

PART I: Group Supervision in Field Education: MSW Students' Perceptions*

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Brief Summary of the Research Study

This qualitative interview study explored the experiences of 18 MSW students and 5 field instructors who participated in group supervision as the primary method of field instruction. The purpose of the study was to contribute to the field's understanding of the potential contributions of group supervision to enhanced field learning and determine the characteristics of an effective social work group supervision model. The competence of the supervisor to provide leadership and structure to process challenging group dynamics in an available and supportive manner were the factors that emerged as essential for student learning in group supervision. In fact, the group process may impede learning and lead students to feel more anxious and self-conscious if group dynamics are not skillfully addressed.

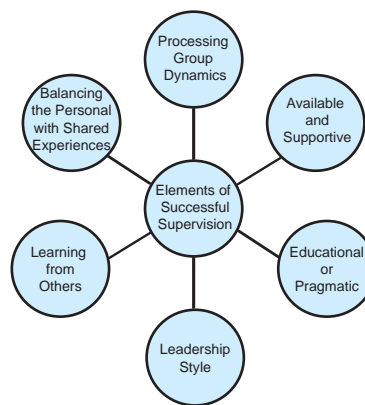
What is Group Supervision?

Group supervision has been used for decades in social work education. It consists of small groups of students who meet with one supervisor on a regular basis. Practitioners propose that group supervision provides opportunities for students to present examples of their practice and through discussion learn from exposure to a wide range of ideas and perspectives offered by their supervisory and peers (1; 3; 5). Through peer interaction and role play, students can develop a more accurate self-appraisal of their ability and learn about group process and group dynamics (5; 6; 7).

Why use Group Supervision?

The literature recommends group supervision as an efficient method for field education especially in the context of reduced agency resources for field instruction. While the conceptual and practice literature includes prescriptions and principles for group supervision, there is a dearth of empirical studies that describe effective strategies in action.

Elements Identified by Students as Being Necessary for Successful Group Supervision



Available and Supportive

Students reported that having a supervisor who was available and supportive was a crucial element leading to the perception of a positive practicum experience.

Available: Supervisors were described as available when they offered regular scheduled supervision which was flexible in duration and void of interruptions.

Supportive: Students experienced supervisors as supportive when they felt respected, when the supervisor did not minimize their opinions and when the supervisor allowed them the freedom to make mistakes.

Rationale for Group Supervision: Educational or Pragmatic?

Most of the students reported not receiving an explanation from their field instructor about the rationale for group supervision as the primary method of supervision. Without an explanation, many students assumed that group supervision was used for pragmatic reasons (e.g., to save time) and as such described feeling short-changed and silenced. Students valued instructors who checked with them about whether they were agreeable to having group supervision, and were available for individual input as needed.

Students resented field instructors who used group supervision primarily for administrative purposes, putting students' educational needs secondary.

Leadership Style

Since the medium of supervision is the group, the field instructor's competence in working with groups was very important. Students valued instructors who provided orientation to group supervision, created a "safe environment" for open discussion ("safe environment" in this study meant a place where students did not feel embarrassed, shamed or outdone), provided structure so that content and process issues could be addressed, and were flexible and responsive to students needs.

Modelling: Supervisors who modeled the expected behaviour of a group member were perceived as facilitating student learning through teaching students how to participate in group supervision. Students identified two important behaviours: **risk taking** and providing **well-framed feedback**.

"(My supervisor) would frame things in a way that would focus on my strength and wouldn't focus on my mistakes."

Promoting Group Norms: Modelling group behaviour was not sufficient to establish openness and trust. Students wanted their supervisors to intervene when group members' behaviours did not support the norms of risk taking and providing constructive feedback. Safety was jeopardized when feedback from other students was seen as "patronizing." If the supervisor did not initiate discussion to rectify hurtful student feedback, other students felt "**unsafe**" and "**shutdown**."

Facilitating Group Interaction: Students stated that they were very aware of the way their supervisors saw them in the group and they were conscious of being evaluated. In several groups, students spoke about the supervisor having "**favourites**" and the students struggling to be the "**favoured**."

Learning from Others

The **key strength and benefit of group supervision** reported by both students and field instructors was the opportunity to learn from others. In group supervision in this study, the methods for sharing opinions, information and ideas took a number of forms, primarily the sharing of cases or in the community practice settings, the sharing of project progress. The

opportunity for reflection about issues/challenges was very important for students to consider hearing others' opinions, perspectives and experiences as valuable. When there was little time for reflection and processing the information or linking theory and practice, students described feeling "**dissatisfied**", "**bored**", and "**ambivalent**" about the extent of learning.

Balancing the Personal with Shared Experiences in a Public Place

Field instructors who shared their expertise by giving their opinions and also asked questions that involved all students were seen as facilitating group supervision. When students were asked to explore their personal feelings while other group members remained silent observers, it felt like:

Group supervision was little more than "individual supervision with an audience."

Students stated that they became uncomfortable when field instructors discussed tension in the group with a subset of members but avoided giving feedback to the entire group. Students also reported that they felt unsettled when supervisors shared their own frustrations about clients, their conflicts with staff or their personal issues.

Field Instructor Feedback to Students:

Students had interesting and somewhat contradictory views about supervisors' feedback given in the group. While they wanted the instructor to give feedback, they described becoming "**uncomfortable when the feedback was negative**." They were very aware of the manner in which negative feedback was given and the impact on the student receiving it. Students spoke about the benefits of feedback from their peers as relative: it was useful when processed by the field instructor; it was less than satisfactory when it was left hanging. When sharing became a forum for an individual's difficulties to get aired without solutions put forth that were linked to them, the group supervision environment was not experienced as supportive.

Processing Group Dynamics

Group Composition: Students came to group supervision with histories with each other that included previous placement experiences, positive and negative experiences from previous classes, and personal relationships. What was striking was that students described conflict between group members that operated at a covert level or outside of formal group supervision. They wished that the supervisor would have labeled the conflict and devised strategies to address it with the group.

Student Competencies: Students arrived in group supervision with different levels of professional competence and learning needs, expectations about the group and skills as group members. Interpersonal communication skills and styles were a source of frustration for students. Expected to work in groups without training in group work, some found that managing others' behaviours affected their ability to trust and to learn. Due to a desire to appear competent, many students did not feel comfortable exposing their vulnerabilities to the group, which produced **“covert conflict”** and a **“lack of trust.”**

*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.

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- 7 Wayne, J., & Cohen, C. (2001). *Group work education in the field*. Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education.

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