

PART II: Group Supervision in Field Education: Field Instructors' Perceptions*

Authors: Bogo, M., Globerman, J., and Sussman, T.

Editor of Fact Sheet: Lambert, L.

Funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Brief Summary of the Research Study

This aspect of the qualitative exploratory study reports on the experiences of five field instructors who offered group supervision to twenty social work students. The study identified a number of related factors that affect the creation of a productive learning environment including: 1) External barriers to establishing trust and safety in the group such as students' previous histories with each other 2) Managing difficult group member behaviours such as the "non-reflective students", "consultant, not learner" and those students who cannot take risks 3) Balancing the intersection of individual supervision and group supervision.

The Importance of Trust and Safety in Group Supervision

Most supervisors in this study recognized that the educational benefits of group supervision could only be realized when students established the trust and safety they needed to learn from the group experience.

Strategies supervisors used to encourage trust and safety within the group included:

Allying equally with individual students, providing sensitive feedback in the group forum, highlighting their own clinical errors and validating different perspectives and approaches.

Obstacles to Establishing Trust and Safety in Group Supervision

All supervisors reported that some of their learning groups were more cohesive than others. Supervisors cited both external and internal obstacles to facilitating successful group cohesion.

External barriers (i.e., factors beyond the supervisor's control): Students entering placements at different times of the academic year, students entering placements with differing levels of experience and education, and students entering group supervision from different universities with different approaches to social work practice.

Internal barriers: The internal factors which supervisors cited as obstacles to the group process reflected group composition and members' behaviour.

a) "Consultant" Versus "Learner": Supervisors described students who could not see themselves as a group learner as always "one upping" other students, never listening, always giving an answer, or always providing a better approach. Effective strategies for managing consultant rather than learner behaviours were not identified by any supervisors.

b) Students Who Were Not Risk Takers:

Supervisors reported that students who continued to present their "stellar cases" and who did not reflect upon their own practice in group supervision did not tend to bond with the group.

Strategies supervisors used to promote group cohesion included:

encouraging discussion of differing perspectives, validating different approaches and stages of learning and re-working formative stages of group process.

When Individual and Group Supervision Intersect

All supervisors believed that group supervision could never completely replace individual supervision. Supervisors realized that students were more inclined to reveal vulnerabilities in individual supervision and hence felt it was necessary to offer this opportunity to their students. All supervisors felt the most appropriate approach to addressing sensitive issues was to offer more intensive individual meetings.

Individual Supervision as a Forum to Discuss Group Supervision Struggles

All supervisors faced situations wherein they were provided with information related to group supervision in the context of individual supervision. Supervisors differed in their opinions regarding the use of the group supervision to facilitate group process.

a) Concerns Related to Colleagues' Practice:

One supervisor recounted a time where two students approached her about their concerns regarding the ethical practice of another student. The supervisor dealt with the situation by addressing the ethical issue as a subject matter for group supervision and mandating all students to bring up their struggles with the issue. She said she now tried to preempt this type of situation by telling students at the outset that they should not tell her things about one another that they would not share directly with one another.

b) Frustrations Regarding Inter-Student Communication:

Some students used individual supervision to discuss their negative reactions to other students in the group. In these instances, supervisors tried to help students reflect upon how they could continue to work with these individuals or how they could bring these struggles back to the group.

c) Students' Sense of Incompetence in Relation to Peers:

In some cases students were defensive and non-reflective in group supervision because they perceived themselves as less competent than their colleagues. Supervisors spent a great deal of time working with struggling students individually. However, they did not address the negative group dynamics created by their behaviour in group supervision. Consequently, other students began to "shut down," take less risks and withdraw from the process altogether.

Similarities and Difference Between Students' and Field Instructors' Views of Group Supervision

Similarities

- Students and supervisors recognized that safety and trust were imperative for a cohesive student learning group to develop.
- Students and supervisors identified student behaviours that prevented individuals from participating as learners as the most significant barrier to creating group cohesion.
- Students and supervisors recognized that group composition could pose a threat to group cohesion.

Differences

- Supervisors did not think students' previous histories with each other would be sufficiently damaging to group dynamics to threaten student learning. Students however revealed that past histories and different competency levels between group members seriously impeded their learning experience.

- Supervisors did not recognize the extent to which negative group dynamics could be damaging to student learning. In students' interviews they reported often feeling "angry", "vulnerable" and "silenced" by their student colleagues.

Implications for Field Instruction

Greater than the desire for reflection and processing of experiences, the students in this study illuminated the profound experience of the "self" when undertaking learning to practice social work. This finding is also consistent with discussions in the literature about the challenges to self-esteem and self-concept in field learning (2). The group supervision experiences identified the importance of risking and exposing themselves to scrutiny, and the feelings of vulnerability this encompasses. Where possible it seems important for field instructors to consider different competencies, learning needs, learning styles and previous histories between students before deciding to offer group supervision to a particular group of students.

Useful Practices for Field Instructors Facilitating Group Supervision:

Beginning Phase

- **Orient students to the framework for teaching and learning** processes in the field.
- Explicitly discuss the **rationale and goals** for group supervision so that students can appreciate what benefits to expect from the process.
- Clarify the **purposes of group supervision** such as educational, administrative and informational.
- Work with students to identify **group norms** which they need to enable safety and **trust** to develop including clear expectations about how the group will operate and the expected behaviours of group members.
- Provide basic operational details about group supervision for example how much time will be allotted for each student and how feedback will be given.
- Explicitly **teach students skills for group membership** especially when students monopolize time and give inappropriate feedback.
- **Teach students how to give constructive feedback, and summarize case material** early on in the group. Manage the implementation of these skills throughout the course of the group to help students improve upon their participation in group supervision.
- Help establish **respectful alliances** among group members.

Middle Phase

Structure

- Provide a **clear structure** for educational activities.
- Allow students to **take turns** in presenting their opinions and perspectives.
- Hold **regular discussions about what is working and what isn't working** in the group process.
- Provide guidance and time for **critical reflection on practice** and **integrating theory and practice** in each session.

Process

- Encourage **open communication about current and immediate issues** among group members such as group tensions.
- **Actively intervene** to ensure group norms are respected.
- Provide leadership through **modeling** and identifying facilitative group member behaviours, such as **risk taking** and providing **constructive feedback**.
- Facilitate **focused discussion** and **feedback**.
- Provide **supportive** and **helpful** feedback.
- Ensure that **feedback about practice is balanced, focused, and proposes possible next steps**.
- Encourage students to **respond to each other's concerns in a positive manner**.
- If soliciting ongoing group feedback is a challenge, ask direct questions regarding students' experiences such as **"sometimes students can feel overly criticized in group supervision are any of you having that experience in this group?"** This "targeted" feedback may encourage more group level disclosure because it normalizes student concerns.
- When possible, use explanations that help students link conceptual knowledge to real situations.

*This fact sheet is a summary of the following articles:

Bogo, M., Globerman, J., & Sussman, T. (2004). Field instructor competence in group supervision: Students' views. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 24(1/2), 199-216.

Bogo, M., Globerman, J., & Sussman, T. (2004). The field instructor as group worker: Managing trust and competition in group supervision. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 40 (1), 13-26.

Sussman, T., Bogo, M., & Globerman, J. (2007). Field instructor competence in group supervision: Establishing trust through managing group dynamics. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 26(1/2), 61-80.

References

- 1 Abels, P. (1977). Group supervision of students and staff. In F.W. Kaslow (Ed.), *Supervision, consultation, and staff training in the helping professionals* (pp. 175-198). San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.
- 2 Bogo, M., & Vayda, E. (1998). *The practice of field instruction in social work: Theory and process* (2nd ed.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- 3 Cowan, B., Dastyk, R., & Wickham, E.R. (1972). Group supervision as a teaching/learning modality in social work. *The Social Worker/Le Travailleur Social*, 40(4), 256-261.
- 4 Geller, C. (1994). Group supervision as a vehicle for teaching group work to students: Field instruction in a senior center. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 12(1), 199-214.
- 5 Mayers, F. (1970). Differential use of group teaching in first year field work. *Social Service Review*, 44(1), 63-70.
- 6 Tebb, S., Manning, D.W., & Klaumann, T.K. (1996). A renaissance of group supervision. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 14(2), 39-51.
- 7 Wayne, J., & Cohen, C. (2001). *Group work education in the field*. Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education.

RIEBSW information sheets are produced and distributed by the Research Institute for Evidence-Based Social Work in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto to provide timely access to evidence-based research.

This information sheet can be downloaded from:
www.socialwork.utoronto.ca/research/initiatives/competency/building.htm