

# Combining Individual and Group Supervision in Educating for the Social Work Profession

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**ABSTRACT.** Supervision is central to the personal and professional development of a social work practitioner. This paper attempts to provide an understanding of what methods of supervision might best promote the process of learning for graduate social work students. It also describes a small qualitative study designed to explore the contributions, advantages, and limitations of a method which combines individual and group supervision for second year MSW students. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: [getinfo@haworthpressinc.com](mailto:getinfo@haworthpressinc.com) <Website: <http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]*

**KEYWORDS.** Supervision, group supervision, learning, professional development

## *INTRODUCTION*

Supervision is central to the personal and professional development of a social work practitioner (Walter & Sadtler, 1997; Jacobs, David & Meyer, 1995; Haber, 1996; Shulman, 1993; Bogo & Vayda, 1998;

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Kadushin, 1985). Yet, little information is available in the literature regarding the process of learning among graduate social work students.

Another under-studied area of investigation is understanding what methods of supervision might best promote the process of learning for graduate social work students. The study reported in this paper attempts to address both.

## ***LITERATURE REVIEW***

### ***The Evolution of Educational Supervision***

Twenty years ago Wijnberg and Schwartz (1977) published an often cited article describing “three supervisory models that have been of historical significance in the development of social work education” (p. 107). They designated these as “apprenticeship,” “growth,” and “role systems” models, and noted that the evolution and defining characteristics of each were related to the historical contexts of the periods during which they were developed.

The apprenticeship model had its origins in the earliest historical period of the social work profession. The organizational context was that of the Charity Organization Societies where supervisors provided their volunteer workers with detailed instructions about how to proceed with their cases. Typically, this took place within individual supervisory sessions with an emphasis on the detailed recording of a worker’s activity on cases. These recordings were used to examine and improve the worker’s casework skills.

The growth model evolved during the period of the profession’s development when the new psychologies of Freud, Adler, and Jung were adopted and applied to social casework’s challenge of understanding human behavior for the purpose of improving social functioning (Taft, 1950; Towle, 1954). Wijnberg and Schwartz (1997) noted that this model reflected an emphasis within social work education on the students’ personality growth in addition to their acquisition of knowledge and skills for helping.

The role systems model evolved during the 1960s and 1970s, partly in response to the Council on Social Work Education’s suggested shift in curricular emphasis “from a purely psychological thrust to a more sociological perspective, embracing social role as a linking concept . . .” (Wijnberg & Schwartz, 1977, p. 109).

Although Wijnberg and Schwartz (1977) clearly viewed the actual use of the role systems model as including aspects of both the apprenticeship and growth models, their contribution has been characterized as both a criticism (Saari, 1986) and a rejection (Bogo, 1993) of the growth model—a development that has diverted the profession's attention away from the relationship between personal development and professional development in the education of social work students.

Saari (1986) points out that the political dialectic between systemically and psychodynamically oriented social work educators during the 1970s and 1980s obscured a more fundamental question about how growth occurs within an educational process involving an adult learner (p. 64). She suggests that all learning involves an expansion of conscious awareness within the self of the learner (pp. 65 and 70). Jacobs, David and Meyer (1995) suggest that the expectations and pressures of training tend to “oppose the student social worker's established sense of identity” (p. 33). Furthermore, the professional self emerges following a considerable disruption in the student's existing ways of thinking and behaving (Jacobs, David & Meyer, 1995).

In Saari's (1986) view, the student brings to the educational process a personal self in search of a professional self. To acquire a competent professional self involves an expansion of conscious awareness that is achieved through the adaptation of the personal self to the demands of new experiences. New knowledge and skills are needed to manage these experiences in a flexible and creative, yet principled fashion (pp. 70-75). The function of supervision in the learning process is to promote the growth of conscious awareness of how the personal self is adapting so that the learner's capacity for both abstraction and creativity is enhanced (p. 75).

Bogo (1993) also focuses her attention on the subjective experiences of the learner. Following Grossman, Levine-Jordano and Shearer (1990), she states:

The nature of practicum learning is such that students are confronted with profound client situations that evoke strong personal reactions and feelings. In order to develop a professional self that is congruent with the personal self, the opportunity to reflect on and examine these reactions is necessary. (p. 27)

Both Bogo (1993) and Saari (1986) view the relationship between the supervisor and the student as providing the context for the stu-

dent's learning process. Through the repeated, shared reflection and examination of personal reactions occurring in professional contexts, the student internalizes this process and integrates it within her/his emerging professional self. In this regard, the process resembles the Dutch concept of supervision emphasizing reflection upon and integration of experiences, as described by van Kessel and Haan (1993).

### ***Modalities for Educational Supervision***

Both Waldfogel (1983) and Munson (1981) have noted that individual, or one-to-one supervision remains the most frequently used format or modality for providing supervision in agency settings. Relatively few publications address the use of the group format for providing educational supervision of students in their field practica.

Kaplan (1988) reported on a pilot project at Adelphi University School of Social Work to develop a group field instruction model. The group that she facilitated consisted of both first- and second-year MSW candidates, all of whom were assigned to different sites for their field placements. Although all four students valued the mutual aid they received from the group, they recommended greater homogeneity of such groups and longer meeting times.

Tebb, Manning, and Klaumann (1996) also reported their experience with providing group supervision for three successive groups of first-year MSW candidates, all assigned to a Department of Veteran Affairs Medical Center for their field placement. A twice weekly meeting schedule evolved in order to separate administrative issues from case processing concerns.

In discussing the strengths and limitations of group field instruction, these authors listed several strengths, including the provision of multiple sources of feedback for the student participants, the opportunity to explore and question their own values, biases, and preconceptions, and the direct experience of the risks and benefits of group process. The limitations noted included the tendency for group members to avoid giving constructive criticism to each other, the tendency of the groups to lose the focus on improving social work skills by becoming preoccupied with administrative issues, and the demands placed on the facilitator(s) to manage the group process (Tebb et al., 1996, pp. 48-9).

It is striking that there are so few reports describing or evaluating the use of groups to provide field instruction. Waldfogel (1983), Kap-

lan (1988), and Tebb et al. (1996) all reference one study reported by Sales and Navarre (1970) that compared MSW students' reactions to individual and group supervision in field instruction using the Michigan Practice Skills Assessment Instrument. As summarized by Waldfogel (1983), there were some differences between the two groups on some items. For example, students receiving individual supervision tended to score somewhat higher on items pertaining to certain practice skills while students receiving group supervision tended to score somewhat higher on items pertaining to agency practice, innovation, and identifying their own areas of competence. However, none of the differences were statistically significant.

Students in individual supervision were more satisfied with their mode in the first semester; after that, the difference decreased. The conclusion can be drawn that a mixture of modalities would be beneficial for meeting a variety of learning needs at different stages and for different material. (Waldfogel, 1983, p. 332)

What follows is a description of a small qualitative study designed to explore the relative contributions, advantages, and limitations of a combined method of individual and group supervision for second year MSW students.

## ***THE STUDY***

### ***Background and Context***

The location of the study was a center for social work education in the Northeast region of the United States which offers an accredited program of study leading to a Masters in Social Work. At the time of the study, the center was also involved in a contractual agreement with the Department of Children and Youth Services (CYS) for the purpose of re-professionalizing itself by encouraging all of its supervisory staff to obtain MSW degrees (Young, 1994).

Typically, the department would release six of its staff each year to pursue graduate study. As part of the contractual agreement, faculty provided supervision for these students' field practica, which were based in the department and referred to as worksite field practica. During the first year of this arrangement, the authors co-facilitated a two-hour supervision group every other week and, on alternate weeks,

each author provided three of the students with an hour and one-half of individual supervision. During the second year, one of the authors was on sabbatical leave, so a third member of the faculty shared the supervisory duties.

In both years the groups met seven times per semester. In the Fall semester, the first meeting was used to describe how the case material should be presented and to emphasize the importance of focusing on the presenter's interests at subsequent meetings. In the Spring semester, the last meeting was used to review and assess the experience. Thus, each of the students presented once each semester.

The format of the group meetings was the same in both years. The students rotated responsibility for presenting a case they had been assigned as part of their field practica. The faculty co-facilitators guided the group's discussion of the case material, focusing initially on the questions and concerns of the presenter. Then, the supervisors encouraged the other members of the group to identify similar concerns and questions they had with cases assigned to them. These were then discussed, but without extensive presentation of case material.

This combined model of individual and group supervision led to a pattern in which the students used their individual supervision time to discuss all of their practicum cases, selecting only one per semester for presentation in the group supervision meeting.

### *The Students*

Both years, all the students were women. They ranged in age from their late 20s to their 50s. Two-thirds were Caucasian; one third were African American. A few had had many years experience working at the department; most had worked for the department ten years or less. All had earned the respect of their administrators, having been recommended for the MSW program.

### *Methodology*

Recognizing that the authors were conducting an exploratory study and working within an ex post facto design based on only 12 subjects, they decided to pursue a qualitative approach (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). A fourth member of the faculty (who had not been involved in the supervision) conducted guided interviews with each of the students. The interview guide, developed by the authors, consisted of eight questions that asked the students to describe what they felt they

had learned through the individual and group supervision, what they liked most and least, what they got out of each that was distinctive, and how they saw the combined method influencing their work with clients or other aspects of their work within the agency. All the interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the students who were promised confidentiality. The interviews were then transcribed from the audiotapes by a transcriber/typist who had no relationship with the center or the authors and who removed, by request, any identifying information contained in the transcripts.

The authors then each read all the transcripts separately and identified the main themes that seemed to emerge and converge across respondents. Then the authors met together to compare their impressions and returned to the transcripts to locate the verbatim bases of the issue whenever either one felt that the other was over- or underemphasizing a theme. Certain quotes were selected from the transcripts that both authors felt best captured a theme expressed by a majority of the subjects.

The major limitation of this approach is that the data analysis was performed on information evaluating an experience with the combined method of supervision in which the authors had participated. Fortunately, all the students felt that they had benefitted from the experience, so the authors were not put in the position of having to defend what had been done. This, plus our curiosity as to whether it was a viable approach, served as a counterbalance to any tendencies we may have had to make it look better than it actually was.

## ***FINDINGS***

### ***Overall Learning Patterns in the Second Year***

The main theme that emerged from the student responses about what they had learned from the combined model of individual and group supervision was that it helped them make the transition from case manager to clinician. One aspect of this role shift was described as moving from a “problem solving” or “fix it” approach to a more reflective, empathic model where the student began to explore the meaning of the client’s behavior that the student was experiencing. Several students expressed the importance of just “listening” or “being” with their clients as opposed to interrogating, advising or doing for them. One student described the change in these words:

As a case manager you go in there with an agenda, you ask a lot more questions. As a clinician you need to listen more to what the client is saying.

Yet another student expressed this same theme differently by stating “learning to guide them in a direction rather than to do for them.” Several students commented upon their new capacity for following a client’s lead and taking less responsibility for the outcome of the problem.

A second theme identified by the students was a conceptual shift from a more narrow “child focused” approach to protect abused and neglected children, to a more “family focused” approach in which the student examined and intervened with client systems in a more holistic way.

This shift brought a new focus to the needs of the adult parent, respecting the adult client and honoring the struggles he or she had endured in the past. Students felt the combined model of supervision helped them to value and direct more attention to understanding the client’s history with regard to how that affected current functioning. Students began to approach assessment with an increased need to understand the adult client’s past history in order to plan for the type of support and intervention needed. Related to this theme was one of learning to respect clients for “where they are” and “work from there”-learning to be with the client and not judging or evaluating the client. Several students indicated that they were less likely to accept the assessment of other workers because these workers were often judgmental in their attitudes and assessments of families. Students were also less likely to see clients in a dichotomous way and saw increased options and alternatives regarding problem solutions and interventions.

A third theme that emerged from the data illustrated the learning that occurred for the students in the interplay between group and individual supervision. One student found the combined approach to be:

the best of all worlds . . . to be stimulated by my peers (in group supervision) and to have these two people (group leaders) push you along, be provocative in their questions, but then to have the security that the same people in individual (supervision) would provide some follow-up because there would be carry over with my field instructor . . . he could interact with my peers (in group

supervision) so that I could apply what I'm learning in other cases and get a broader view than my ability to assess it. Rather than just my six (cases), he was able to see me comment on other cases and then make some assessment or generalize about my skills and how I apply them more generally to other clients.

As a result of learning to examine cases in a more holistic way, some students began to question current agency practices regarding the placement and separation of children from families. However, this learning introduced some conflicts for the students with agency personnel. This conflict emerged most directly as a struggle for the students around how they were beginning to learn to help clients in a therapeutic way and the way that the case managers assigned to the same case were working with the clients. One student said:

My struggle is in presenting my learning experience (to others) that is suiting me to help my clients to maybe help us (caseworker and student/worker) work better together . . . they don't need to accept what I'm saying as being right, but just to be able to work more effectively with my perspective and theirs.

However, one student felt that group supervision helped her engage the case worker with the entire family rather than just with the child. This same student believed that the combined approach was actually making an impact on changing the agency's conceptualization of service delivery, by moving the agency in the direction of a family approach.

### ***Learning from Individual Supervision***

Unlike the students' varied positive and negative responses to group supervision, no student complained about any aspect of their individual supervision with the exception of the time invested in writing process recordings. The aspects of the individual supervision that they liked most included: individual attention, case-specific direction and support, being the initiator and director of their own learning process, developing their clinical skills, and acquiring the supervisor's increased understanding of the case material and the clinical process.

The levels of learning that were described by the students with respect to individual supervision were similarly varied. Some were

expressed in cognitive terms. As they discussed their clients with their individual supervisors, the students reported that they began to understand their clients and their problems from their clients' perspectives. One student described it as "connecting things" together in her "own head" as a result of talking about her interactions with her clients in supervision.

Students also recognized the powerful influence of the use of the worker's self in establishing and then making use of the relationship. They began to trust the power of the relationship to facilitate change. One student described this learning as follows:

I think for me it was probably the use of self. . . . We could do concrete work, but really being able to learn to listen to the client, listen to where they are, start out where they are and help them move on or whatever we needed to do to help them.

Learning about themselves—especially how their own reactions to clients could "block" the clinical process—was a major aspect of individual supervision.

### *Learning from Group Supervision*

The general consensus among the students interviewed was that, at least initially, there was far more ambivalence about group supervision. More than half of the respondents would have preferred having more individual supervision and less group supervision. This interest was expressed more with regard to first semester, when students felt they were less secure and needed more time to discuss cases with their individual supervisor. During the first semester one student was unable to generalize learning from other students' cases to her own. However, she reported:

the more comfortable I got with myself and my skills, the more I was able to relax and understand exactly what was happening in the group process and then integrate that into my own practice.

Even students who praised the group supervision component as having made a central contribution to their learning found it a disconcerting experience at the beginning of their second year of learning. To them it was initially "like another class" that took up valuable time that they would have preferred to spend in individual supervision.

Many felt that the case presentation format put too much emphasis on assessment at a point when they wanted to learn about how “to do” clinical interventions. A few acknowledged that presenting their own work to their peers was very anxiety provoking.

More positively, respondents reported that in group supervision learning to consult others in a simple, and exploratory way supported and encouraged them in their work with clients. One student’s comments summed it up well:

exposure to other people’s viewpoints, their skills, their values, their knowledge . . . that’s a piece you don’t just get in individual [supervision] or class.

This experience was so valuable that they extended it informally to their work together at their workplace.

Some commented that they viewed cases differently in group supervision than in individual supervision. In group, they were more likely to see a “larger view of the case” and the “long term goals.” In individual supervision, they learned (1) to apply theoretical perspectives to a specific case; (2) an orientation toward short-term goals; and (3) what to say and do in the next interview with a client.

Students also reported that the process of learning to apply theories to cases was facilitated by group supervision in a way that was not experienced in individual supervision. They reported that when another student was presenting, they felt more able to consider alternate theoretical perspectives and less responsibility to come up with the “right” one. In group, they felt more free of their own countertransference reactions whenever another student was discussing a case. In individual supervision, they were often focused on their own countertransference reactions.

Learning in group supervision evidently occurred at different levels for different members. For example, one level was described as “I was able to take pieces of somebody else’s case into what I’m doing through the exchange of information.” At another level, one student’s learning in group came from within herself. As she would listen to another student’s case presentation and the group discussion of it, she would write down her own thoughts about herself and her own cases. At still another level, several students linked their discovery of shared experiences with enhanced learning experiences. As one student put it, “I think we were able to validate one another, support one another,

and to explore perhaps more deeply a particular point of intervention.”

### *Learning from the Co-Leaders/Field Instructors*

More than half of the student respondents commented on the modeling provided by the two field instructors who demonstrated respect for one another while offering different conceptual frameworks. These differences in approaches encouraged the students to understand that there can be different, yet equally effective ways to approach a case. This enabled the students to accept the ambiguity of process work that is often necessary when working with a dynamic client system. Students were also pleased that they could receive feedback from others and to understand that “it’s okay to have a different point of view—there’s nothing that has to be done in a straight line.”

Students also noted that the respectful way in which the co-facilitators treated each other set the tone for the group. Some of them referred to this as a “modeling effect.” One student added that the ways in which the co-facilitators interacted with the students added yet another layer of learning for them. They experienced being attended to, supported, and challenged. This expanded their own capacity for thinking and talking about their work:

. . . I think the modeling was the most important thing and their shaping our questions or making us go that extra, “Well, what do you mean by that?”

Finally, the students also believed that their learning experience was enhanced by the use of university professors who teach in the clinical curriculum and are not agency employees. This process enabled the students, in a work site placement, to use their internship more as a learning experience than as a work experience.

For some respondents, the process had a more personal dimension with substantial emotional import. “I discovered that I could be myself with her and talk candidly about my fears of failing and the self-defeating efforts I had made to ward off those fears.” Another student reported that she gained a greater awareness of herself by discussing her interactions with clients. Even when she felt she had done poor work, she was able to “be vulnerable” with her supervisor and “just talk about it.”

Finally, one student’s description of her own learning process

seemed to capture the comments several others made about having a certain kind of relational experience with her supervisor that she then tried to provide to her clients:

. . . I think it was learning the value of the relationship, and . . . that somehow I was able then to take the relationship with my supervisor and see how that was important to me and how it was more than just content. I began to see the power of words, the power of thinking, the power of conceptualizing, that as you begin to trust someone, as I did, I would be able to share more. As I began to share more, I was learning more and so I began to think that relationships do make a difference, that there was power in talking.

### *DISCUSSION*

From this study we can begin to understand the process and content of student learning during their second year of professional social work education. Two main learning themes emerged from the student responses. The first is that the use of the combined methods of supervision helped them make the transition or role shift from case manager to clinician/case manager. Students learned to guide clients in their search for a solution to their problems rather than to attempt to “fix” their problems for them. However, this was not an easy learning process. Students were constantly challenged in their attempts to move forward due to their prior experience as caseworkers at a public child welfare agency. In addition, the students reported difficulty dealing with the caseworkers because it was stirring up their own conflicts regarding still wishing to “fix the client,” while trying to learn a new, more facilitative approach.

The second major learning theme was their shift from a more narrow child protective approach, to that of a more “family focused” approach in which the student examined and intervened with client systems in a more holistic way. This shift affected their approach to assessment and intervention as they learned to understand the adult client’s past history and to suspend previously held judgmental attitudes toward the parents of children who have been abused and neglected. In some ways this brought the student into conflict with the agency’s more child-protective approach and, in some instances, stu-

dents began to seriously question agency policies and practices regarding the placement and separation of children from families.

Through this study the authors discovered that MSW students placed in a child welfare setting benefit from individual and group supervision. However, the benefits from each form of supervision are different and important. The findings from this study corroborate those of Tebb, Manning and Klaumann (1996) who discovered that the strengths of group supervision include the multiple sources of feedback for the students which encourages more comprehensive and integrated learning. Our findings suggest that the group experience enhances students' ability to understand problems and their solutions from multiple perspectives—one of the important goals of social work education. Our study findings further revealed that the group learning context facilitated the students' abilities to apply more theoretical classroom learning to practice with their clients in a way that was not experienced in individual supervision. In group they felt less responsibility to provide the "right alternative," they were more free of their own countertransference reactions, and they could consider alternate theoretical perspectives.

Individual supervision was essential to the students' learning in many arenas. It is in this mode that they believed they had more of an opportunity to conceptualize the role of clinical social worker from that of case manager. Students began to understand issues more from their clients' perspectives and could take more of an enabler or facilitator role within the relationship. This observation seems to relate directly to the main "learning theme" that emerged from our findings—the ability of the student to move from a more active, "fix it" approach to a more listening, reflective position in working with clients on their problems. Within this role the students learned that the worker helps the client to become his/her own change agent. The group supervision also helped students to reconceptualize the case management role, so that the learning transition was facilitated by both modes of supervision.

Our findings corroborate those of Waldfogel (1983) who found that students in individual supervision focused more on specific practice skills. Furthermore, in individual supervision students are more comfortable "being vulnerable" and discussing work that has been difficult and/or problematic for them. Through individual supervision the students believed that they achieved a greater sense of self-awareness

and learned how their own reactions can “block” the clinical process. As Saari (1986) has pointed out, all learning involves an expansion of conscious awareness within the self of the learner. It is through this educational process that the learner acquires a competent professional self as the “personal self” adapts to the demands of new experiences.

Bogo (1993) and Grossman, Levine-Jordano and Shearer (1990) suggested that students develop a professional self that is congruent with a personal self by reflecting on and examining reactions and feelings evoked by client situations. It is also clear that the support of the peer group during group supervision helped to validate this emerging professional self. Our students found that the formation of trust in their relationships with the supervisors enabled them to realize the power and effect of the therapeutic relationship that they developed with their clients. This corroborates Bogo (1993) and Saari’s (1986) findings regarding the importance of the relationship between the supervisor and student as providing the context for the student’s learning process.

Our study findings also suggest that students felt that the “public exposure” of the group supervision experience initially amplified their anxiety, but once they achieved more confidence they enjoyed and benefitted from group supervision. Our findings corroborate those of Waldfoegel (1983) who found that students in individual supervision were more satisfied with this form during the first semester, but after that the difference decreased. One ideal way of combining individual and group supervision may be to provide more individual supervision during the first semester, with some tapering off to every other week as group supervision is introduced and provided on alternate weeks. Perhaps, in this way, students can best achieve the personal and professional growth that enhances creativity and flexibility in enabling client change.

### ***CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH***

The learning process of second year graduate social work students is one in which students expand their ways of thinking, feeling and behaving so that they can allow the client to do the work of treatment. This does involve a shift and disruption in an established sense of identity from which a new professional self emerges. A combined

method of individual and group supervision appears to facilitate this growth process.

Since these findings are based on an ex post facto design, further studies to evaluate student learning and the methods of supervision most conducive to this learning could be designed using a pre- and post-test to assess where the students are at the beginning and end of the second year of professional education.

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