProQuest, Google Scholar, and EBSCOhost. The following search terms were used: leadership, leadership in higher education, leadership in MFT programs, leadership in marriage and family therapy, leadership in mental health, preparing graduate level therapists, MFT programs, and MFT program competencies. Data was collected and analyzed between January 2016 and August 2020. A preliminary search included articles from 1980 to 2016. Next, a search of more current research was performed, and dates were refined to the years 2015 through 2020. A comprehensive and ongoing search determined that little progress was made in the area of research on leadership in MFT programs.

Articles were subject to a preliminary review for appropriateness. Articles needed to meet the following criteria for inclusion: relevant to the current study, written in the English language, and published in a peer-reviewed journal. Articles were excluded if the topic was too broad with information that could not be analyzed as applicable to the focus of this study or if the research was exceptionally outdated. The qualifying research articles were reviewed and organized by theme. The findings are reported below.

Leadership in Higher Education

For the purpose of this study, leadership is defined as a leader's ability to organize participants in a manner in which they accomplish the leader's desired goals (Cyert, 1990). Much of the literature creates a clear distinction between leaders and managers (Floyd, 2016; Hofmeyer et al., 2015; Vilaga, 2019). Managers organize, are task-focused, and offer administrative oversight. Leaders are self-aware, offer expertise in their area, and influence an organization. The qualities of effective leaders and styles of effective leadership are well-researched. Leadership is an ongoing area of focus across multiple disciplines, including but not limited to, business and management, education, law, political science, public service, and nursing (Arthur et al., 2017; Benito, et al., 2018; Brandebo et al., 2016; Cote, 2017; Franken & Plimmer, 2019; Lamm et al., 2016; Singer, 2017; Veeriah, et al., 2017; Warshawsky & Havens, 2014). There are several

leadership styles that have been identified as well as factors that influence leadership, including but not limited to, resources, setting, and personality (Elwell & Elikofer 2015). Leaders tend to have a clear vision. They are often evaluated on the premise of characteristic traits, including modeling behaviors, ethics, willingness to be hands on, consistency in word and action, and trustworthiness. Leaders are largely responsible for the stability of an organization and can impact morale, relationships among coworkers, longevity and satisfaction of subordinates, and turnover rates. Leadership is much more than a position; it is dynamic and performative (Brue & Brue, 2018; Harris et al., 2016; Hofmeyer et al., 2015).

While there are innumerable styles of literature identified in research, this study reviewed those major categories identified in Bass' (1985) Full-Range Leadership Theory (FRLT): transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire. FRLT suggests that leadership exists upon a continuum of minimal effort (laissez-faire) to very high effort (transformational). The framework has been broadly and successfully applied across varying disciplines within the literature on leadership to determine leadership style. It is also one of the most cited theories on leadership (Antonakis & House, 2013; Bacha, 2019; Barnett, 2017; Itzkovich et al., 2020; Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2016).

Transformational leaders are generally seen as having a positive impact on the organizations they lead. They focus on the betterment of the organization and its employees, often sacrificing personal interest and gain (Ramsey et al., 2017). Transformational leaders increase awareness and inspire innovation. They create momentum toward shared goals. It is suggested that they are able to clarify the purpose of company-wide goals for employees and use the relationship to focus employee attention toward achieving shared goals (Steinmann et al., 2018). Charisma and trustworthiness are common characteristics of transformational leaders. These leaders tend to be found in upper-level management, rather than lower-level positions (Fardillah et al., 2018; Riaz & Haider, 2010).

Transactional leaders are focused on the exchange between the leader and the follower. They are not concerned with situational factors. Rather, the process of giving and receiving is of the utmost importance. Decisions are often made with little input from others and without a full range of details due to the less collaborative nature of this style (Khan, 2017). Subordinates are incentivized to perform toward the leader's goals and vision via positive rewards for such behavior (e.g. tangible incentives or verbal praise). Failure to comply can result in punitive action or punishment (Riaz & Haider, 2010).

The laissez-faire style is often referred to as an absence of leadership. Research has suggested that is one of the more ineffective leadership styles (Puni et al., 2016; Tosunoglu & Ekmekci, 2016; Wellman & LePine, 2017). Laissez-faire leaders lack an emotional, and sometimes even physical, presence. They offer little follow-up to requests, fail to express opinion on important matters, and avoid responsibility and decision-making. These leaders, in avoiding decision-making, pass the responsibility to their subordinates. The laissez-faire leaders assume that subordinates will work independently and self-motivate without guidance (Jones & Rudd, 2008).

Leadership in higher education has garnered increased interest over the last decade. Definitions of leadership have expanded due to the need to adapt to technology and globalization (Alonderience & Majauskaite, 2016; Dobson et al., 2019; Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Wood & Breyer, 2017). In spite of this, leadership in higher education institutions warrants further review. Academic programs continue to expand, student populations grow increasingly diverse as individuals have access to institutions across the globe, and organizational demands and stress increase with social and global changes (Jones & Harvey, 2017). The existent research has continually called for an understanding of how to improve leadership in institutions and a demand for better and adaptable leadership (Black, 2015; Jones & Harvey, 2017; Stefani, 2015).

Institutions of higher education are constantly juggling demands and are subject to scrutiny. They are tasked with ethically serving students and preparing them to enter a work

force. They must do this while also managing tight fiscal budgets, negotiating agreement among several administrators, balancing the need to bring in enough funds to sustain daily operations, and maintaining the integrity that the field of academia and student consumers demand (Evans, 2018; Fields et al., 2019; Stefani, 2015; Thompson & Miller, 2017). Leaders in higher education occupy roles identified to shape the development of the school and its programs, faculty, and student outcomes. The following are commonly held titles, but this list is not comprehensive: dean, associate dean, department chair, program chair, program director, and faculty liaison. Effective leaders must recognize their ability to influence the institution's success and often display common characteristics such as vision, integrity, consideration, emotional intelligence, and sense of direction (Hofmeyer et al., 2015). A collaborative style can influence performance outcomes and support academics. Effective leaders are indisputably important in higher education settings. They shape institutional practices and have a direct impact on their subordinates. They are largely responsible for shaping and sharing the vision and ensuring that faculty and students are motivated to reach it (Bacha, 2019; Ekman et al., 2018; King, 2017; Steele & White, 2019).

Snodgrass and Shachar (2008) conducted a qualitative, phenomenological study on the relationship between program director leadership style and institutional characteristics. While the study was field specific (occupational therapy), it provided insight on collegiate level program director leadership styles. Participants were administered leadership inventories to identify their leadership styles and then participated in an interview to discuss the impact of knowing their style. The results suggested that program leaders often reflect on how they plan to grow as a leader and highlighted the value of integrity and an open-door policy. Additionally, it was suggested that insight to leadership style promoted self-reflection, reaffirmed leader strengths, and built leader confidence. The authors concluded that the most effective program directors used a blend of both styles—a transformational stance with the incorporation of the transactional contingency reward system

(Snodgrass & Shachar, 2008). However, the study lacked generalizability and was limited in that the sample size was very small and the geographic region was specific to the Midwest United States.

The literature on leadership suggests that leaders are largely responsible for student outcomes by way of their support for and influence on faculty as well as their responsibility to oversee programmatic activity and maintain quality (Hertlein et al., 2017). MFT programs are especially tasked with retaining skilled practitioner-scholar faculty members for the purpose of supervising and supporting the development of efficient and competent graduates (Earl, 2018; Samman & Seshadri, 2018; Zamboni & Zaid, 2017). To date, it is not clear how MFT program directors influence faculty retention and development, and by way of this, student success.

Rigor in Marriage and Family Therapy Programs

The need for adequate mental health services in the United States continues to rise and has long been documented in research, and graduate level MFT programs have grown to meet this need (Chen et al., 2019; Hardy & Keller, 1991; McDowell et al., 2002; Mize et al., 1996; Nelson et al., 2007; Parker et al., 2003; Touliatos & Lindholm, 1992). Graduates of MFT programs go on to work as knowledgeable, competent, practitioners of psychotherapy in the mental health field (Bernal, 2009; Gurman & Kniskern, 2014; Lambert-Shute et al., 2018; Nelson & Palmer, 2001; Whittenborn et al., 2018).

MFT programs provide a dual emphasis on dyadic skills and the development of clinical skills needed to treat mental health conditions (Avila et al., 2017; Cornille et al., 2003). They focus on training students for direct clinical work. A master's degree is the minimum required level of education needed to apply for a state license to practice independently. These programs are regulated by The Commission on Accreditation of Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE) and the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) (Earl, 2018; Hodgson et al., 2005; Northey, 2010). Master's programs in marriage and family therapy

follow a core competencies curriculum that was designed to equip graduate students with the skills needed to become competent practitioners. The core competencies consist of several domains of theory and skill and cover content knowledge related directly to MFT practice. Demonstrated mastery in the program is expected and presumably produces competent practitioners (Caldwell et al., 2011; D'Aniello & Perkins, 2016; Gerhart, 2010; Miller et al., 2010; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Nelson & Graves, 2011; Nelson & Smock, 2005; Piercy et al., 2016;).

Miller and Lambert-Shute (2009) used survey data to explore the relationship between graduate level MFT training, career aspirations, and field preparedness. The results of their study showed that students felt their training was practical and useful, and they also felt well prepared to work in the field. It is notable, however, that career preference was toward research and teaching as opposed to direct clinical work. This preference could suggest a resistance toward or feeling ill-prepared for direct work with clients. It was suggested that this insight on preferred career paths might influence the development of core competencies in the future by broadening them to include a greater focus not only on research and academia, but also the foundational skills necessary to work in diverse and challenging careers with direct client contact (Peterson, 2017).

The suggestions given by Huff et al. (2014) for improving skills in MFT students included providing opportunities for practice and giving explicit encouragement and support. It was further suggested that those in supervisory positions who conceptualize themselves as a supportive vessel, should be aware of their supervisee's personal issues and model therapeutic skills that would support the transition from student to competent practitioner. It was suggested that ongoing dialogue about the practical application of formal skills and their value in therapy was needed. Open communication and ongoing discussions with constructive feedback were said to be the most effective means of increasing student comfort and competency (Huff et al., 2014).

The literature suggests that while MFT programs prepare competent practitioners, the

relationship between leadership style and student success is not well understood. Students have reported feeling better equipped to practice and succeed in their programs when supported by program administration (Theisen et al., 2017). However, little has been done to operationalize, understand, and define support (Piercy et al., 2016). Since research has suggested that transformational leaders tend to be perceived as empathic, supportive, and inspirational, the practice of transformational leadership in MFT programs can also be further reviewed (Woods-Giscombe, 2017).

Leadership in Marriage and Family Therapy Programs and Other Mental Health Fields

Research specific to MFT programs is severely lacking, and there is very little available on MFT program leaders (Harris-McCoy et al., 2017; Marlowe et al., 2020). For the purpose of this study, MFT program leaders are identified individuals in administrative positions including but not be limited to the following titles: dean, associate dean, department chair, program chair, program director, and faculty liaison. Bernal (2009) reviewed higher education trends and the connection to MFT programs and administration and noted significant stress associated with financial constraints and the ability to provide a quality and rigorous educational experience. Additionally, said constraints impact the development of a solid leadership team (Bernal, 2009). The steady trend of financial constraints has impaired program development and growth. It can be assumed that student and staff connection is limited due to decreased rates of full-time faculty, reduced course offerings, fewer touch points, and limited support services (Mitchell et al., 2017; Salts et al., 1990). A lack of adequate resources could result in a lower rate of skills acquisition. Additionally, much of the research in higher education leadership has focused on constraints rather than the mental health and personal needs of students (Lipson et al., 2019). It has been suggested that MFT program leaders be flexible to meet the complex needs of the program operation, the student body, and general budget oversight (Bernal, 2009; Dragoo & Barrows, 2016; Salts et al., 1990). This implies a need for MFT program directors to be both flexible and adaptable to meet organizational demands and to also

accommodate a diverse faculty and student body with equally demanding needs.

It has been suggested that mental health practitioners make dynamic leaders in higher education settings (Miller, 2016; Wang & Frederick, 2018). There is, however, a lack of leadership style inquiry in the mental health field (Aarons, 2006; Gharabaghi & Anderson-Natthe, 2016; Kois et al., 2015). Whitsett (2007) notes the general lack of research on leadership styles of academic department program leads. He asserts that while program chairs hold the heavy burden of assuming responsibility for major decisions, they seldom receive adequate training (Whitsett, 2007). The decisions made by program leaders can impact students directly. They can impact the allocation of resources, staff morale, and the connection between administration and students.

Aarons (2006) argues that leadership style is a critical point of focus in both practitioner competency and consumer satisfaction. He adds that transformational leadership is at the core of the student learner and clinical supervisor relationship, in part of its intimate nature. Transformational leadership is suggested as being especially relevant to the student practitioner and clinical supervisor relationship due to a need to motivate the supervisee, build upon inherent strengths, and support the transition of theoretical skills gained in the classroom to clinical practice.

Avila et al. (2017) additionally explored the relational aspect of supervision in the MFT field. A quantitative, longitudinal study was conducted and aimed to understand how competent supervisors perceived their student trainees to be. It also aimed to propose a model of research that was more similar to the practical aspects of the field where the relationship is inherent and can influence modes of practice. The study surveyed 205 supervisor-supervisee dyads in total. The goal was to assess the validity of Dyadic Supervision Evaluation (DSE) for causality and to determine if relational elements should be further explored within the context of supervision. They hypothesized that several relational factors existed in the supervisory relationship and could influence competency. These included perceived safety in the supervisory relationship, alliance, satisfaction

with the working relationship, and general engagement. The results showed that the DSE was effective in capturing the psychometric aspects of the supervisory relationship. However, the study encouraged further exploration of the efficacy of the DSE in evaluating relational aspects of the MFT supervisor-supervisee relationship (Avila et al., 2017).

Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) explored the difference between authentic and pseudo transformational leaders and cautioned the dangers of pseudo transformational leadership. The authors asserted that authentic transformational leaders appeal to the best in people, and this allows for shared goal setting and attainment. The result is harmony and quality work. In contrast, the pseudo-transformational leaders, defined as a “fake” transformational leader, pursue self-interests, have skewed morals and bring out far fewer desirable qualities in subordinates (Hughes & Harris, 2017). These can include “conspiracies, unreal dangers, excuses, and insecurities” (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999, p. 188). In all, transformational leaders seek to empower rather than force compliance, and this activates transformation within the subordinates (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). For these reasons and the vulnerable nature of the work that MFTs do, transformational leadership appears as a viable option for practice.

Aarons (2006) contrasts transformational and transactional leadership by noting that transactional leadership is based upon exchange and the meeting of quotas and objectives. While some level of “building up” occurs via this leadership style, it is about recognizing accomplishments and milestones rather than building on a personal level. This contingency-based praise can often result in fear of rejection or failure. Transactional leadership can be effective in structures (such as MFT graduate programs and post graduate settings) where EBP practice and measurable outcomes are a pillar of progress and competency. However, this leadership style fails to recognize another core area that defines an effective MFT, which is the possession of relationship skills. Relationship skills are typically inherent in personality traits. The preceding literature suggests that transformational leaders will target these

personality traits, facilitate their growth, and produce competent, skilled practitioners.

Aarons and Sommerfeld (2012) make mention of the lack of literature on leadership practices in the mental health field. They explored transformational leadership as a fundamental feature of developing working environments for MFTs in which innovation and the practice of EBP exists. Their results showed that transformational leadership paved the way for higher levels of innovation, and in so much, increased supervisor-supervisee contact. This increased contact and the autonomy resulted in the increased practice of EBPs. This study further suggests that a transformational leader garners a greater subordinate buy-in and is likely to reach targeted outcomes.

The Aarons and Sommerfeld (2012) study suggested that transformational leaders support emerging clinicians by building upon an inherent skill set and supporting the development of genuine personality traits that make clinicians more adept in providing quality client care. Transformational leaders focus on the relationship, thereby, supporting and propelling the clinicians they supervise toward growth. There is a focus on positive, reciprocal relationship. Literature suggests that the transformational leadership style is best suited for those in critical positions who share responsibility for developing competent psychotherapists.

Directions for Future Research

The existing research on leadership in the field of mental health supports the notion that in order to prepare students to become competent psychotherapists, program leaders must be adaptable and personable. It has been suggested that much of the research on competency and the development of student therapists is built on theory and skill and does not address the relational aspects that are specific to the MFT field (Avila et al. 2017). Further, the existing literature on leadership in higher education focuses on institutional demands, constraints, and program completion and competencies. Program leadership that is incentives driven (grades, core competencies, and outcomes) will satisfy some demands placed

on leaders and may drive student performance in some domains. However, it may show limited professional progress and personal growth among students. Long-term professional gains may be halted if the relational, personal and character development aspect of training is neglected.

Much more inquiry and analysis of leadership in MFT programs is needed. A deeper understanding of relationships and interdependent variables as related to the training of therapists would be beneficial. Research in this area could increase validity and credibility for the MFT field as whole. Given the competitive nature of the mental health field and the job market that graduates will enter, advances in training competent practitioners can be made via conceptualizing support, identifying how leaders connect to students, and assessing the use of the administrator-student relationship to support therapist growth and development (Avila et al., 2017). Future research could focus on identifying program leadership styles so to promote self-reflection, determining if programs with transformational leaders have improved student outcomes, exploring the extent to which program leaders interact with student therapists, the nature of these interactions, and if interactions support the development of a practical skill set. Several variables such as support, relationship, and level of interaction can be quantified and measured to determine their influence on leadership and its relationship to students' experiences and professional development. Quantitative research can then be conducted. Additional consideration can be given to department resources, demographics and cultural variables, geographic region, length of time in a leadership position in academia and in the specific position held, and personal factors that can impact workplace performance (i.e. stress or family life). Additionally, qualitative inquiry into the self-reflection process of leaders in MFT programs would provide a depth of understanding of the lived experiences of MFT program leaders, their approaches toward furthering the mission of the institution and field at large, and their understanding of the use of the relationship in professional development.

Conclusion

MFT programs are structured, rigorous programs within higher education. The literature suggests that on the surface level, they produce practitioners that are sufficiently prepared to enter the working world. At the foundational level, MFT graduate programs prepare students with a solid skill set which translates to adequate client care and therapeutic outcomes. However, students emerge from their programs to join a complex workforce where they rely on relationships and work-related confidence to readily use their attained skill set (Avila et al., 2019). The extent to which relationships are fostered and modeled within MFT programs remains unclear.

There is a great deal of research presented in this paper to support the importance of focusing on both professional and personal skill sets when educating and training future therapists in graduate programs. There is a strong connection between this dual focus and optimal sense of preparedness to practice. In addition, the literature suggested that student competency was dependent not only on the ability to apply foundational skills but also on the practitioner's ability to develop and sustain a relationship with clients. The implication of this dual nature is that students need preparation beyond formal textbook training. Transformational leadership is suggested to support student psychotherapists in their need to attain skills, feel positively so that they can purposefully apply these skills, and feel empowered and supported as individuals in both their successes and trials.

The review of literature demonstrated a need for more attention on MFT program leadership style and the implications it has on student outcomes and overall organizational success. To date, very little data exists on leadership in MFT programs and even less on how these leaders balance organizational and student needs and the relationship between administrators, faculty and the student body. Of notable mention, there are two publications that support the efficacy of transformational leadership in an organizational setting when working with therapist practitioners (Aarons, 2006; Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012). There is extensive research on leadership in higher education and MFT specific literature supports the use of transformational leadership. MFT programs have an inherent, relational focus. Administrators, faculty, and students must

interact on a consistent basis as MFT programs tend to be smaller, have a niche focus, and the transmission of skills often occurs in the context of relationships. The preparation toward professional practice is relationship based and requires a sensitive, dynamic, in-tune leader.

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