



Emotional reactions of students in field education: An exploratory study

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This fact sheet summarizes an exploratory study on the emotional reactions of social work students to their experiences in the field practicum. The purpose of the study was to elucidate the factors and dynamics associated with students' emotional responses to their field experiences. Twelve recent MSW graduates from two Canadian graduate social work programs participated in semi-structured one and a half hour interviews focused on participants' practice experiences, with results indicating strong reactions. This summary provides field instructors with study findings related to: the impact of emotionally charged events in field practice, the student-field instructor relationship, the organizational environment of the practicum, and problem-solving supports for students.

Context for the Study

During practicum students learn to integrate theory and practice, gain mastery of intervention skills, and learn how to handle ethically challenging situations. Polson and Nida (1998) caution however, that disciplines, such as social work, with graduate programs that require both classroom and field training can be stressful. The social work educational experience can be fraught with role ambiguity, conflict, stress and strain, brought on by students' own expectations of themselves, their perceptions of faculty and school expectations, field instruction demands, and often conflicting familial roles and work schedules (Kamya, 2000). Social work students in field placements may have not yet acquired mature coping strategies to handle client situations which evoke strong emotions, and may have yet to learn how to negotiate organizational demands which create stress. Concerns and questions surround the emotional reactions of social work students to their experiences in field placement.

Summary of Findings

Subjective Definitions of Emotionally Charged Events

Analysis of the interviews with recent MSW graduates revealed great variation in the identification and definition of emotionally charged events. Three distinct categories were described as precipitating strong emotional reactions: (i) a catastrophic event; (ii) organizational and professional issues; and (iii) intra/interpersonal issues. Only one participant in the study

described a catastrophic event during practicum, a client suicide. The category of organizational/professional issues included matters such as student experiences of marginalization, fear for personal safety, observing unethical staff behaviour, and stressful interactions with field instructors. Lastly, the category of intra / interpersonal events referred to stressors with clients or individual emotional triggers, such as working with child clients which triggered childhood memories. All events were perceived as intense by the participants, impacting both their personal lives and experience of the field setting.

The Student-Field Instructor Relationship

The student-field instructor relationship emerged as both a crucial protective factor and a crucial risk factor. Positive student-field instructor relationships enabled the participants to weather challenging situations and setbacks that arose in the practicum. Conversely, negative student-field instructor relationships were described as overwhelming and the relationship itself sometimes became a stressor for participants. Charged terms were commonly used to describe the participants' relationship with the field instructors. A striking finding was that descriptions were either positive and glowing or highly negative. Strong personal reactions developed early in the relationship with comments revealing an immediate comfort or disconnect.

The participants were acutely aware of the power dynamic regardless of the strength of the student-instructor relationship. Field instructors perform student evaluations and may be called upon as references for future employment. Some participants expressed vulnerability in relationships with field instructors that did not feel solid and expressed concern about the possibility of negative references impeding career options. In this small sample there were a few participants who discussed instructors who appeared to misuse power, were burdened by student supervision, focused on student weaknesses without acknowledging strengths, or crossed professional boundaries. In contrast, many respondents reflected on instructors who mentored them by being welcoming and accessible, celebrated strengths, provided constructive feedback, and normalized students' anxieties. Such behaviour provided emotional support which could mitigate the impact of negative events in the field practicum.

Organizational Environment

The organizational atmosphere was another factor that could potentially either mitigate or exacerbate student distress. Positive relationships with field instructors served to protect students from tense issues within organizations. Those participants who experienced the combination of a stressful relationship with their instructor and a negative organizational environment reported these combined factors had a strong impact on their learning and on their general well-being.

Seeking Problem-Solving Assistance and Support

When students experienced upsetting emotional reactions, they most commonly turned to persons they felt they could trust. Where there existed a safe and secure relationship with a field instructor, course instructor, or agency staff member, students felt capable of disclosing their reactions to emotionally charged events. Some participants were reluctant to discuss their

concerns with designated faculty advisors or their field liaison and did so only if they perceived no other options. Seeking help from field liaisons was fraught with anticipated difficulties as participants rarely described meaningful and trusting relationships with their liaison. They feared they would not be supported, that they would be judged, and that disclosing any vulnerability could jeopardize their future careers. Although faculty and field liaisons demonstrated intentions of being available and helpful to students, student perceptions of the power imbalance influenced their willingness to express vulnerabilities. Rather, friends, family, and fellow students tended to be considered the source of support and advice for students with respect to field placement concerns.

Implications for Practice

Student ability to manage stress in the field placement appears to be due to a number of factors.

- It is recognized that when subjective experiences are not acknowledged or validated, the impact on the individual can be quite devastating (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992).
- Emotionally upsetting experiences can be conceptualized as a product of interrelated factors including:
 - the actual practice event and its subjective meaning to the student
 - the nature of the student and the field instructor relationship
 - the student's comfort in the organization
- The student-field instructor relationship served as either a risk or protective factor:
 - when the experience of negative field events was met with warm, supportive and interested field instructors, students were better able to move ahead in their learning process
 - the presence of a caring field instructor appeared to soften or diminish the student's discomfort and distress about placement concerns
 - in the context of a safe, secure relationship with an instructor students were found to disclose vulnerabilities
 - students did not seek out field instructors who were perceived as unavailable or uninterested in teaching
 - the absence of a potentially helpful field instructor appeared to exacerbate students' negative reactions to placement concerns
- The organizational context of the practicum can mitigate or exacerbate student distress:
 - agency policies, observations of informal styles of communication, and staff tensions all had the potential to intensely affect the participants
 - the organizational atmosphere interacted in a synergistic manner with the effect of the student-field instructor relationship whereby the positive experience of one lessened the negative impact of the other
 - when both the relationship with the field instructor and the environmental context were stressful, the total experience was perceived as highly negative.

This fact sheet is a summary of the following article:

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