



# Field Education Literature Review: Volume 2

## Emotional Triggers to Field Experiences: Preparing Students and Field Instructors

Author(s)  
Katharine Dill, PhD  
Marist College

### Introduction

This literature review is the second in a series that will be published in each issue of the *Field Educator* on topics related to field instruction. The reviews will highlight key components of practice, including reflective models of supervision and creating safe learning opportunities for students. Each review will contain three discussion questions. Our hope is that field instructors will use these questions to enhance their professional development, incorporate these brief reviews in their daily practice, and begin to develop a library of resources.

The topic of this literature review – how students navigate the emotional terrain of their emerging engagement with the realities of social work practice – emerged from discussions with field educators, student interns, and academic field liaison staff. The review begins by discussing emerging evidence in this area, and then integrates the specific roles of field supervisors and social work educators in supporting social work interns in navigating the complexities of social work practice. The review begins with discussion questions and concludes with best practice considerations that can be used when training field educators.

### Discussion Questions

1. How do you promote the exploration of student interns' emotional needs within the context of your supervisory practice?
2. Give an example of when a student you were supervising was significantly impacted by the work. How did you manage this situation?
3. What research questions should we explore within the context of our practice in field education?

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### **Emerging Evidence**

The evidence to date suggests a hopeful trend for social work interns; social work interns appear to be at their peak of emotional satisfaction in the context of their career development (Harr & Moore, 2011). Those at the beginning of their career often feel the greatest satisfaction, as they begin in their work of helping others. Harr and Moore (2011) suggest that it is at this first phase of the social work practitioner's career that we need to spend time educating student interns about the complexities of engaging with people who may be dealing with very complex life histories.

### **Potential Challenges and Anxieties for Social Work Interns**

Social work interns navigate an intricate emotional terrain. These individuals must interact with and manage the stress of complex practice situations, which can range from the death of a client to child abuse, domestic violence, extreme poverty, and mental health issues. Beyond the stressors of client engagement, social work interns often face their own crises of confidence and competence. They may feel that they have too little knowledge to deal with the situation in front of them, or that they might cause the client harm by being insufficiently trained to intervene (Gelman, 2004).

In their separate studies, Barlow and Hall (2007) and Litvack, Mishna, and Bogo (2010) identified the following themes among the emergent challenges for social work student interns: 1) client circumstances; 2) perceptions about competency; 3) management of potentially violent relationships; 4) the student intern-field supervisory relationship; and 5) the agency environment. These two studies suggest that students' emotional reactions extend beyond their engagement with clients to include authoritarian relationships with supervisors, faculty members, and the broader organization in which they are employed. A particularly salient feature of the Barlow and Hall (2007) study is the very real concerns students expressed about volatile or threatening situations in the workplace.

### **The Role of Field Supervisor**

Unsurprisingly, a theme that resonates throughout the literature is the need for good-quality supervision from field instructors (Cleak & Smith, 2012; Knight, 2001; Miller, Kovacs, Wright, Corcoran, Rosenblum, 2005). Field instructors can be viewed as both a support and a cause of emotional distress for social work interns. The nature of the student intern-field supervisor relationship is based on the power and authority of the supervisor in terms of assessing and evaluating the student intern. The student intern

must achieve a certain level of competency in the eyes of the field supervisor. The field supervisor must also play a complementary role in supporting the intern to reflect on the complexities of the emotional terrain of social work practice. This dual role of supporter and evaluator can be challenging for field educators.

Bogo & Dill (2008) explore a parallel journey that is undertaken by child welfare supervisors, who must negotiate the roles of supportive supervisor and child welfare administrator. Again, there is a balance to be found of power and authority within the context of the worker/supervisory relationship and, in turn, the worker's engagement with the client (Dill, 2007). Kadushin (2002) has highlighted the 'juggling act' that social worker supervisors must always play in terms of providing support to staff in relation to the emotionality of the work, while also ensuring that the tasks engaged in and support provided to clients is paramount and of the highest quality. This same tension exists for field supervisors.

Another unique study and conceptual analysis by Bennett and Saks (2006) and Bennett, Mohr, BrintzenhofeSzoc, and Saks (2008) has explored the role of attachment theory in creating a positive learning environment for social work interns. The conceptual model proposed by Bennett and Saks (2006) considers how adult attachment theory can promote a supervisory relationship in which there is a good fit between the student and the field supervisor. Without such a positive relationship, the authors contend that it is more difficult to create a learning environment that is focused on personal and professional reflection – a necessary tool for understanding and navigating the emotionality of social work (Bogo, 2015).

### **The Role of Social Work Educators**

Almost all the articles and research studies identified for this review highlight the need for social work educators to set aside time to explore the emotional territory of social work internships. Supporting student interns' self-care is one positive element that can help students to understand the overarching complexity of social work, but there is more to consider within a broader context. One of the core themes throughout the literature is the need to address and inspire social work students' own emotional awareness and reflexivity (Marlowe, Appleton, Chinnery, & Van Stratum, 2015; Miller et al., 2005). Marlowe et al. (2015) conducted a unique educational exercise in which social work interns were asked to examine their own emotional reactions to their placements through the lens of a social work reflective assignment. This exercise was repeated four times during the course of the academic year, and invited interns to explore a challenging event that occurred during their placement. Students examined how they saw themselves within the context of this situation, aspects of self that

require further analysis, and strengths and challenges for the future.

A unique study performed by Giddings, Vodde and Cleveland (2004) examined how field placement supervisors often teach as they learn. The authors found that when field supervisors did not address reflective practice and their own emotional reactions to the work, their social work interns would often not go on to explore this for themselves. There appears to be a parallel learning process for the field supervisor and intern. The adage 'we teach as we learn' is particularly true as we explore the subject of students' emotional reactions to their placements.

### **Best Practice Considerations**

The roles of the field supervisor and social work academic are critical in terms of enhancing the start of students' journeys into recognizing and addressing their own emotional reactions. Much of the literature speaks to the role of the field supervisor in exploring and promoting students' reflections on the emotional issues faced by clients, but it is clear that the broader context, including the supervisory relationship and practice setting, also has an impact on students' emerging sense of their personal and professional self. What is missing from the literature is how field supervisors negotiate their own emotional challenges in managing the work on a daily basis. The advice to 'know thyself' seems as pertinent and relevant to field supervisors as it is to students.

Schools of social work must ensure that field supervisors are provided with opportunities to promote a reflective stance on the part of students. However, educators also need to cultivate opportunities for field supervisors to stand back and reflect on their own work. A missing element within the social work literature is a discussion of field supervisors' emotional reactions to their work and how their own journeys may or may not play out in the interactional quality of the supervisory relationship.

### **Other Considerations for Field Supervisors**

Field supervisors may not recognize the impact of the work on the interns they are supervising; what is normal to a seasoned professional is not necessarily normal to someone who has recently joined the social work profession.

Being overseen by a field supervisor can be both supportive and challenging for interns. Social work students see field supervisors as evaluators, but also as people who can help them navigate the complexities of the work. Creating a safe space in which interns can ask questions, make mistakes, and hear from supervisors about the challenges they have encountered over the course of their own careers can help to

encourage an open dialogue about complex issues. Finally, field supervisors should practice what they preach: it is important to model for student interns how to manage stress in their own daily work.

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