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## SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISION

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### ABSTRACT

Professions historically have been practiced autonomously, but with the proliferation of professionalism as technology advances professional practice is being conducted more and more within the confines of "organizational necessities." There is an inherent conflict between professional autonomy and organizational constraints. This conflict has created a need for theoretical formulations that mediate this situational relationship. The theoretical formulations of Mead, Cooley, Linton, Thomas, Kinch, and Blumer are used to identify a system for taking account of the individual within the organization. Using the concepts of looking glass self, self-indications, role, status, definition of the situation, the social self, scripts, and actors, specific areas of concern for empirical research are identified. An interactionist perspective is used to demonstrate how the professional self-image is derived from specific others in each interactive situation, but at the same time the individual professional practitioner is an active, creative source of behavior. How the professional defines the situation and reconciles self-actions and organization expectations depends to a large extent on how the supervisory process is structured and acted out. Various theorists, their theoretical formulations and the possible research applications of each in relation to professional activity within organizations are identified.

### Introduction

Supervision in social work in its earliest stages was concerned with indirect regulation of service but not necessarily direct control of workers (Brackett, 1903). Only with the development of casework as a method did control become a direct and explicit function of supervision. The control element in supervision did not become a critical issue until professionalization of social work took place. As long as the worker developed his self-concept on the basis of "'sitting next to Nellie'" (Pettes, 1967:9), there was little problem, but as professionalization evolved and the basis of self-concept shifted (self-regulated practice), control in supervision and autonomy in practice were brought into conflict as has been demonstrated in recent articles by Mandell (1973) and

Epstein (1973). This conflict quite naturally gets acted out around professional education, and the role of education in supervision as a means of control can also be documented in the literature (Wilson and Ryland, 1949; Feldman, 1950; Berkowitz, 1952).

### Theoretical Framework

The conceptions of self as formulated by Mead, Cooley and others are well-suited to dealing with the supervisory process in social work as related to worker sense of control. "In very general terms the basic notions of the theory can be stated in one sentence: The individual's conception of himself emerges from social interaction and, in turn, guides or influences the behavior of that individual" (Manis and Meltzer, 1972:246). The importance of supervision as a source of professional identification and effectiveness has received much attention in social work education and is attested to by the heavy emphasis on strongly supervised field experience in social work education. In spite of this, little experimentation on the impact of supervision on professional effectiveness or satisfaction has been attempted (Briar and Miller, 1971: 102). The purpose of this paper is to theoretically conceptualize supervision in a manner that allows for analysis of the day to day supervisory relationship as well as analysis of the supervisory process through larger scale empirical research. It has been consistently held that supervision of workers exists to carry out effectively the purpose for which the organization exists (Hester, 1951:242) and, "The organizational structures of social work agencies reflect the dominant ideologies and structures of the larger society." resulting in the assumption "Supervision was . . . the most efficient way of training and socializing new personnel and assuring the stable continuation of organizational patterns" (Mandell, 1973:43). Given this conception of social work supervision, symbolic interaction theory lends itself to an empirical analysis of this process because "According to Mead, all group life is essentially a matter of cooperative behavior.", and ". . . in order for human beings to cooperate there must be present some sort of mechanism whereby each acting individual: (a) can come to understand the lines of actions of others, and (b) can guide his own behavior to fit in with those lines of action" (Meltzer, 1972:5). Symbolic interaction theory helps in conceptualizing this linkage among society, social institutions (the organization or agency), supervision and the individual. The basis of interaction in supervision is derived from society and "Symbolic interactionists stress the primacy of society." (Manis and Meltzer, 1972:2) in the same sense social work does as a profession. However, symbolic interaction theory becomes even more helpful at the level of the supervisory relationship because the theory is ". . . inclined to consider the individual as an active, creative source of behavior" (Manus and Meltzer, 1972:2). Blumer expands on this by pointing out:

The term 'symbolic interaction' refers . . .  
to the peculiar and distinctive character of

interaction as it takes place between human beings. The peculiarity consists in the fact that human beings interpret or 'define' each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. Their 'response' is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions (Manis and Meltzer, 1972:145).

W. I. Thomas referred to this as that process in which "Preliminary to any self-determined act of behavior there is always a stage of examination and deliberation which we may call *the definition of the situation*" (Manis and Meltzer, 1972:331). From Thomas we might conclude that this self-action is spontaneous, but Blumer states that:

[an] important implication of the fact that the human being makes indications to himself is that his action is constructed or built up instead of being a mere release. Whatever the action in which he is engaged, the human individual proceeds by pointing out to himself the divergent things which have to be taken into account in the course of his action. He has to note what he wants to do and how he is to do it; he has to point out to himself the various conditions which may be instrumental to his action and those which may obstruct his action; he has to take account of the demands, the expectations, the prohibitions, and the threats as they may arise in the situation in which he is acting. His action is built up step by step through a process of self-indication (Manis and Meltzer, 1972:146).

Mead saw this formation of self-indication as taking place in a social context. "Each individual aligns his action to the action of others by ascertaining what they are doing or what they intend to do - that is, by getting the meaning of their acts" (Manis and Meltzer, 1972:143).

In social work supervision the worker is not then a passive receptor of the attitudes, beliefs and values of the supervisor, but must be viewed as an active participant through interaction with the supervisor. Through this interaction the worker not only assigns meaning to the supervisor's behavior toward him, but assigns meaning to his own behavior as a result of the supervisor's actions. The worker's perceptions of his own actions and the supervisor's actions are built up over time in the supervision relationship. The worker's self-indications will be based on the nature, type and extent of the interaction with the agents of the

group (the supervisor). The supervisor as the "significant other," symbolizing and signifying for the worker the "generalized others," permits the worker to take the role of others in order to elicit from the supervisor definitions that prescribe specific behavior in a given situation (Knott, 1973:25-26). Cooley's formation of the "looking glass self," and its three main components of: (1) our perception of how behavior appears to others; (2) our perceptions of their judgments of this behavior; and (3) our feelings about those judgments (Popenoe, 1971:105), can be very helpful in assessing the worker's professional self-directions in relation to the worker's perception of the supervisor's response to the worker's behavior. If workers think supervisors approve of the things they do, the workers themselves will approve them, and if workers are treated as autonomous practitioners, they will view themselves as independent professional workers. The idea of self-indications growing out of a process of interaction raises the question of how is interaction varied within supervision to take into account differing levels of worker self-indications. The assumption is that new workers require a higher level of direction and control than more experienced workers, but how and if this occurs remains untested. Do younger workers receive the level of control and interaction they need from supervisors while more experienced workers receive the degree of autonomy and independence expected to promote self-reliance? Research by Wasserman (1970, 1971) indicates the answer to this question is no. In his study of social workers employed in the foster care division of a welfare department, Wasserman found that 50 percent suffered varying degrees of physical fatigue and emotional upset. The problems were related to an array of working conditions, but supervision was viewed as the major source of difficulty. In spite of having to rely on supervisors for decisions, most of the supervisors were considered not knowledgeable enough to make decisions, and the workers had little sense of belonging to a professional collectivity (Wasserman, 1970:96-101). These findings lend support to the argument that the crucial element in the deprofessionalization of social work resides in part in the failure to resolve the authority conflicts around supervision rather than in the shift in values in the larger society and reflected in the profession as argued by Specht (1972) and others.

In moving on to the organizational aspects of supervisory perceptions, Kinch, in his formalized theory of the self-concept, identified three major postulates of the theory:

1. The individual's self-concept is based on his perception of the way others are responding to him.
2. The individual's self-concept functions to direct his behavior.
3. The individual's perception of the responses of other's toward him reflects the actual responses of other's toward him (Manis and Meltzer, 1972:246).

One of the chief objectives of supervision has been geared to the

development of "Professional identification and responsibility" (Jones, 1969:15). This relates to the first and second propositions presented above from Kinch. If we are concerned with the worker's sense of professional effectiveness and responsibility, then of paramount importance to supervisors should be the question: what behaviors do certain methods of supervision produce? Related to the third postulate from Kinch is the idea that in the traditional model of supervision, "The primary teaching-learning method is the tutorial or individual conference based on relationship and role identification with the chief mentor - the field instructor" (Jones, 1969:22). Here again, the role of the supervisor is portrayed as crucial to the self-concept of the worker.

These observations all relate to the kind of interaction and the context of interaction that occurs between the worker and supervisor. Therefore, if use of authority varies as viewed by the worker being supervised, then the worker will have different self-indications as a result of supervision. Symbolic interactionists have evolved much of their theory around these very ". . . issues of how interaction among individuals shaped social structure and how social structures as networks of interaction molded individuals" (Turner, 1974:152). There is much mention of types and models of social work supervision in the literature and concern with types and sources of authority with little effort to empirically identify or test these differing approaches. Mead was directly interested in these interactive situations:

What Mead sees as significant about this process is that, as organisms mature, the transitory 'self-images' derived from specific others in each interactive situation eventually become crystallized into a more or less stabilized 'self-conception' of oneself as a certain type of object (Turner, 1974:154).

In relating the "self" to "society," or institutions as he often phrased the situation, Mead held institutions represent ". . . the organized and patterned interactions among diverse individuals" (Turner, 1974:154). Mead placed this interaction in the context of role taking and related it to control:

The immediate effect of . . . role taking lies in the control which the individual is able to exercise over his own responses. The control of the action of the individual in a co-operative process can take place in the conduct of the individual himself if he can take the role of the other. It is this control of the response of the individual himself through taking the role of the other that leads to the value of this type of communication from the point of view of the organization of the conduct of the group (Mead, 1934:254).

This comment can be related directly to the supervisory process in social work in terms of worker perceptions of how control gets exercised and how this relates to his own self-indications. In social work we do not know if perceptions of high control produce weak or negative self-indications. Mead himself disliked the idea of rigid and oppressive patterns of social organization. He states directly:

. . . there is no necessary or inevitable reason why social institutions should be oppressive or rigidly conservative, or why they should not rather be, as many are, flexible and progressive, fostering individuality rather than discouraging it (Mead, 1974:261-262).

Turner points out that Mead failed to ". . . indicate how variable types of social organization reciprocally interacted with variable properties of self and mind" (Turner, 1974:156). Linton gave added meaning to Mead's formulations when he delineated the concepts of role and status. Linton defines status as "A position in a particular pattern" (Schuler, 1971:157) representing the individual's "position with relation to the total society" and "is simply a collection of rights and duties" while "role represents the dynamic aspect of a status." Linton relates to Mead's emphasis on co-operation by stating that ". . . the more perfectly the members of any society are adjusted to their statuses and roles the more smoothly the society will function" (Schuler, 1971:157-158). This is important to social work supervision in regard to the level of satisfaction of the worker with supervision because satisfaction plays a large role in the smooth functioning of the system. Merton (Bell, 1967:201) has pointed out that we have emphasized positive organizational functioning while neglecting individual stresses and strains. From this perspective it is possible to argue that we would rather sacrifice our professionalism than give up our outdated and tradition-bound views of supervision.

Linton in his discussion of role and status makes three conceptual distinctions in relation to social structure that are of importance in analyzing supervision: (1) there exists a network of positions, (2) there is also a corresponding system of expectation, and (3) there are patterns of behavior which are enacted with regard to the expectations of particular networks of interrelated positions (Turner, 1974:153). These conceptualizations allow for distinguishing clear cut variables that crystallize the nature and kind of interrelations among positions and types of expectations associated with the positions. Social structure involves positions and expectations while behavior reflects role enactment. The question that needs to be explored is: *do varying structures of supervision as perceived by the worker produce differences in worker needs, satisfactions, and self-indications?* If there are differences, then this has important implications for social work practice with respect

to self-perceptions and cooperation in effective delivery of service. For example, in much of the recent literature it is argued that group supervision is better than the traditional form of individual supervision. This remains to be determined empirically. It would seem that perceptions of authority are more important than how supervision is structured.

Since Linton, role theory has continued to evolve. More recent theorists have been concerned more directly with power and authority in relationships. The terminology has turned to "players" and "actors" in interaction. It has been pointed out that ". . . just as players with varying abilities and capacities bring to each role their own unique interpretation, so actors with varying self-conceptions and role-playing skills have their own styles of interaction." This gets acted out within the context of situations and ". . . for groups and classes of positions, various kinds of *expectations* about how incumbents are to behave can be discerned" (Turner, 1974:161-162). As discussed in the area of supervisory models, there are self-indications growing out of social structures, but there are also aspects of self-image that grow out of "expectations" specifically related to the interactive relationship. For example, the structure of supervision can vary, but the level of perceived use of authority can remain constant. A supervisor might switch from using individual supervision to using group supervision and still be perceived as exercising as much authority in the second style as he did in the first. In this context the nature and type of authority involved in interaction can be more important than variation of the structural model of supervision.

Symbolic interactionists view expectations as deriving from three main sources: (1) expectations from the "script" of the interaction, (2) expectations from other "players" in the interaction, and (3) expectations from the audience associated with the interaction. The first two sources are directly related to uses of authority in interaction in supervision. The "scripts" deal with norms specifying behavior and the conditions under which behavior varies in terms of such variables as scope, power, clarity and degree of conflict, while expectations of other "players" focus on demands emitted by the "other players" (Turner, 1974: 162).

Turner summarizes this level of analysis by indicating that role theory tends ". . . to cluster around an analytical concern for the impact of self-conceptions on the interpretation of various types of expectations that guide conduct in a particular status" (Turner, 1974: 163). Symbolic interactionists are concerned with the ways individuals conform to what is expected of them through occupying a particular status. Turner sees conformity as growing out of several levels of internal processes:

The degree and form of conformity are usually seen as the result of a variety of internal



processes operating on individuals. . . . these internal processes are conceptualized in terms of variables such as (1) the degree to which expectations have been internalized as a part of individual's needs structure, (2) the extent to which negative or positive sanctions are perceived by individuals to accompany a particular set of expectations, (3) the degree to which expectations are used as a yardstick of self-evaluation, and (4) the extent to which expectations represent either interpretations of others' actual responses or merely anticipations of their potential responses. Just which combination of these internal processes operates in a particular interaction situation depends upon the nature of the statuses and attendant expectations (Turner, 1974:164).

The first of these conceptualizations relates to the differing ways authority is utilized in supervision, and how they relate to workers' self-conceptions and satisfaction of their needs. The second and third conceptualizations offer a basis for analyzing whether different perceptions of authority give rise to differing self-perceptions. The fourth conceptualization is accepted as a given, but does point to a criticism of symbolic interaction theory and its inability to demonstrate that attitudes about behavior and behavior itself are the same. Despite this inherent weakness of symbolic interaction theory it is held to be an appropriate basis for analyzing social work supervision.

### Conclusion

A great deal of theory has been used to suggest means to analyze and study social work supervision. To summarize the theory and its applications to social work supervision, Figure I was developed. The left-hand column identifies the major theorists, and in the middle column their general theoretical formulations are briefly stated, while the column at the right identifies the major propositions that remain unexplored empirically.

FIGURE I  
APPLICATION OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTION  
THEORY TO STUDY OF SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISION

Theorist <sup>1</sup>	Theoretical Formulations	Research Application
G. Mead W. James C. Cooley W. Thomas	Self-image derived from specific others in each interactive situation. The social self. Looking glass self. Definition of the situation.	What is the relationship between worker's perceptions of their supervisors and their self-indications?
T. Parsons R. Linton K. Davis	Internalization of expectations as part of individual's need structure. Status as collection of rights and duties and role dynamic aspect of status. Allows conceptualization of variables on the nature of interrelations among positions and expectations.	Do varying structures as perceived by workers produce differences in worker needs, satisfactions, and self-indications?
K. Davis J. Moreno G. Homans H. Gerth C. W. Mills	Classes of positions and expectations: 1. Expectations from the "scripts." 2. Expectations from "other players." 3. Expectations from the "audience."	Do differing worker perceived uses of authority give rise to varying self-evaluations and varying feelings of satisfaction of needs?

<sup>1</sup>For full citations see: Jonathan H. Turner, The Structure of Sociological Theory (Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1971), pp. 151-207, and Don Martindale, The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), pp. 285-433.

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