

# From Being 'Caught in the Middle of a War' to 'Getting Everything and More' - Social Work Students Experiences in Placements with External Supervision

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*Celebrating*  
**40**  
YEARS  
1970~2010

# Presentation Overview

- Context of Research
- Back ground Information
- Method
- Student Voices
- Discussion
- Questions
- References

# Context of Research

- ◉ Associate Lecturer in Field Education
- ◉ Current PhD student in social work
- ◉ Explorative Qualitative research.
- ◉ Research question: *'What are the experiences of all key stakeholders in field education with external supervision?'*.
- ◉ Progress to date:
  - ◉ literature review
  - ◉ Ethics approval from JCU, confirmation seminar
  - ◉ Initial Data Collection completed
  - ◉ Initial Data Analysis Student data

# Highlights of Literature Review

- **Field Education crucial and beneficial** (Barton, Bell & Bowles, 2005; Clare, 2001; Abraham, Hartung & Wernet, 2000; Patford, 2000)
- **Dual experience of learning and stress** (Maidment, 2003, 2006);
- Current Context: **workplace ideologies & neoliberal market principles**(Aggias, 2010)
- **Availability of placements** impacted (Abram et al., 2000; Barton et al., 2005; Unger, 2003).



- **Apprentice ship model** (Cameleri, 2001; Celak & Smith, 2012) **of field education under strain** (Eagan, 2005)
  - Difficult to find placements
  - Placements with External supervision more prevalent
  - Cultural relevance of model? (Zuchwoski, 2011)
  - **Violence in helping profession** (Gair & Thomson, 2008) **and on placements** (Tully, Kropf & Price 1999, Gair & Thomson, 2008)
- **Supervisory relationship central** (Ornstein & Moses, 2010; Cleak & Smith, 2012))
- Field Education introduces concept of **professional supervision** (McAuliffe & Sudberry, 2005)
- Students want field educators to “...**provide opportunity to be observed, and facilitate professional development**” (Barretti 2007, p. 51)

# Literature: External Supervision

- **External Supervision- limited literature**
  - Assumption ideal is on-site social work supervision (Abram, et al., 2000)
  - This is challenged (Abram, et al., 2000; Plath, 2003; and Zuchowski, 2011)
- **External Supervision arrangement complex**
  - Challenges: lack of clearly defined social work roles, values skills, complexity of four way relationship (Plath, 2003)
  - Power imbalances (Henderson, 2010)
  - Triad relationship has to be actively developed (Abraham, et al., 2000; Henderson, 2010)
- **Models**
  - For field education- Four steps (Clare, 2001)
  - Additional support for work-based supervisors (Henderson, 2010)
  - Ecological paradigm when external supervision (Maidment & Woodward, 2002)

# Method

## Sample

- Purposive Sampling
- Eligibility Criteria: Social Work students, field educators, task supervisors and liaison persons that have been involved in social work field placements with external social work supervision.
- 32 participants
- Range of Australian universities
  - Qld, ACT, WA, Vic and SA
- Focus here on student experience
  - 13 participants
  - 9 solely student experience

## Qualitative Research: semi-structured interviews

- 8 face-to face, 5 phone interviews
- Explorative interview
- Field education with external supervision
- All females

## Data analysis

- Taped, transcribed
- Themes and subthemes identified
- Nvivo
- Current reflection on interim analysis

## Qualitative Research

- Subjective experiences, self-selection and self-reporting
- One aspect of a range of experiences
- Insider positioning of researcher



# The Student Voices

- *General Experience in Field Education*
- *The Specific Challenges of Placements with External Supervision*
- *The Opportunities of Placements with External Supervision*
- *The four way relationship*
- *Ideal Placement*

## **General Experience in Field Education: Struggles**

***....and if I put myself back completely in context I was, because I have done my degree part time, ... had two small children and my husband worked away and I was working full-time, ... completing my degree, and I was probably semi insane by that time. Shelly***

## **General Experience in Field Education: Power, Lack of Choice and Being Lucky**

- Power Struggles
- Bullying culture of organisation
- Put downs

***He took me in the kitchen and gave me that whole lecture about, men and women's brains and how, he was comparing me with the client and that her problems and my problems were similar, ... we regurgitate, we are like cows chewing apart, we do this, we chew all over it, we vomit it up, whereas men are action people, they make the plans and they do it, that's why I have to listen to him and just do as he says (laughs) Jamie***

## **General Experience in Field Education: Power, Lack of Choice and Being Lucky**

- Lack of Choice
  - Field of Practice
  - Supervisors
  - Limited placements

***...we hear a lot of how hard it is to get supervisors and how it is to get placements and we hear about, and that kind of censors us a bit, God, I am so thankful to have somewhere. Laura***

## **General Experience in Field Education: Power, Lack of Choice and Being Lucky**

***If it had been actively promoted that, ok, no matter that these are really difficult to, that is the nature, you know, not everybody in the industry puts their hand up for a student, not matter, we want to provide that safe space for you for you to do that, this is important, still let us know, then I would have spoken up much sooner. Denise***

***I remember feeling very anxious to start with, but I was lucky that [co-worker] was there. Um, and she kind of really took me under her wing. Kelly***

## ***The Specific Challenges of Placements with External Supervision: Access, Burden, Differing Ideas and Limitations of Supervision***

- Limited access to supervisor and Inability to debrief, concern, but not major
- Quality of the supervision;
- Lack of understanding of the context;
- Limitations of task supervision;
- Differing ideas between supervisors;
- Burden of putting it all together
- Lack of choice
  - Supervisor
  - Placement with external supervision

## **The Specific Challenges of Placements with External Supervision: Limitations of Supervision: lack of Contextual knowledge**

***I guess some of the challenges were at times, because the external supervisor didn't have a knowledge of the agency, besides what I gave them, so their background clashed a little bit with what the task supervisor might want. Stephanie***

## **The Specific Challenges of Placements with External Supervision: Limitations of Supervision: Task Supervision**

***And my task supervisor's idea of supervision was going down with her on a smoke break and talk about, ok, how is it going, and there was no actual focus on theory, there was not actual focus on how did I interact with clients, you know how did I get my head around a lot to the service, what sort of things that were, what were pertinent and how do you interact with clients and what your ideas were and what your learning involves. Carmen***



## **The Specific Challenges of Placements with External Supervision: Differing ideas and burden**

***I felt I had to make the decision, it was being left to me because I couldn't get, I was like caught in the middle of a war. Samantha***

***I guess it was more stressful,... just to arrange things and sometimes you think well, it would be easier if everybody just worked in the organisation or was involved more, or was around more. Kelly***

## ***The Opportunities of Placements with External Supervision: Receiving Supervision, Safe Space, New Layer of Learning, and Objectivity***

- Receiving Supervision external to agency:
  - safe space,
  - a separate space to sit and reflect,
  - scheduling time specific for supervision,
  - an independent look at issues,
  - keeping an eye on things,
  - providing a new layer of learning and
  - exploring issues of concern outside the agency.

## **The Opportunities of Placements with External Supervision Safe Space**

***...to me the external supervision is a really safe space, a 100%, where I can really pull it apart, and really, um, go for it, I suppose, um, whereas it is a lot more contained, I feel a lot more contained within the organisational context. Laura***

- ◉ Able to complete placement or leave unsafe placements

***...the professional supervisor said, do you want to continue with this placement? And I hadn't even considered that that was an option for me, that this was actually not ok to be treated like this... Jamie***

## ***The Opportunities of Placements with External Supervision :New Layer of Learning, and Objectivity***

- Concerns about agency explored externally:
  - Open and honest
  - Own sense of social justice
  - Clear perspective
  - Not upset others

***There is that sensitivity around this is where someone has chosen to work and in my case, my task supervisor has been in here 8 years and,... it is easier to critique a workplace if, when you not challenge someone who works in it (laughs), that's probably hard to Shelly***

## *The four way relationship: A disjointed picture*

- Little information shared
- Relationships not close, were fractured and disjointed
- Meetings

***It's just that it is sometimes, I guess, disjointed to me in that way, it is not, look there hasn't been a time where the four of us have sat down, the manager, the task supervisor, the field educator and myself, hadn't sat down all four of us together. I sit with the task supervisor, I sit (laughs) with the manager, I sit with the social worker, social worker talks to the manager Kelly***

## **Ideal Placement: Not about external or internal supervision?**

- Good placement preparation
- Matching students to placements and supervisors
- Can learn out of any placement

***So it was, as a first experience of a placement it could have been a really totally negative thing, but it hasn't been because of this field supervisors skills and stuff around supporting me in my learning, but also about helping me to focus on other things that were going well or my ability and resourcefulness to go and seek help from others. Carmen***

## ***Ideal Placement: Internal supervision?***

- Need to be with trained field educators
- Context would be clearer
- Things would flow better

***No, it wasn't a good experience and it , I shied away from the second and final placement, I said, I won't have an external supervisor, I am not doing that again, it is not good. Denise***

## ***Ideal Placement: External supervision?***

- Distance to reflect
- Double supervision
- People need connections
- Supervisors need contextual knowledge

***I think, just that particular set-up, where the supervisor had a very good working knowledge of the organisation, the supervisor ....he has worked in the field,.... I actually found, and I do find external supervision a really, really positive,... experience. Jennifer***



# Discussion

1. Message Students hear: Placements and Supervisors are hard to come by
  - Lucky when they get something positive, when they survive, when they get support
  - Lack of choice
  - Student stay in unsafe placements

However, as Denise points out, no matter how difficult it is to find placements '...we still want to provide that safe space for you ...'

# Discussion

## 2. External Supervision is a Choice in Professional Practice

- ◉ Managerialism and compliance (Beddoe 2012)
- ◉ Raise ethical dilemmas with external supervisors (McAucliffe & Sudbery 2005).
- ◉ Yet :social work students have no choice and placements with external supervision presented as less desirable
  - ◉ Similarly identified those advantages
    - When it worked: felt lucky
  - ◉ No choice about Supervisor
    - Relationships did not always work
    - Supervisory relationship central

# Discussion

3. External Supervision can assist student to identify or act on unsafe practices

- Students experienced power struggles, put downs and harassment
- Participants identified Importance of safe space and support that they received through external supervision
- External Supervision can 'keep an eye on things'
- Could be important for minority group students who are often labeled as aggressive when they speak up about differential treatment (Razack, 2000)
- Links to argument for external supervision in professional practice, '...that it provides an opportunity to offer emotional support that is untainted by power relations and issues of confidentiality' (Beddoe 2012, p. 205).

# Discussion

4. When asked about Ideal placement Internal/ External not foregrounded

- Rather:it depended on
  - what they wanted to learn,
  - how they and their supervisors were prepared for this placement,
  - what they were bringing to the placement and
  - how it was supported.

*I like to think that these people were handpicked (laughs),...I did request my liaison person and...I am really aware that she would really keep my focus on my ...practice and my ideology and that I can really expand my knowledge around that ...it would be lovely to think if that could happen for everyone, that...people were supported in areas that they needed to be supported in... Laura*

## Areas for further thought

- As Social Work Educators we may need to be cautious about inadvertently devaluing placements with external supervision and present it as such to students.
- Rather we need to ensure best practice in the area and it seems that more has to be done to develop this.
- It appears that matching student, supervisors and organisations need further exploration, in particular, in light of the challenges raised by participants.
- Our understanding of the positive elements of external supervision would benefit from further exploration.
- External supervision could be embraced as a tailored, contemporary model for field education, but this should not come at a cost for students.

From 'Caught in the middle of a war' to  
'Getting everything and more'

Thank you for your time and  
interest

Are there any Questions or  
Comments?

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