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THE PRACTICUM INSTRUCTOR: A STUDY OF ROLE EXPECTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The study discussed in this paper focuses on the differences between four respondent groups in their perception as to the importance of various role behaviors of practicum instructors in social work. The population for the study was obtained from a random sample of the 84 accredited graduate schools of social work in the U.S. and Puerto Rico. Significant differences in perception of role were found along with areas of agreement among the four groups.

The social work practicum is a vital part of the master's degree in social work programs in colleges and universities throughout the United States since it provides the student the opportunity to apply knowledge gained in the classroom as well as practice the skills necessary for effective social work service. The relationship between the practicum or field instructor and the social work student is an important element in this educational process. In this study, role theory, which may be described as a manner of defining certain interactions between people, provides a workable framework to study the practicum supervisory role.

The importance of the supervisory role both in the formal education process and in the continued growth toward autonomy of the agency professional is summarized by Kadushin when he states:

The objective of professional training is not only to teach the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that would enable the recruit to do a competent job but also to socialize the student to the ways of the profession, to develop a professional conscience. It is the elaborate process of professional socialization, during a prolonged program of intensive training, which permits workers, in all professions to operate autonomously, free of external direction and control on the basis of competence and values incorporated during training. The supervisor is, in effect, internalized during the transformation of the lay person into a professional, and supervision does not then need to be externally imposed.¹

The goal of the social work practicum program broadly stated is to provide the student an opportunity to obtain experience working in various social work settings. Agencies and social work educational institutions, therefore, experience a mutual dependency which has the potential to be both harmonious and mutually satisfying. As Tropman observes:

Perhaps the most obvious link is the agency's dependency on the

educational institution for the preparation of its professional staff, and the educational institution's dependency upon the agency for fieldwork experience.²

Tropman points out that a mutually satisfying relationship between an agency and an educational institution is sometimes confronted by obstacles such as: (1) agency history and tradition which is in conflict with educational goals; (2) agency responsibility which may concern the present rather than potential for the future; and (3) agency organization and support which may include boards or directors whose philosophy, values and ideas may not be supportive of education. One of the most obvious obstacles to which Tropman alludes is that of the differences in responsibility experienced by agencies and educational institutions, or stated another way, the possible conflict between service roles and educational roles.³

The role of the practicum instructor varies from school to school and agency to agency according to the various demands encountered by the instructor from students, faculty, agency administrators, and other people throughout the community. Ramsay uses an allegory to describe the practicum student as "standing on the bridge between academic studies and reality."⁴ This author suggests that the role of the agency supervisor has to do with "assisting him in crossing this bridge and seeing the view from its span."⁵ Ramsay also views the supervisor as a special kind of educator who must respond to the varied objectives of students' individual differences with special approaches in guiding them through field work experiences.⁶

Ramsay further clarifies the practicum supervisor's role by stating:

the agency supervisor has a double role in relation to students engaged in field experience. He must see the student as both worker and learner. His special contribution to the student's development is helping the student relate through his work to the real world.

Ramsay also believes that the practicum supervisor has an interpretive role which is part of the teaching function and concludes by stating:

In general, supervisors are responsible for some output in terms of product or service, they must see that the objectives of the organization are met and that the labor under their supervision is directed toward that end. However, the student laborer is an end in himself and success is measured in part by his development.⁸

In the preceding paragraph, it becomes quite evident that the supervisor's position which requires satisfying both agency and student needs may result in the supervisor's encountering conflicting role demands. The practicum supervisor may also be faced with conflicting expectations from other groups such as the faculty of the school of social work, the practicum coordinator for the school, or the community in which the supervisor practices. Merton observes that "the professional social worker has become more aware of conflicting demands and that the resulting problems have become acute in supervision."⁹ Merton goes on to point out that conflict has the potential to be beneficial and suggests that

when it becomes plain that the demands of some are in full contradiction with the demands of others, it becomes in part, the task of members of the role-set . . . to resolve these contradictions either by a struggle for over-riding power or by some degree of compromise.¹⁰

Before being able to "resolve contradictions", however, the practicum supervisor must be aware of the role expectations coming from the various groups with which professional contact is experienced.

Research Objectives and Questions

The purpose of this study is to determine the importance of expected role behaviors for practicum instructors in social work. Specifically, the objectives of this study are to: (1) Identify and indicate the importance of various expected role behaviors for practicum instructors in social work as determined by agency executives, graduate students in social work, practicum instructors in social work and practicum coordinators in schools of social work. (2) Determine whether these groups are of the opinion that an appropriate amount of practicum time is spent in various role activities.

From these specific research objectives arise the following questions: (1) What expected role behaviors for practicum instructors in social work are identified as important by students, practicum instructors, practicum coordinators, and agency executives? (2) Does conflict exist between the various groups responding in terms of their determination of importance of practicum instructor role behaviors? (3) Are the four respondent groups in agreement as to how practicum instructors should spend practicum time? (4) Are there differences in the way in which the groups give priority to the role expectations?

Method

The multistage stratified systematic random sample of respondents on the basis of school size was taken from the 84 accredited graduate schools of social work in the United States and Puerto Rico listed in the Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States: 1977. Sixteen schools were chosen by this system from which 564 students, 16 practicum coordinators, 200 practicum instructors and 200 agency executives were randomly selected. Of these respondents, 71% (398) of the students, 81.5% (163) of the practicum instructors, 67% (134) of the agency executives and 87.5% (14) of the practicum coordinators returned usable questionnaires in time for participation in the study.

Data Gathering Instrument

A basic questionnaire of dependent variables was developed which was divided into two parts. The first section consisted of forty-two possible practicum instructor roles such as "helps the student incorporate professional values" or "communicates actively with the School of Social Work." For each role, the respondent was given a choice of responses ranging from "no, not a role," to "Yes, a very important role."

The second part of the questionnaire consisted of eleven statements which were summaries of the forty-two previous role expectation statements, for example, "Formal Teaching" or "Student Skill Development." In this section, the respondent was asked to indicate if practicum instructors should spend less time, the same time, or more time in the described activities. A "Don't know" response was also provided.

From this basic questionnaire, four versions were made with independent variables which would be appropriate to the respondent group. For example, the student questionnaire asks for year in school whereas the practicum instructor version asks for position in agency.

Analysis of Data

A test for proportional differences between percentages was used in the statistical analysis reported in this research. Because the sample of practicum coordinators is much smaller proportionately than the other three groups, a conservative bias will tend to occur since differences between the practicum coordinators and other groups are less likely to be found.

Findings

The first question was "What role behaviors for practicum instructors in social work are identified as important by students, faculty members, practicum coordinators, agency administrators, and practicum instructors?" In order to answer this question, all role behaviors which were perceived by 80% or more of all four respondents as "Very Important" were considered "Important" in this study and are presented in Table 1. Role behavior items having to do with student progress and evaluation received the most "Very Important" responses. The Summary area of student skill development and orientation both had two items which were rated "Very Important" by 80% of all four groups. Teaching modalities might also be included in the area of skill development. Finally, all four groups indicated that the practicum instructor is responsible for helping students develop an awareness and use of self as well as definition about feelings experienced toward clients.

The second research question asked was whether conflict existed between the various respondent groups so far as their determination of the importance of various practicum instructor role behaviors. The conclusion based on the findings having to do with this question is that conflict does exist among the four respondent groups on the importance of some of the role behaviors. Of the 42 role behavior items on section one of the questionnaire, 12 items were found to have significant differences in the total percentage of "Very Important" responses between two groups or more. Role behaviors about which two or more respondent groups had conflicting views about their importance are grouped together in Table 2.

Table 1
Role Behavior Items Which Were Considered
"Very Important" by 80% or More of Respondent Groups

Summary Statement

Role Behavior Item

The Practicum Instructor's Role is to:

Orient Student to Agency

- Define Student's Role in Agency
- Orient Student to Agency Procedures

Formal Teaching

- Teach Specific Treatment Modalities

Student Skill Development

- Points Out Student's Weaknesses
- Points Out Student's Strengths

Supervision and Case Selection

Help Student with Awareness of Self
Help Student Clarify Feelings

Evaluation of Student

Evaluate the Student
Confer with Student Regarding Progress
Provide Supervisory Time for Student

Table 2
Role Behavior Items on Which One or More Respondent Groups
Had Significant Disagreement on "Very Important" Responses

Role Behavior Items	Percentage of "Very Important" Responses			
The Practicum Instructor's Role is to:	P.C.	Stud.	P.I.	A.E.
1. Communicate with School	100% ^a	66% ^b	69% ^b	85%
2. Serve on Committees	67% ^a	31% ^b	36% ^b	42% ^b
3. Be Aware of Other Employee Feelings Toward the Student	69% ^b	48% ^a	71% ^b	75% ^b
4. Teach About Minority	100%	72% ^a	84% ^b	81%
5. Demonstrate Treatment Methods	85%	70% ^a	80% ^b	73%
6. Improve Listening Skills of Students	85%	73% ^a	87% ^b	91%
7. Help Student Develop a Work Schedule	93% ^b	41% ^a	71% ^b	76% ^b
8. Review Assignments of Students	93%	67% ^a	81% ^b	81%
9. Challenge Student Attitudes	100%	77% ^a	86%	90% ^b
10. Write Letters of Recommendation for Student	31% ^b	73% ^a	55% ^b	49% ^b
11. Set Up Opportunities for Students to Observe Other Professionals	58%	59% ^b	59% ^b	73% ^a
12. Interview the Student for Suitability for Agency	46% ^a	67%	80% ^b	79%

The difference between two groups "a" and "b" significant >.05.

The third research question asked: "Are the groups in agreement with how the practicum instructor should spend practicum time?" The conclusion based on the findings having to do with this question is that there was disagreement on more than half of the summary statements as to how much time should be spent in the various broad areas of activity. Of the summary statements in section 2 of the questionnaire, there was general agreement between the four groups on four of the statements as to whether

or not the practicum instructors should spend less time, the same amount of time or more time on the listed behaviors. The four summary statements in which relative agreement was found were: 1. Formal teaching 2. Student skill development 3. Supervision of client care and case selection, and 4. Socializing the student to the profession.

In six Summary Statements there was significant disagreement between two or more groups as to whether or not more or less time should be spent in a particular broad activity. The following table summarizes the responses in which significant disagreement was found.

Table 3
Significant Differences in Percentage Responses
on Summary Statements by Respondent Groups

Summary Statements		Response Percentage			
		P.C.	Stu.	P.I.	A.E.
1. Assessment of Suitability of Student for Placement	"More Time"	23%	19%	* 38%	24%
2. Orienting the Student to Agency	"More Time"	31%	32%	* 17%	28%
3. Advocating for the Student in Agency	"More Time"	8%	18%	* 6%	6%
4. Involvement in Personal Concerns of Student	"More Time"	54%	16%	* 32%	39%
5. Professional Development of P.I.	"More Time"	54%	22%	* 68%	36%
6. Evaluation of the Student	"More Time"	36%**	26%	11%	19%

* The Difference between Stu. and P.I. response significant <.001

** The Difference between P.C. and P.I. response significant <.05

As can be seen in Table 3 on more than half of the summary items significant disagreement occurred between one or more of the groups as to whether more or less time should be spent in a particular role behavior. On all but one Summary Statement, disagreement was focused on whether or not the practicum instructor should spend more time in a role behavior. All but one of the differences occurred between practicum instructors and students although in the area of professional development, of the practicum instructor, the agency executives also responded "More Time" at a much lower rate than did the practicum instructors.

The final research question was: "Are there differences in the order in which the groups gave priority to the expected role behaviors." The conclusion which can be drawn from the findings are that there are differences in the order in which the

four groups gave priority to the expected role behavior, but that six role behaviors were chosen by all four respondent groups as first through ninth in priority as viewed by the percentage of "Very Important" responses received. These findings are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4
The Ten Highest Ranked Items According to Percentage
of "Very Important" Responses

*P.C.	Ranking by			
	Stu.	P.I.	A.E.	
1	3	4	4	Serves as a role-model of a social work professional
2	7	6	2	Helps the student incorporate professional values
3	1	1	3	Regularly confers with the student regarding progress
4				Challenges students' attitude not in harmony with social work values
5	4	8	7	Points out the students' weaknesses in skills and techniques
6				Teaches the student about minority issues
7	5	7	5	Provides weekly supervisory time for the student
8				Communicates with the school of social work
9	2	2	1	Points out the strengths of the student in the area of skills
	6	3	9	Helps student develop an awareness of self
	8			Evaluates the student's progress formally twice per semester
	9	5	6	Helps identify and clarify feelings about the client
10				Introduces the student to agency employees
		9		Orients the student to policies and procedures of the agency
		10	10	Helps the student learn one of more methods of working with people
			8	Defines the student's role within the agency

* Only the top nine items were ranked for the practicum instructor since they all received 100% rating.

As is shown by Table 4, each group gave priority to items which had to do with their own orientation in the situation. For example, practicum coordinators tended

to stress educational-professional items or areas which were related to the school such as teaching minority issues, communication with the school, and incorporation of professional values. Students seemed to put priority on skills and evaluation as well as socialization to the profession. Practicum instructors also emphasized skills and professionalization with the addition of student orientation and teaching methods or modalities. Finally, agency executives also stressed skill areas as well as supervision of the student and development of the student as a professional social worker.

Although there is disagreement over the importance of some of the role behaviors in the findings, Table 4 shows there is a good deal of agreement among students, practicum instructors and agency executives as to the ten most important behaviors with only one or two questions not appearing in all three of the groups top ten ratings. Practicum coordinators also agreed with many of the rankings of the other three groups with three of the questions rated as the top nine by coordinators not appearing in the other three lists.

Conclusions

As we pointed out earlier in the review of the literature, there are many ways in which to deal with role behavior expectation conflicts ranging from ignoring the conflicting views to using the conflicts to further understandings and improve relationships among people. As was indicated by the study, there are areas of both consistent agreement and considerable disagreement as illustrated by the responses of the four groups which participated in the study. Recognition of such disagreements must occur on the local level as well since such conflicts may be the basis for misunderstandings and feelings of alienation by practicum instructors toward Schools of Social Work. The potential of schools to build upon likeness and learn from differences through discussions, meetings, liaison activities and other forms of communication between the school faculty, agencies, and students is one obvious remedy, especially if conflicts are acknowledged, specified, and discussed. Then, it is possible for compromise and resolution to be developed.

The general area of practicum, field work, internship, practice teaching or whatever term a specific profession uses to describe the practical training of its students has potential for further study. A review of the literature indicates that there is very little transfer of information from one profession to another in this area. Although there are, of course, differences in subject matter and approaches among professions, much could still be learned from research and experience of other professions.

The practical application aspect of a student's learning experience has been an area of concern for educators in all professions for as long as these professions have been in existence. Although many of the problems involved in providing field work experiences have been either lessened or alleviated, a considerable number still exist, not the least of which is that of conflicting role expectations. Further investigation of specific training role behaviors is still needed to provide students with the type of consistent excellence in their educational experience which will produce professionals who will make viable contributions to our society.

NOTES

1. Alfred Kadushin, Supervision in Social Work (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976) pp. 30, 31.
2. E. O. Tropman, "Agency Constraints Affecting Links Between Practice and

- Education," Journal of Education for Social Work, Volume 13 (Winter, 1977), p. 8.
3. Ibid., p. 8-10.
 4. W. R. Ramsay, "Role of the Agency Supervisor," New Directions for Higher Education, Volume 2 (Summer, 1974), p. 45.
 5. Ibid., p. 45.
 6. Ibid., p.45.
 7. Ibid., p. 50.
 8. Ibid., p. 50.
 9. R. K. Merton, "The Role Set: Problems in Sociological Theory." In L.A. Coser and B. Rosenberg, (eds.), Sociological Theory: A Book of Readings (New York: Mac Millan, 1964) p. 383.
 10. Ibid., p. 383.