

1-1-2010

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## Recommended Citation

Kuechler, Carol F., "Group Supervision: Motivation for Social Action" (2010). *Social Work Faculty Publications*. Paper 20.  
[http://ir.stthomas.edu/ssw\\_pub/20](http://ir.stthomas.edu/ssw_pub/20)

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## Group supervision: Motivation for social action

Carol F. Kuechler and Jennifer Schwartz

Social work supervision has traditionally been a major form of training as well as a source of professional monitoring and development (Kadushin, 1992; Kaiser, 1997; Munson, 2002; Shulman, 1993). The primary focus of the supervisory relationship is the ethical and competent practice of social work with clients. While little is currently being written about the practice of *group supervision of professionals* in social work, particularly from the perspective of practitioners, group supervision as a modality is practiced in many social work settings (Holloway and Johnston, 1985; Prieto, 1996; Kuechler & Schwartz, 2002). A focus group study with practitioners was conducted to address this gap, emphasizing the group supervisor's experience with and perspectives on group supervision. Based on well-documented connections between group work and social action, supervisors were asked to identify any social action that had come from their supervision groups. This paper distinguishes unique aspects of group supervision, addresses the interconnectedness of social action, social group work, and supervision, and presents the social action activities reported by study participants in four focus groups conducted in the north and central mid-west and at the 24<sup>th</sup> Annual AASWG symposium held in Brooklyn, New York.

## Group supervision

When the primary contract is supervision of practice, group supervision is distinguished from other models of group practice based primarily on contracts of consultation, coaching, or educating. This distinction is based on the definition of the supervisor-supervisee relationship as one of accountability (Barnard and Goodyear, 2000; Kadushin, 1977; 1992; Kaiser, 1997; Munson, 2002; Shulman, 1993; Weinbach, 2003). Kaiser (1997) notes that supervision by its nature heightens issues of power and authority, trust and vulnerability, in the context of fostering ethical practice and the ongoing development of professional skills. Supervisors, while not equal members in the realm of accountability, can moderate the impact of their positional and administrative power and authority by using group supervision (see, for example, Kadushin, 1992; Munson, 2002; Shulman, 1993; Weinbach, 2003). Functionally, group supervision has also been implemented as a way to address critiques that models of individual supervision foster dependency, to respond to efficiency and resource issues in agencies, and to provide cost-effective options for supervisees seeking licensure (e.g. Getzel and Salmon, 1977; Kadushin, 1992; Munson, 2002; Weinbach, 2003.)

Shulman (1993) and others note that the practice of supervision *in a group* poses unique challenges and issues for the supervisor and requires additional skills related to group leadership, balancing individual and group needs, and understanding group development and processes. In addition, the supervisees contribute to the supervisory process and ideally are 'actively involved in providing support and making demands' (Shulman, 1993, p. 225), thus reflecting the principles of the mutual aid process.

Challenges experienced in the practice of group supervision have been raised by practitioners (Kuechler & Schwartz, 2002) and scholars (see, for example, Munson, 2002) relative to the nature and limits of direct and vicarious liability. Other challenges related more specifically to the function of social action and the supervisory role, as well as the attainment of the knowledge and skills needed to support and implement social action, will be addressed later in the context of social action.

Despite these challenges, practitioners and supervisors, through the continued use of group supervision, model agreement with Getzel and Salmon (1985) who described group supervision as a 'positive approach in the [social workers'] professional organizational environment,'

which, despite its challenges 'match[ed] the potential reward in humanizing and democratizing the workplace in these harsh and difficult times' (p.41). Their description of group supervision and its potential is congruent with group work, as the 'intentional work with a group of people, all of whom are equal members, where interaction occurs that not only influences individual members of the group to help themselves, but, in the process, to help each other in the group, the group as a whole and the larger society' (Andrews, 2003 p.1). In this context the potential for social action as an outcome of group work becomes the foundation for exploring social action and group supervision.

## Social action and social group work

Throughout the history of the social work profession, social workers and their supervisors have been involved with issues of social justice (Munson, 2002; Brilliant, 1996; Haynes & Mickelson, 2000). Group work has historically been at the heart of social action work as exemplified by Jane Addams and the settlement house movement and Eduard Lindemann (Abramovitz, 1998). Haynes and Mickelson (2000) characterized three models of social action in use in the 1950s: 1) citizen social worker, 2) agent of social change, and 3) actionist. Two of these models, citizen social worker and actionist, relied heavily on group work to be effective. For example, the citizen social work model, 'calls for the profession of social work to use the information and knowledge gained through work with...groups to inform the larger society of the need for programs and policies' (Haynes and Mickelson, 2000, p. 10). Using the actionist model, social workers, with the client group, focused on bringing about desired change based on needs identified by the group members.

Regardless of the model of group work in use, it has often been demonstrated that it is unlikely for a group to develop without some form of injustice being identified, thus inviting the need for social action at some level. As noted by Getzel and Salmon (1985) and Cox (1991) social action is often not the primary focus of a group, but rather 'an integral and natural outcome of the mutual problem solving process in which [the group] engages' (Cox, p. 88). Breton (1995) likewise notes,

'any group has within itself the latent or unrealized capacity of moving its members to engage in social action and empowerment producing activities' (p. 5). The empowerment literature is likewise filled with examples of the social action activities accomplished by groups (for example, Bertcher, Kurtz, & Lamont, 1999; Lee, 1994) bringing to mind the oft used quote from Margaret Mead: *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*

## Supervision and social action

Munson's (2002) view of supervision in the development of the profession provides the context for establishing a connection between supervision and social action. Starting with the premise that social reform, client advocacy, cost-effective interventions and an effective model of supervision are contributions made by social work to the helping professions; he characterized supervision as the 'glue that held together' the 'individual intervention, advocacy, and social reform that was the hallmark of the social work profession' (p. 87). He contextualizes this characterization by directing the reader to Mary Richmond's belief 'that reform, advocacy, and microintervention could be integrated by supervisors gathering data from supervisees and generating statistics that would be supplied to social reformers to influence philanthropists and legislators to meet social needs and promote prevention' (p. 87).

Gowdy and Freeman (1993) identify challenges faced by the supervisor in supporting social action within the agency context when the agency dynamics discourage 'sending up [complaints] through organizational channels' (p. 63). Wood and Middleman (1995) noted that social workers are at times limited in their social action engagement when *de facto* norms, i.e. operational procedures, discouraging social action are treated as *de jure* policies. When challenging these norms, social workers (and their supervisors) may be challenging societal norms as well as agency norms. Thus, when workers bring these issues to supervision, the importance of the supervisor's attitudes, skills and knowledge relative to change is heightened.

To the degree that social action involves change, the nature of

change is understood and supported through the supervisory process. Shulman (1993) and Weinbach (2003) posit the expectation that social work supervisors and managers will encounter change at many levels in their work and that they need to be prepared to understand and deal with it. Understanding change is fundamental to their positions.

Change, regardless of the level of intervention, often raises the supervisory dilemma of balancing individual case needs with other demands. Gowdy and Freeman (1993) suggest that supervisors are unprepared to handle workers' feedback when its focus is other than case level issues. They point to gaps in supervisory methods, which blend program analysis and direct service. Breton (1995) cites the importance of knowing how to implement social action, suggesting that it is difficult for workers to adequately promote the ideas behind social action if they feel poorly educated or trained in the subject and that without the relevant skills and training 'any potential for social action will remain dormant' (p. 9). Brilliant (1986) suggested that supervisors, like many social workers are fundamentally not comfortable with the idea of social action and power. For the social worker, accessing supervisory support can be further challenged in situations where supervisors are not employed at the same organizations as their supervisees.

Examples of social action, which evolved from supervision groups, were reported by Gowdy and Freeman (1993). In their report on the effectiveness of program supervision, conducted in groups, they cited a number of social action-related outcomes. For example, they attributed the identification of hidden issues related to salary inequities and the emergence of program limitations to the group supervision process, which nurtured a secure and informal environment in contrast to the more formal individual supervision. The social actions noted were more likely to be based in the agency and its work, rather than in the broader sense of community-based change. In this context of the overlapping functions of: group supervision and social group work, social group work and social action, and supervision and social action, the potential for social action as an outcome of group supervision was explored in this study.

## Method

A focus group design facilitated to address a specific research issue was selected as a model congruent with the research question with its emphasis on group process (Krueger, 1994). Participants (n=25) were recruited in Fall 2002 from current and past members of a continuing education program for community-based supervisors located in the Twin cities metropolitan area, from practitioners who belonged to or were recruited through an international group work organization in Kentucky and from participants at the organization's annual symposium in Brooklyn, New York. Focus groups lasted from one and a half to two and a half hours and were audio taped; longer sessions included a short break. Prior to the focus group process, participants completed a background information sheet (Berg, 2004), which included the main questions to be addressed such as inquiries about perceived benefits and challenges, frameworks of practice, social action activities emanating from supervision groups and recommendations for new practitioners.

Participants in four focus groups represented medical, school, social service, corrections, foster care, in-patient, and community counseling settings. Some were in private practice. Participants' experiences as group supervisors ranged from two weeks to thirty plus years. While all had practiced group supervision with practitioners, not all were currently practicing. One notable reason given for participating in the focus groups was the desire to find out what other people were doing as group supervisors.

## Findings

When queried about social action activities and outcomes, some members readily described actions taken by their supervision groups. Others, who indicated that they had not identified any 'social action' on their background sheet, were prompted by the process to recall relevant examples. Not all examples of activities fit the notion of group action; some represented social actions taken by individual members of a particular supervision group. This paper focuses primarily on the group-based social action activities reported by the supervisors.

Group supervisors described a variety of social actions that emanated from the groups they supervised. Examples included actions within agencies that were client-related and those that were staff-related. The presentation of examples are organized on the basis of the content and focus of the social action described; the context of 'Agency-related' refers to the location of the action, not necessarily to the location of the supervision group. Client-related social action has been organized into three subcategories: advocacy, program development, and standardization (see Figure 1). Staff-related social action has four subcategories: empowerment, policy, staffing, and staff/professional development (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Social Action Within Agencies: Client-Related

**Advocacy**

A change that occurred out of one of my groups was that materials were translated into Spanish...[the place the member worked] was a drug and alcohol treatment center and the materials that they used were not in Spanish...and yet a lot of clients were Spanish speaking  
In talking with staff and in supervision [there was discussion] of the dual diagnosis issue...people were being treated for the primary issue of alcohol and drugs when we wanted to have a mental health contribution to the treatment process...that is changing now...

...We are grant funded and every year the funding expired and Congress... didn't authorize the funding so we have been pretty good letter writers as a group [including getting other colleagues in the schools and community to write letters.] We have done a pretty good job keeping track of legislation.

**Program Development**

I supervised a group that were working in a level 5...EBD [Emotional Behavioral Disorders] program for pretty behaviorally disturbed kids... [members of the group discussed the challenges in the experience of these kids' transition to 7<sup>th</sup> grade]...we were able to obtain funds from our special education department to actually take the kids on tours [of their new school] during the school year... there has also been talk in that group about writing a grant to promote some basketball activities [for the kids].

People were sharing about several family situations and realized this group of families all lived in the same trailer park and all these little kids were being sexual with one another...[another member] said she had done some community prevention work...and [would] present a proposal [at the next

meeting] about what it would look like if we did some community thing [in the trailer park] So that came out of the sharing about what goes on in the supervisees' caseloads and that all the families happened to be in the same community

**Standardization**

In the process of getting together and discussing common issues, [the group members] realized that tardiness and absentee data was kept differently in every [school]...when we realized that this was a problem throughout the district we started talking about it with the principals. They were able to rewrite the rules about the truancy and tardiness and...[I] felt very, very good about the process. It definitely came out of the group getting together and realizing that there was a problem and then deciding to do something about it.

The workers that I am supervising at the behavioral health setting have... instituted some policies about...treatment planning for group members...and really trying to get a screening tool...for who might be good for working within groups. They have kind of done that on their own as an outgrowth [of the group].

Figure 2: Social Action Within Agencies: Staff-Related

**Empowerment**

...my team has challenged policies at my agency...they feel like they can have [the]...voice to disagree with me and challenge the...larger agency.  
I found [what] the group has been able to do, in a really powerful way, is to assist [the supervisees] to go back to the agency [to challenge an abusive situation] and not put their job at risk.

**Policy**

...one of the supervisees brought a policy change when [the directors of a new program were] making management statements around sexual orientation and prohibition in...allowing homosexuals intake [into the agency]. I saw...the agency as [a] client as well...We practiced in the group...how he would approach the board...he used us as a sounding board...he did challenge the board and created all kinds of media coverage.

[Supervisees identified] that one of the greatest sources of frustrations for them was staff turnover...we looked...hard at those issues and then put forward recommendations for improvements in their working conditions and increases in the pay for the frontline people...[also the group] created equity in the salary structure and the assignment of titles based on responsibilities in the organization.

### Staffing

*One of the [supervision] groups I was in demoted their supervisor...they said that 'we are not accepting you as a supervisor anymore'...he was also their administrative supervisor...I think it is really important to have everybody working on it together...*

*In the agency I worked for, one of the staff was fired because of her sexual orientation...it was a big group process...she [the person who was fired] had been part of my supervision group...they asked me to fire her and I wouldn't do it...in the group process of talking with the [other] people I supervise...their first reaction was 'what are you going to do about this?' [As a result of the circumstances the supervisor speaking here resigned rather than fire the supervisee.]*

### Staff/Professional Development

*...as a result of some of our group supervision [the supervisees] got more training on topic areas that they need training around.*

*...[Respondent's supervisees] went out on their own and [got] more training because they knew they were lacking in certain areas that they wanted to be skilled...[they] brought people into the agency to provide training.*

*Sometimes the need for additional training [for agency-related work] has come from the group.*

## Discussion

These examples, which represent contributions from over half of the study participants, exemplify the power of groups to effect change in the context of group supervision conducted in a variety of agency and practice settings. Although the context for social action and change in most of the examples was the agency or organization itself, many of the client-related activities (Figure 1) had a broader impact in the community. For example, materials translated into Spanish were made available for future clients and could facilitate access to services; education offered in the community was available to non-clients as well as those on the caseloads of the social workers; and standardized policies about tardiness and absentee data facilitated communication

between schools. Getzel and Salmon (1985) noted, 'although the primary purpose of group supervision is not the explicit alteration of organizational activities, it may be a latent function' (p.41). The examples provided by the diverse array of 'group supervisors' who participated in this study demonstrate the reality of this statement. While the focus of their supervisory groups was not to 'create change,' their stories exemplify the power and energy of practitioners working together in a safe and supportive environment.

These findings exemplify how the premise presented that social action may be inherent in any type of group (Getzel and Salmon, 1985; Cox, 1991; Breton, 1995) can be true for supervision groups as well. For over half of our respondents an opportunity for social action developed from their supervision group. In these examples, the supervisors functioned in their group leadership role to guide and support the social actions and in their 'third force' (Shulman, 1993) role as effective mediators between the workers and the agency administration. Using their examples and guidance from the literature, we present some strategies for supervisors who wish to open their supervisory guidance to the realm of social action.

The strategies are divided into three categories: 1) supervisor-focused, 2) group-focused, and 3) worker-focused, though all are presented for action by the supervisor. Documentation for these strategies is grounded in the literature and is congruent with input from the study participants as reported in segments of the transcripts not reported in this paper.

## Strategies for supervisors to support social action

### Supervisor-focused

- View the task environment as a resource (Weinbach, 2003)
- Become a resource person (Cox, 1991, Toseland, 1995)
- Address the power differentials in supervisor-supervisee relationship through participative management (Cox, 1991; Toseland, 1995; Weinbach, 2003)
- Model openness to sharing power, authority and knowledge (Shulman, 1993; Weinbach, 2003)
- Engage in self-examination relative to social action (Colwell, 2001)
- Model involvement in collective or social action (Porter, 1994)

### Group-focused

- Facilitate the mutual aid process in the group (Shulman, 1993)
- Facilitate linkages and communication between the group and change agents in the community (Cox, 1991; Toseland, 1995)
- Share power and allow leadership to come from within the group (Cox, 1991; Toseland, 1995)
- Create an organizational climate for teamwork, risk-taking, and openness to change (Porter, 1994)

### Worker-focused

- Understand and support the process of change (Lewin, 1951 as cited in Shulman, 1993; Weinbach, 2003)
- Facilitate the development of worker skills in communication, mediation and advocacy (Cox, 1991; Toseland, 1995)
- Hold and share a vision for hope with enthusiasm (Gitterman and Shulman, 1986; Breton, 1995)
- Be proactive in supporting supervisees involvement in the process of change at all levels of practice

### Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate a strong connection between group supervision and social action. This connection is grounded in the interrelated historical roots of social group work and social work supervision. None of the agencies represented by the group supervisors in this study have social action as a primary service mission, yet over half of the respondents were parties to a variety of social action situations in their supervision groups. The reality of this experience suggests that supervisors need to be prepared in attitude, knowledge and skill to guide supervisees in the natural social action outcomes of the group supervision process.

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