Improving the Supervisory Working Alliance: A Pilot Study of Personality Differences Between Novice and Experienced Counselors

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to provide a framework for identifying personality differences between novice and experienced counselors utilizing the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992a). Two groups of counselors ($N = 69$) were compared in terms of their personality profile. One group, consisting of 48% of the participants, was comprised of novice counselors (licensed at the entry-level). The other group, consisting of 52% of the participants, was comprised of experienced counselors (licensed at the advanced level). Results indicate significant differences between the two groups in the Factor of Openness and the Facets of Vulnerability, Feelings, and Trust. Results show that experienced counselors have significantly higher levels of Openness, Feelings, and Trust and have significantly lower levels of Vulnerability. Counselor Educators and Counseling Supervisors need to increase their knowledge of the individual personality differences typically found between novice and experienced counselors, especially for those experienced counselors who provide clinical supervision to novice counselors, as these can have an impact on the supervisory working alliance.
Improving the Supervisory Working Alliance: A Pilot Study of Personality Differences Between Novice and Experienced Counselors

Profiles are used in many aspects of society today and have both positive and negative connotations. For example, racial profiling, as used by some in the "war on terror," concerns many civil liberties groups. Some profiles are used in the identification of positive attributes, characteristics, and personality types. This type of profiling can be used in a positive manner such as to aid prospective employers in identifying potential employees that would make a good "match." This type of profiling may also be useful in the supervisor-supervisee working alliance. One way to identify these attributes is through personality inventories. "Personality inventories are useful precisely because they measure general and pervasive dispositions that influence a host of psychological and behavioral variables" (Costa & McCrae, 1995, p. 46).

Supervisory Relationship

Bernard and Goodyear (2004) define supervision as “an intervention provided by a more senior member of a profession to a more junior member or members of that same profession” (p. 8). There are two central purposes of supervision. The first purpose is to provide an educational support function that helps to promote the professional development of the supervisee. The second purpose is that of a gatekeeper, where the supervision is intended to safeguard the client’s welfare (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004).

The integrative model of supervision is one of the most widely used models in the supervisory process (Bradley, Gould, & Parr, 2001) blending a variety of theories and techniques into a unique process. Several of the integrative models of supervision, however, do not directly address the supervisory relationship (i.e., Discrimination Model, Interpersonal Process Recall). Characteristics of the supervisor and supervisee play a major role in the supervisory relationship.
Further, personality differences between the supervisor and supervisee may be a significant element in the supervisory relationship.

The healthy interpersonal processes between the supervisor and supervisee are one of the keys to a successful supervisory relationship. While one would expect personality differences to exist between the supervisor and supervisee, an examination of these differences may be useful in the development of the supervisory relationship. For the purposes of this investigation, the results of the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992a) will be used as a framework for identifying personality differences between novice and experienced counselors.

The Five-Factor Model of Personality

The Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality is a dimensional representation of personality. Overall consensus of personality researchers is that personality can be described in terms of five factors. According to Aiken (1999) these five factors are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and culture. These five factors are also known as neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1992b).

The Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992b) is based on the FFM of personality - a dimensional representation of personality structure that includes (a) Neuroticism, (b) Extraversion, (c) Openness, (d) Agreeableness, and (e) Conscientiousness. Neuroticism is denoted by the proclivity of the individual to experience psychological distress and includes the facets of anxiety, angry hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness, and vulnerability. According to Costa and McCrae (1992b) men and women high in Neuroticism tend to have difficulty adapting to stressful situations. Additionally, "Individuals who score low on Neuroticism are emotionally stable. They are usually calm, even-tempered, and relaxed, and
they are able to face stressful situations without becoming upset or rattled" (Costa & McCrae, 1992c, p. 15).

Extraversion is denoted by the proclivity of the individual to experience positive emotions, activity, and flexibility. This factor includes the facets of warmth, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity, excitement-seeking, and positive emotions. Individuals who score high on Extraversion, according to Costa and McCrae (1992c) tend to like stimulation and have a cheerful outlook on life. However, those individuals who score low on Extraversion tend to be reserved, independent, and even-paced.

Openness is denoted by traits such as being imaginative and sensitive to art and beauty, intellectual curiosity, and includes the facets of fantasy, aesthetics, feelings, actions, ideas, and values. "Open individuals are curious about both inner and outer worlds, and their lives are experientially richer" (Costa & McCrae, 1992c, p. 15). Men and women who score low on Openness, according to Costa and McCrae (1992c) "tend to be conventional in behavior and conservative in outlook. They prefer the familiar to the novel, and their emotional responses are somewhat muted" (p. 15).

Agreeableness is denoted by traits such as the individual being trusting of others, sympathetic, and cooperative and includes the facets of trust, straight forwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty, and tender-mindedness. Individuals high in Agreeableness tend to be helpful, empathic, and put others first. Conversely, individuals low in Agreeableness are typically cynical, uncooperative and self-centered.

Conscientiousness can range from the responsible, organized, and meticulous to the irresponsible, flippant, and disorganized. This factor includes the facets of competence, order, dutifulness, achievement striving, self-discipline, and deliberation. Individuals who score high in
Conscientiousness are "associated with academic and occupational achievement" (Costa & McCrae, 1992c, p. 16). Individuals who score low in Conscientiousness tend to be fastidious, compulsively neat, and exhibit workaholic behaviors (Costa & McCrae, 1992c). Originally derived from the vast array of trait terms used in natural languages, these five factors appear to have considerable generality (Loehlin, McCrae, Costa, & John, 1998).

The FFM model of personality is thought to account for most of the common variance in virtually all personality traits. Costa, McCrae, and Dye (1991) reported that the NEO Personality Inventory is intended to operationalize the FFM of personality, both at the level of broad factors or domains and at the level of more specific traits or facets of each domain. Because the FFM is assumed to be comprehensive, it provides a basis for a systematic study of personality and affect (McCrae & Costa, 1997).

Numerous studies relate the FFM to career-related concepts. For example, Tokar and Fischer (1998) examined the relationships between extraversion and sociability and between openness and conformity. Results indicated both openness and extraversion were strong predictors of the data/ideas dimension. Further, openness was a strong predictor of the things/people dimension for men. As a result of the strong results from this study, Tokar and Fischer (1998) "encourage practitioners to continue taking an integrative approach to assessment, combining client information from a variety of domains (e.g., personality, interests, abilities)" (p. 256).

Roepke, McAdams, Lindamer, Patterson, and Jeste (2001) compared NEO-PI-R profiles of middle-aged/young-old and old-old normal subjects. Results showed similarity in profile patterns with the old-old group having lower Extraversion scores supporting the consistency of personality across time. "This would indicate predictability and a basis for prevention and
intervention, considering factors such as treatment adherence and therapeutic outcome" (Roepke et al., 2001, p. 163).

Paunonen and Ashton (2001) studied the relationships between two of the factors of the FFM (Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience) with two narrow personality trait measures (achievement motivation and intellectual curiosity) in relation to academic achievement. "The results of this study suggest that academic performance can be better predicted by narrow personality traits such as achievement motivation and intellectual curiosity than by broad Big Five personality factors such as Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience, even though the factors subsume the traits" (Paunonen & Ashton, 2001, p. 84). Overall, this study suggests that while researchers should not discard information provided by the FFM it would be prudent to include information gained from the facet level.

The Five-Factor Model of Personality Profiles

Advocates of the five-factor model of personality (FFM) "argue that nearly all the constructs measured by personality scales and inventories can be interpreted as aspects of one or more of the five factors of Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness (O), Agreeableness (A), or Conscientiousness (C). By selecting scales to measure each of these factors, the clinician can obtain a full portrait of the client at a global level" (Costa, 1991, p. 394). This portrait can be used to diagnose, select treatment, anticipate outcomes, and to identify strengths. "The five NEO-PI-R domain scores quickly sketch the outlines of the client's personality; facet scales fill in the details" (Costa & McCrae, 1995, p.47).

A study by Scandell, Wlazeleki, and Scandell (1997) examined the relationship between personality and theoretical orientation of counselors from the standpoint of the FFM. Results indicated the following significant relationships: Cognitive orientation and the Agreeableness
Personality Differences (r = .42, p < .01), Straightforwardness Facet (r = .35, p < .05), and the Altruism Facet (r = .37, p < .05); Humanistic orientation and the Openness Domain (r = .31, p < .05), Fantasy Facet (r = .38, p < .05), and Action Facet (r = .32, p < .05); and the Gestalt orientation and the Openness Domain (r = .34, p < .05) and Fantasy Facet (r = .36, p < .05) (Scandell et al., 1997).

Personality and the Supervisory Relationship

Resnick and Estrup (2000) examined the personality functioning of the counselor, supervisor, and client, and the relationships between the client, counselor, and supervisor from a Gestalt perspective. They stated, “It is at times necessary and relevant for the supervisor and therapist to examine, collaboratively, the therapist’s affective responses to the client and to identify relevant psychological issues that are interfering in the productive work with the client” (p. 128-129). The supervisor may use educational methods to help reduce anxiety in the supervisee or open-ended questioning to encourage creativity and thinking (Resnick & Estrup, 2000). Bandel (1969) reported on problems in supervision of counselors related to personality differences found in the literature. For example, Malcolm (1968) recommends that if supervisors and supervisees standardize their terminology it will help to bridge the gap between their differences. Blocher (1983) stated that “The supervisory relationship is by its nature one in which the counselor begins, at least, by feeling inadequate and vulnerable” (p. 30). The ideal supervisor-supervisee relationship includes trust, respect, and concern. The supervisor, under process goals of developmental supervision, must address the relationship and communication conditions of the supervisor-supervisee relationship to help the supervisee with these feelings. White and Queener (2003) explored the relationship between supervisor and supervisee characteristics and the supervisory working alliance. Results from 67 supervisor-supervisee dyads suggested ‘supervisees’ attachments and social provisions explained, in part, supervisees’
and supervisors’ perceptions of the working alliance” (p. 213). For the purposes of this investigation, the results of the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992a) will be used as a framework for identifying personality differences between novice and experienced counselors and how these differences can be address in the supervisory relationship.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Sixty-nine ($N = 69$) participants were recruited on a voluntary basis from Arkansas, Colorado, North Carolina, and Ohio from the general community. Each participant was administered the NEO PI-R and general demographic data was collected. Standardized written instructions were provided. Consent forms were collected and kept separate to ensure anonymity of the information. Only results of those participants who completed the NEO PI-R in its entirety were utilized.

The 69 participants were categorized as to whether they were novice counselors (i.e., licensed at the entry-level) or experienced counselors (i.e., licensed at the advanced level). Forty-eight (48%) of the participants were identified as novice counselors and 52% of the participants were identified as experienced counselors (see Table 1 for a summary of demographic descriptive statistics).

Instrument

The Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO PI-R) was developed by Costa and McCrae (Costa & McCrae, 1992a) to operationalize the FFM of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1997). The inventory consists of five domains or factors, Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C) and 36 facets of which six facets relate to a respective domain or factor. The facets relating to Neuroticism include Anxiety,
Angry Hostility, Depression, Self-Consciousness, Impulsivity, and Vulnerability. The facets relating to Extraversion include Warmth, Gregariousness, Assertiveness, Activity, Excitement-Seeking, and Positive Emotions. The facets relating to Openness include Fantasy, Aesthetics, Feelings, Actions, Ideas, and Values. The facets relating to Agreeableness include Trust, Straightforwardness, Altruism, Compliance, Modesty, and Tender-Mindedness. Finally, the facets relating to Conscientiousness include Competence, Order, Dutifulness, Achievement Striving, Self-Discipline, and Deliberation.

There are 240 items on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The nature of the NEO-PI-R is to obtain a detailed assessment of normal personality. It can be administered to individuals or groups. This test was designed for college students and other adults in the normal population. The population samples included 1,000 subjects (500 males, 500 females) stratified to match the 1995 Census projections for age, gender, and race (Costa & McCrae, 1992c). Raw scores are converted to standard scores (T-scores) with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10. Scores are divided into the average range (T = 45 to 55), high range (T = 56 to 65), low range (T = 35 to 44), very high range (T ≥ 66) and very low range (T ≤ 34) (Costa & McCrae, 1992c).

According to Costa and McCrae (1992c), internal consistency reliability coefficients for the domain or factor scales range from .86 to .95. Internal consistency reliability coefficients for the facet scales range from .56 to .90. No information is available at present for the long-term stability or test-retest reliabilities of the current version of this test. Face validity appears high as the questions appear to be representative of personality characteristics and are descriptive adjectives. Content validity is addressed by identifying six distinct facets to sample each factor and by selecting nonredundant items to measure each facet.
McCrae and Costa (1997) conducted two analyses to examine the discriminant validity of thirty facet scales from the NEO PI-R. Principle component analyses were performed using a varimax-rotated five-factor solution to compare self-reports, peer ratings, and spouse reports on the NEO-PI-R. In addition, correlations between the NEO-PI-R and the Adjective Check List (ACL; Gough & Heilbrun, 1983) were calculated. The results indicated a strong correlation between self-reports and peer ratings and even stronger correlation between self-reports and spouse ratings on the NEO-PI-R. Additionally, the correlations between the NEO-PI-R facet scales and the ACL were all significant. This data, according to McCrae and Costa (1992c) indicates evidence for convergent and discriminant validity. According to the reviews by Botwin (1995) and Juni (1995) the NEO PI-R has established reliability at .86 to .95 for the factor level.

Results

Means and standard deviations were calculated for the categories (all participants, novice counselors, and experienced counselors) for the factor scores and the facet scores on the NEO PI-R. The majority of the results indicate the mean T-scores for the counseling profession fall in the average range of the NEO PI-R with the exception of the Openness factor and the facets of Openness to Fantasy, Openness to Feelings, Openness to Ideas, and Openness to Values falling in the high range.

An examination of the differences between the converted scores of novice counselors and experienced counselors was conducted to assess if there are significantly different NEO PI-R profiles between each category. Multivariate analyses of the scores on the NEO PI-R factors and facets were used to test the null hypothesis that no difference exists in the population between categories. An alpha level of .05 was used for the multivariate analysis. Univariate analyses of the scores on each of the factors and facets of the NEO PI-R were used to identify if significant
differences exist between categories and a post hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD procedure 
(Tukey a) was used to identify where significant differences exist. See Table 2 for a summary of
descriptive and inferential statistics.

The multivariate F was not significant for the NEO PI-R factors of Neuroticism, 
Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness $F(5,63) = 1.31, p = .27, \Lambda = .91$.
Univariate analyses identified significant differences among the categories for Openness $F(1,67) = 5.07, p = .03$. The post hoc analyses identified a significant difference between the categories 
for Openness with experienced counselors having significantly higher scores on Openness than 
novice counselors (difference between means = 4.9).

The multivariate F was not significant for the NEO PI-R facets associated with 
Neuroticism (Anxiety, Angry Hostility, Depression, Self-Consciousness, Impulsiveness, and 
Vulnerability) $F(6,62) = 2.47, p = .11, \Lambda = .85$. Univariate analyses identified significant 
differences among the categories for Vulnerability $F(1,67) = 5.88, p = .02$. The post hoc analyses 
identified a significant differences between categories for Vulnerability with novice counselors 
having significantly higher scores on Vulnerability than experienced counselors (difference 
between means = 5.2).

The multivariate F was not significant for the NEO PI-R facets associated with 
Extraversion (Warmth, Gregariousness, Assertiveness, Activity, Excitement-Seeking, and 
Positive Emotions) $F(6,62) = 0.61, p = .72, \Lambda = .94$. Univariate analyses did not identify 
significant differences among the categories for Warmth, Assertiveness, Activity, Excitement-
Seeking, or Positive Emotions.

The multivariate F was not significant for the NEO PI-R facets associated with Openness 
(Fantasy, Aesthetics, Feelings, Actions, Ideas, and Values) $F(6,62) = 1.90, p < .09, \Lambda = .84$. 
Univariate analyses identified a significant difference among the categories for Feelings $F(1,67) = 6.44, p < .01$. The post hoc analyses identified a significant differences between categories for Feelings with novice counselors having significantly lower scores on Vulnerability than experienced counselors (difference between means = 4.9).

The multivariate F was not significant for the NEO PI-R facets associated with Agreeableness (Trust, Straightforwardness, Altruism, Compliance, Modesty, and Tender-Mindedness) $F(6,62) = 1.52, p = .001, \Lambda = .87$. Univariate analyses identified significant differences among the categories for Trust $F(1,67) = 5.20, p = .02$. The post hoc analyses identified a significant difference between categories for Trust with novice counselors having significantly lower scores on Trust than experienced counselors (difference between means = 4.8).

Finally, the multivariate F was not significant for the NEO PI-R facets associated with Conscientiousness (Competence, Order, Dutifulness, Achievement Striving, Self-Discipline, and Deliberation) $F(6,62) = 0.67, p = .67, \Lambda = .94$. Univariate analyses did not identify significant differences among the categories for Competence, Order, Dutifulness, Achievement Striving, Self-Discipline, and Deliberation.

Discussion

Results indicate no overall significant difference in the factors of Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. However, univariate results indicate a significant difference between experienced counselors and novice counselors in the factor of Openness. The experienced counselor category resulted in a significantly higher mean score in Openness than the novice counselor category. This result suggests that novice counselors may have more difficulty with new experiences than experienced counselors.
Results indicate no overall significant difference in Anxiety, Angry Hostility, Depression, Self-Consciousness, Impulsiveness, and Vulnerability. However, results indicate a significant difference between experienced counselors and novice counselors in the facet of Vulnerability. The novice counselor category resulted in a significantly higher mean score in Vulnerability than the experienced counselor category. This result suggests that novice counselors may feel more helpless than experienced counselors in dealing with counseling situations.

Results indicate no overall significant difference between novice and experienced counselors in the facets of Warmth, Gregariousness, Assertiveness, Activity, Excitement-Seeking, and Positive Emotions. This result indicates that novice counselors and experienced counselors have similar characteristics of interpersonal intimacy, a preference for other people’s company, and the experience of positive emotions such as happiness, love, joy, and excitement.

Results indicate no overall significant difference in the facets of Fantasy, Aesthetics, Feelings, Actions, Ideas, and Values. However, results indicate a significant difference between experienced counselors and novice counselors in the facet of Feelings. The experienced counselor category resulted in a significantly higher mean score in Feelings than the novice counselor category. This result suggests that novice counselors may have more difficulty with receptivity to their own inner feelings and emotions or have less differentiated emotional states than experienced counselors.

Results indicate no overall significant difference in Trust, Straightforwardness, Altruism, Compliance, Modesty, and Tender-Mindedness. However, results indicate a significant difference between experienced counselors and novice counselors in the facet of Trust. The novice counselor category resulted in a significantly lower mean score in Trust than the
experienced counselor category. This result suggests that novice counselors may tend to be more distrustful or skeptical than experienced counselors.

Results indicate no overall significant difference in Competence, Order, Dutifulness, Achievement Striving, and Self-Discipline. Further results indicate no significant differences between novice and experienced counselors in the facets of Competence, Order, Dutifulness, Achievement Striving, Self-Discipline. The results suggest that novice and experienced counselors have similar characteristics of sensibility, organization, devotion, purposefulness, motivation, and deliberation.

Implications for the Counseling Supervisory Relationship

Promoting the optimal atmosphere between the supervisor and the supervisee is key in the supervisory relationship. While this task can be daunting, understanding fundamental characterological differences between the supervisor and supervisee will help lead to a productive supervisory relationship. The results of this study show that there are significant differences between novice and experienced counselors in Openness, Vulnerability, Feelings, and Trust. As novice counselors and supervisees develop over time some of these differences may lessen. The experienced counselor and supervisor, however, are encouraged to be aware that these differences may exist initially. Further, different supervisees may need different approaches to increase their levels of Openness, Feelings, and Trust, and reduce their level of Vulnerability. With this awareness, the supervisor may adjust their model of supervision to better address the needs of their supervisee, establish a more congruent relationship, and increase the working alliance between the supervisor and supervisee.

Supervision is a collaborative endeavor and should be an authentic encounter. To help facilitate mutual exploration and learning in the supervisee the supervisor is encouraged to
address but not “treat” these personality differences. For example, the supervisor may use support and encouragement in order to encourage the supervisee to try new interventions, thereby increasing their level of Openness. The supervisor may use clarification or interpretation to help the supervisee access unconscious feelings or to increase receptivity to their own emotions, thereby increasing their level of Feelings. The supervisor may use several examples of modeling (e.g., self-disclosure, acceptance), thereby increasing the supervisee’s level of Trust. Finally, the supervisor may use educational instruction to help the supervisee feel more empowered and focused, thereby reducing their level of Vulnerability.

In conclusion, there are both theoretical and practical implications of this project. First, most theoretical models of supervision do not take into account personality differences between the supervisor and supervisee. If taken into account, these differences may help explain, in part, some of the dynamics of the supervisory relationship. On a practical level, supervisors are encouraged to be sensitive to the individual personality differences between themselves and their supervisees. Such sensitivity will aid the development of the supervisory relationship and working alliance.
References


Table 1

*Summary of Participant Demographic Descriptive Statistics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variable</th>
<th>All Participants ((N = 69))</th>
<th>Novice Counselors ((N = 33))</th>
<th>Experienced Counselors ((N = 36))</th>
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<td>Age Range</td>
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<td>24 - 54</td>
<td>24 - 63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Mean</td>
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<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age SD</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>21 (30%)</td>
<td>10 (30%)</td>
<td>11 (31%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>48 (70%)</td>
<td>23 (70%)</td>
<td>25 (69%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>61 (90%)</td>
<td>30 (91%)</td>
<td>31 (89%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Caucasian</td>
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<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td>4 (11%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Master Degree</td>
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<td>33 (100%)</td>
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<td>Doctoral Degree</td>
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<td>0 (0%)</td>
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</table>

Note: Numbers may not add to \(N\) due to missing data.
Table 2

Descriptive and Inferential Statistics for NEO PI-R Factors and Facets by Category

<table>
<thead>
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<th>NEO PI-R Factors and Facets</th>
<th>All Participants</th>
<th>Novice Counselors</th>
<th>Experienced Counselors</th>
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<th>SD</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<th>SD</th>
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Note: N = 69. F tests (univariate analyses) for the NEO PI-R factors and facets were based on df = 1,67. *Significant model. Values with subscripts indicate significant within-row differences between novice and experienced counselor categories (Tukey post hoc comparisons).