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EMOTIONAL REACTIONS OF STUDENTS IN FIELD EDUCATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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An exploratory study using qualitative methodology was undertaken with recent MSW graduates ($N=12$) from 2 graduate social work programs to identify and describe the students' emotional reactions to experiences in field education. Significant and interrelated themes emerged including the subjective and unique definitions of emotionally charged events; the considerable effect of the student-field instructor relationship and the organizational environment, whereby both act as major risk and major protective factors; and participants seeking help from sources in their family and social networks and not necessarily from those in formal social work education roles. Implications for field education are provided.

PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK literature has traditionally acknowledged that practitioners' emotional reactions to practice situations are an important dynamic in understanding and intervening effectively with clients. More recently, all helping professions have increasingly recognized the significant impact on practitioners of exposure to their clients' accounts of trauma and of witnessing disturbing situations. Indeed, an extensive body of theory and research elucidates phenomena such as vicarious trauma (Bride, 2007; Bride & Figley, 2007; Iliffe & Steed, 2000; McCann &

Pearlman, 1990; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995), secondary trauma (Figley, 1995; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995; Stamm, 1995), and compassion fatigue and burnout (Figley, 1995).

This article examines the emotional reactions of social work students to their experiences in the field placement. Social work field education is credited by alumni and employers as having the most significant impact on the preparation of social workers for practice (Fortune & Abramson, 1993; Kadushin, 1991; Tolson & Kopp, 1988) and is characterized as the signature pedagogy of social work

education in *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2008; Shulman, 2005). In field education students are able to integrate theory and practice, gain mastery of intervention skills, and learn to deal with ethically challenging situations.

In addition, it is in the practicum where students experience and explore how personal and professional aspects of self come together. Social work field education literature has traditionally emphasized developing, rather than obliterating, the identity of the learner (Towle, 1954) and helping students to face emotions and personal value judgments elicited in their practice (Younghusband, 1967). The aim is to develop self-awareness to use in understanding and working with client dynamics (Deal, 2000; Hensley, 2002; Saari, 1989). In this context, students' reactions to clients and practicum experiences are understood as by-products of the students' internal and subjective meanings and responses. Field education literature proposes the trusting and supportive field instructor–student relationship as the context for conscious and systematic reflection about how personal reactions and professional interventions merge in practice (Bogo, 1993; Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Walter & Young, 1999), with attention to maintaining boundaries between “treating and teaching” (Hendricks, Finch, & Franks, 2005, p. 7).

Although professional growth and self-awareness developed in field education is generally lauded, theorists such as Polson and Nida (1998) caution that disciplines such as social work, psychology, and family therapy, which require both a classroom and field training component, can be more stressful than

other more traditional graduate programs. In academic courses and the field, learning new concepts and values can challenge core personal and familial worldviews and beliefs, leading to a sense of confusion and even disorientation. Self-concept is often challenged as students struggle to master new skills. Teaching methods that expect active participation through discussion, role-play, and provision of service in the practicum can engender performance anxiety and can differ from the experience of many students who were socialized in an educational system that emphasized the student as passive recipient of knowledge. Furthermore, Kamyra (2000) notes that the social work educational experience is fraught with role ambiguity, conflict, stress, and strain, brought on by such factors as students' own expectations of themselves, their perceptions of faculty and school expectations, field instruction demands, and often conflicting familial roles and work schedules.

The populations with whom students work are frequently vulnerable and overwhelmed. Researchers have noted that clients present with greater acuity and that governmental and managed care fiscal restraints have led to fewer resources and services for clients (Bocage, Homonoff, & Riley, 1995; Raskin & Bloome, 1998). Interaction with these populations may place further stress on students and affect their learning as well as their personal and professional development. Other situations in the field can also adversely affect students' learning. Settings may involve students working with clients who are experiencing intense emotional pain. Students may be exposed to sights and smells they find disagreeable. They may be involved with

clients who are dying, witness clients' death, or experience the distress of bereaved families. Intervention with clients' traumatic stress often involves assisting clients in working through the traumatic experience, thus exposing the helper to the traumatic event through vivid imagery (Bride, 2004). Students are expected to engage in these situations through active listening and to remain empathically attuned to the client, so they may feel overwhelmed. Moreover, exposure to such suffering may trigger students' own personal, painful memories.

In the literature on practitioners' reactions to clients' trauma, the terms *vicarious trauma*, *secondary trauma*, *compassion fatigue*, and *burnout* are often used interchangeably. Vicarious trauma, first described by McCann and Pearlman (1990), refers to a transformation or disruption in cognitive schema and belief systems resulting from engagement with client trauma. Secondary trauma refers to symptoms that mirror those experienced by people experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These symptoms may include a range of adverse sequelae such as intrusive imagery, hypervigilance, sleep disturbance, irritability, relational difficulties, and difficulty concentrating (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Compassion fatigue develops as a result of helpers' exposure to the experiences of clients in tandem with the empathy they feel (Collins & Long, 2003). Although there does not seem to be a standard definition of burnout, there is agreement that it refers to a syndrome of exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of reduced personal accomplishment (Collins & Long, 2003; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Novice practitioners may have not yet acquired mature coping strategies to deal with a range of client situations that evoke strong emotions, and they may have yet to learn how to negotiate organizational demands that create stress. Similarly, practicum students are often expected to become familiar with and negotiate complex organizational structures, some aspects of which can be highly disturbing. In a review of the empirical literature, Bride (2004) comments that younger professionals may be at increased risk due to the lack of opportunity to develop protective strategies. In a conceptual analysis of PTSD and the stresses related to working with patients who have AIDS, Wade, Beckerman, and Stein (1996) point out that young and inexperienced social workers are highly susceptible to PTSD due to their novice status. In fact, in 2007 the *Clinical Social Work Journal* dedicated an issue to the topic of compassion fatigue. Bride and Figley (2007) argue that it is incumbent on social work educators to prepare students to work in highly stressful environments.

Although the previously noted research applies to novice professionals, these observations may also apply to many social work students who, in addition to sharing some characteristics of beginning workers, must also cope with a range of stressors related to students' role conflicts, expectations of field and academic learning, the nature of the field setting, and the population served. Although attention has been paid in the literature to the impact on practitioners' exposure to trauma, there is a gap in the literature regarding the impact on students who are exposed to these types of stressors in the field practicum. Attention to the emotional impact of field experiences has

potential to strengthen the pedagogy of field education (Barlow & Hall, 2007).

Anecdotal reports from field liaisons and classroom teachers suggest a significant number of students experience a range of emotional reactions to their field settings. Students may feel overwhelmed and struggle with their reactions to some practice experiences. It is possible that student distress is underreported, as students may not be willing to share their uncertainties or distress with individuals in authority, such as their field instructors. The lack of attention to students' emotional reactions may reflect an unfortunate by-product of the current emphasis on an educational model of field instruction, rather than on a personal growth model.

In an effort to better understand the emotional reactions of students to their field experiences, a qualitative exploratory study was conducted to identify and describe the emotional reactions of social work students to their experiences in the field placement. The researchers were interested in determining what elements in the field setting contribute to students' emotional reactions, both positive and negative, and what supports or factors students identify as helpful when they experience distress in the field. The goal of the study was to contribute knowledge so that field instructors could more effectively respond to the emotional reactions of students who are exposed to traumatized, stressed, and at-risk populations.

Method

Because there is a lack of literature on students' emotional responses to the field practicum, qualitative methodology was chosen to explore this topic in depth. The participants

were from MSW programs in two Canadian universities. Participants had recently successfully completed all requirements for the MSW degree. One program is located in a large urban center, and the other is located in a rural area. One program uses regular on-site liaison visits, whereas the other uses a troubleshooting model (Fortune et al., 1995). The study received approval from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board.

Recruitment and Sample

Graduating students from master's programs in two schools of social work were invited to participate. Approximately 140 students in each university received a study information letter. Eight students volunteered from one university (one subsequently withdrew), and five students volunteered from the second university. The letter explained the study objectives and detailed the potential risks and benefits to the participants. It was clearly stated that study participation was voluntary. As the researchers are faculty members at one of the participating universities and work directly with students, students were informed that a research assistant, a doctoral student who was an experienced social worker, would conduct all the interviews and that the data would be transcribed and made anonymous before the researchers could access the data.

The final sample included 12 graduating students of both MSW programs. All participants were female. Eight participants were in the age range of 24–29, one was in the range of 30–35, two were in the 40–45 age range, and one was in the range of 50–55. Eight participants had a BA degree, two had BSW degrees, and two had degrees in other disciplines. In

comparison to available demographic information about the student population of both programs, the sample was similar in age distribution. There were no men in the sample, although the student population includes approximately 15% male students.

Data Collection and Analysis

Individual interviews lasting approximately one and a half hours in length were conducted following a semistructured interview guide. The interview guide was developed based on a literature review and the researchers' extensive experience in field education. Questions were open-ended and focused on participants' field experience in general, the organizational environment, their relationship with their field instructor, work with clients, any events that had an emotional impact on them, and any supports they had accessed in this regard.

Thirteen interviews were conducted and were digitally recorded. One participant withdrew from the study after her interview. The remaining 12 interviews were professionally transcribed, and NVivo software was used to organize the data (Richards, 1999). In analyzing the interviews we identified categories and themes (Merriam, 2002), and constant comparison led to groupings of similar concepts about participants' emotional responses to their practicum settings. The researchers developed narrative themes and moved from reading and memo writing to describing, classifying, and interpreting (Cresswell, 1998). Consistent and contradictory themes were identified and compared among the participants. Axial coding procedures were used to explore the interconnectedness among the emerging cate-

gories. Selective coding procedures were employed to build a narrative that connected the themes pertaining to participants' emotional reactions. Finally, memo writing furthered our understanding of participants' emotional reactions, their perceptions of educational supports in their field placements, and of the nature of the practicum setting.

Findings

Four significant and interrelated themes emerged through analysis of the interviews. First, there was great variation in the identification and definition of emotionally charged events. Second, the crucial nature of the student-field instructor relationship emerged as both a major risk and a major protective factor. Third, the impact of the organizational environment as a risk and as a protective factor was similarly apparent. The theme of how, and from whom, participants sought help and problem-solving support emerged as a fourth significant theme. The following sections describe these themes in more detail.

Subjective Definitions of Emotionally Charged Events

A striking finding was the wide range of student responses that was elicited. Analysis of the interviews revealed three distinct categories of events that precipitated a strong emotional reaction among the participants. These included a catastrophic event, organizational and professional issues, and intra/interpersonal issues. All categories of events were perceived by the participants as extremely intense and as affecting the participants both in the field setting and in their personal lives outside the field setting.

Only one student described an event that could objectively be considered catastrophic: a client suicide. As would be expected, this significantly affected the student and created considerable distress. Although she appreciated the attempts of agency staff, faculty, and peers to be supportive, the student felt they could not possibly understand the devastating impact of this experience. Others' attempts at consolation often resulted in this participant feeling that her experience was minimized. Although she recognized that the suicide was not her fault, she struggled with feeling that if she had done something differently, she could have prevented this tragedy. She believed that nothing in the academic program had prepared her to emotionally handle this type of event.

The category of organizational/professional issues reflects some participants' distress in response to various aspects of the organization. The participants expressed negative reactions to factors such as the physical setting, fear for their personal safety, feeling marginalized and disrespected as a student, feeling humiliated, and observing unethical staff behavior. These situations stirred up a range of feelings, including disillusionment and disappointment with the social work profession. Experiencing a stressful relationship with a field instructor also had a major impact on participants and was identified as a significant source of emotional distress.

The category of intra/interpersonal events refers to the participants' individual emotional triggers and to stressors with clients. For example, a crisis of confidence or fear of causing harm created significant stress for some participants. Some participants be-

lieved that clients were disadvantaged as a result of being assigned to them and were concerned that they were potentially failing a client who was in great need of competent professional assistance. Participants were sensitive to clients' reactions to them, and those who reported rejection by a client were strongly affected, unless this was mitigated by a supportive field instructor. The requirement to report suspected child abuse resulted in intense emotions for some students, as this act felt like a betrayal of the client. Several participants feared particular clients. Other participants recognized that their own past emotional issues were triggered by client experiences. For example, working with clients struggling with relationships triggered reactions based on some participants' own relationship history, working with child clients triggered childhood memories, and working with disempowered clients triggered memories of times when they themselves felt powerless. A number of participants described a cognitive process through which they had to bring themselves back to the moment and remind themselves that the client was separate from them. One student for instance, described her experience as follows:

There were moments where I think I wasn't present. But then I'd get into their story and then I'm not so conscious of my story. So I mean I think it's my strategy of saying yeah there's your story and being aware of it and not, like empathizing with the fact that that's me versus them. I'd give myself permission to have those feelings and let it just go. And so I'm kind to myself instead of struggling with it.

Some participants expressed the view that these experiences of countertransference enabled them to relate more empathically to clients. For example, one student commented, "I could relate in the sense that my grandfather was in the hospital just this past winter and so like seeing my family go through the same types of roles," and that this enabled her to have a better understanding of the client's experience.

The Student–Field Instructor Relationship

The student–field instructor relationship emerged as significant, both as a crucial risk factor and as a crucial protective factor. Participants who reported a positive relationship with their field instructor generally weathered difficult challenges and setbacks well. When the relationship was reported to be negative, minor challenges were often described as overwhelming, and the relationship itself became a stressor.

Participants tended to describe their relationship with their instructors in charged terms that were either positive and glowing or highly negative. There seemed to be no middle ground; the instructor was either "loved" or "hated." Of the 12 participants, 10 had two MSW field experiences during their program, and many of them described their two field instructors in a polarized manner, as opposites. For instance, when describing field instructors, it was typical for a participant to depict "one that was great and one that was horrible." They experienced strong personal reactions early on. Comments such as "I instantly felt comfortable with her" or "We just didn't click" reflected their quick emotional reactions to their instructors.

Regardless of the strength of the relationship or of the participant's personal characteristics, participants were acutely aware of the power dynamic. Even participants who generally felt confident and competent expressed a sense of vulnerability within the student–instructor relationship. This sense of vulnerability emerged as a significant stressor when the relationship was not considered solid. Not only were field instructors responsible for the participants' evaluations, but also participants were acutely aware that their instructors might be called upon as a reference for future employment. In addition, participants often hoped to find work in the geographic area and practice specialization of their placement. They believed that an instructor who spoke negatively about them could seriously impede their career options. This possibility created an undercurrent of tension for some participants and magnified what would otherwise likely have been perceived as normal challenges.

Participants very clearly identified factors that contributed to their positive or negative perceptions about their instructor. They were acutely aware of instructors who appeared to feel burdened by the responsibility of a student and who, according to the participants, gave the message, in varying degrees of subtlety, that they did not want to be bothered by the student. Participants were cognizant of instructors who focused on their weaknesses and problems and who did not acknowledge student strengths. Instructors who were described as crossing boundaries, either by eliciting or sharing personal information, created stressful situations for a number of participants. It was not uncommon for some participants to feel they had to take care of and protect their field

instructor. Finally, participants were quite negatively affected by instructors who were perceived as “disrespectful” and “misusing power.”

On a positive note, many respondents identified field instructors who truly mentored them by celebrating their strengths and constructively acknowledging areas for improvement. They appreciated instructors who were welcoming, accessible, and emotionally supportive and who maintained friendly but professional boundaries. Moreover, participants appreciated instructors who spoke positively about former students. Instructors who were protective of students within the agency context, normalized students’ anxieties, acknowledged errors as a learning experience, maintained a balance of structure and flexibility, and gave explicit feedback created an atmosphere that not only enhanced learning but also appeared to mitigate negative emotional responses to client and organizational issues. Instructors who were open to differences and gave the message that they cared about the student seemed to create an emotional safety net. As an example, a student who had experienced a public humiliation described how the negative impact of the experience was mitigated by a supportive field instructor:

Afterward I found my supervisor and we were in the cafeteria. And she was asking me how it went and then I just started to cry in the cafeteria. So that was extremely emotional but yeah she was very understanding and very supportive in that respect and she gave me time to kind of talk about it. She said “if you don’t feel like staying for the rest of

the day maybe you should go home.” So I thought that was handled really well but yeah that was very emotional.

Organizational Environment

The organizational atmosphere was another factor that could potentially mitigate or exacerbate participants’ distress. Participants proved to be very acute observers, ever watchful and sensitive to organizational issues and patterns such as power dynamics, meta-communications, “in groups,” and “out groups.” The organizational environment and the relationship with the instructor appear to be interrelated variables with the potential to enhance the positive or mitigate or exacerbate the negative impact of the other. A positive relationship with a field instructor often protected participants from tense organizational issues. These students were able to share observations with their field instructor who in turn supported the student and often normalized the participant’s reactions. At times, the negative impact of a stressful relationship with a field instructor was cushioned by others in the agency, who were supportive, made themselves available for consultation, and provided a welcoming atmosphere. The combination of a stressful relationship with the instructor and a negative organizational environment appeared to result in a toxic situation that affected on the participants’ learning.

Participants were acutely aware of whether they were welcome and valued by their organization. They indicated awareness of team dynamics and recognized when they could, without hesitation, approach anyone on the team for assistance. Comments such as

"We never had to feel that we had to flounder" or "They saw me not only as a student but as someone who could give back to the organization" reflected positive experiences.

These observations are in contrast to other participants' reflections of spending a great deal of emotional energy on such matters as managing the agency politics, struggling with client issues on their own, and nursing wounded self-esteem. Participants were aware of their instructors' conflicts and status within the agency and had to balance alliances. This dilemma was noted by one student who said:

I didn't feel comfortable talking to a lot of the team members because when I would tell them something on behalf of my instructor they would brush me off and kind of say "oh yeah okay," and then continue on their way.

Participants were cognizant of the care staff had taken to provide a welcoming physical atmosphere, not only for the students but also for clients. A number of participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to personalize their own physical space.

In general, participants proved to be particularly sensitive to negative feedback when the general environment was perceived as "critical" and "cold." For example, one student described feeling extreme distress when a presentation she made was not well received. Another student felt extremely humiliated when she experienced a personally embarrassing incident in front of a group of clients. When not mitigated by a protective and supportive instructor or agency environment,

these types of incidents contributed to battered self-esteem and an intense emotional response that affected the participants' personal lives.

Seeking Problem-Solving Assistance and Support

A number of clearly identifiable and significant patterns emerged with respect to seeking problem-solving assistance and support. Similar themes were found in the responses of participants from both schools despite the two different faculty-field liaison protocols. Participants were highly reluctant to share their feelings and concerns with either designated faculty or with the field liaison, and did so only when they saw no other option. Despite perceiving faculty and field liaison as wanting to be helpful and as "nice," the participants did not see them as generally trustworthy and were always wary of approaching them with a problem. The recognition of a power imbalance strongly influenced their willingness to display vulnerabilities and to take the chance that they might be judged.

Friends and family were almost invariably the first people participants approached for support and advice with respect to their field placement. Fellow students were often a source of assistance because they could generally be expected to understand the troubling issue and to be empathic and nonjudgmental. Talking with friends who were in the program was generally described as very productive, as the experience was normalized when others expressed the same concerns and feelings. As an example, one student noted:

There was a huge relief when I talked about it with friends who were in the

program too. It was just like "oh God thank God you're going through this too oh good, okay." So it became, it just became like a stress relief.

Participants were most able to express shameful feelings to family and friends. As the stressful issues sometimes affected their core self-esteem, the context of these safe relationships enabled the participants to expose their vulnerabilities. For example, they could cry, act foolishly, disclose fears and, as one student aptly stated, could admit that she felt like a "goof" without fear of reprisal. Some participants regularly telephoned partners or friends throughout the day, just to have them listen.

Although peer support was generally perceived as useful, there were occasions when participants believed that their peers did not understand their emotional reactions. At times, the issue seemed insignificant to others, but due to interrelated factors such as an unsupportive environment or the participant's individual personal characteristics, was experienced as very significant to the participant.

When the relationship with the field instructor was strong, participants would sometimes attempt to seek help from them. They could also, in the context of a safe, secure relationship with an instructor, disclose vulnerabilities. Similarly, if there was a positive relationship, an agency staff member was at times called upon for support or advice.

On the occasions when participants sought faculty assistance, rather than approaching their assigned faculty adviser, they most commonly approached a faculty member with whom they had a relationship.

Seeking help from the field liaison was even more daunting than approaching a trusted faculty member and fraught with anticipated difficulties. Regardless of the liaison structure, participants rarely described a meaningful and trusting relationship with the liaison. They were often concerned about what steps would be taken by the liaison if the situation was considered truly problematic. Most commonly, their expressed goal was to complete the program and obtain their degree. Participants worried that if they asked for assistance they might be risking their ability to complete the program successfully, a risk that was unacceptable; rather, the participants chose to suffer in silence. At times, participants struggled with the emotional impact of potentially dangerous clients or client situations, field instructors who abused their power, toxic agency politics, and woefully inadequate supervision rather than seek help from their liaison.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to elucidate the factors and dynamics associated with students' emotional responses to their field experiences. Drawing on the literature and anecdotal evidence from faculty who provide consultation and support to students in the field practicum, the expectation was that students would recount clinical practice situations that were so difficult that they might feel traumatized, resulting in strong reactions with adverse affects on their learning and personal well-being. The study findings only partially supported the observations of faculty that some students were traumatized or experienced strong negative emotional reactions in

response to events in the practicum. The small sample size and the nature of the sample may have contributed to these results. Following conventional human subjects research ethics, the investigators could not directly recruit students into the study who had self-identified to faculty as having been adversely affected by practice events. Rather, volunteers were sought and may not have represented the student body nor included students who had traumatic and negative experiences. Students may have volunteered who had either very strong positive or very strong negative feelings about their field learning. Moreover, the findings are based only on the perspectives of the participants and not those of their field instructors. Hence, although the study findings provide interesting insights, generalizations applied to student field education should be made with caution. Despite these limitations, there is some support in the literature for the findings of this study.

Emotionally upsetting experiences can be conceptualized as a product of interrelated factors such as the actual practice event and its subjective meaning for the student, the nature of the student and field instructor relationship, and the student's comfort in the organization. First, regarding the practice event, only one participant experienced what in the literature would be described as an objective catastrophic event: the suicide of a client. The participants, however, spoke at length about subjective stress and strong emotional reactions that spilled over into their everyday lives. It was apparent that individual participants had highly individual definitions of what was experienced as critical, humiliating, or upsetting. Events considered

to be extremely upsetting by a participant might not be perceived similarly by other students, field instructors, or faculty. It is recognized in the literature that when subjective experiences are not acknowledged or validated, the effect on the individual can be quite devastating (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992).

The second contributing factor to defining experiences as distressing is the nature of the student-field instructor relationship. Similar to the abundant empirical literature on the crucial nature of this relationship to students' satisfaction and perception of quality field experiences (Fortune & Abramson, 1993; Gray, Alperin, & Wik, 1989; Knight, 2000; Strozier, Barnett-Queen, & Bennett, 2000), the student-field instructor relationship served as either a risk or a protective factor. When students reacted negatively to field events and sought the guidance of their field instructors, warm, supportive, and interested field instructors made a difference in assisting students to process the experience and move ahead in their learning. These instructors appeared to acknowledge students' strengths in the face of their fears and strong emotional reactions; they normalized student anxieties, were attentive to student concerns, and maintained appropriate boundaries with distressed students. Conversely, students did not seek out field instructors who were seen as unavailable or uninterested in teaching. The absence of a potentially helpful person appeared to exacerbate students' negative reactions, whereas the presence of a caring field instructor appeared to soften or diminish the students' discomfort and distress. This finding is consistent with Bennett and colleagues' (Bennett, Mohr, Szoc, & Saks, 2008; Bennett & Saks, 2006) recent

contributions in which the relationship is viewed through the lens of attachment theory. These authors underscore the importance of the field instructor providing a secure base so that the student can return "to the safe haven of supervision for repair of the inevitable ruptures that occur during the field experience" (Bennett & Saks, 2006, p. 671). The field instructor who is attuned to the student's cues can determine what should be offered, when to provide encouragement to venture forth again into the practice situation, and when to use the safe haven of the relationship to examine the vulnerabilities and difficulties evoked in learning. Additional study of the links among the nature of the relationship, students' emotional reactions, and ability to learn and master competencies is warranted.

Finally, with respect to the student-field instructor relationship, there were examples in which the relationship itself was the source of negativity and stress for the participants. In such relationships students experienced the field instructor as misusing power, such as behaving in authoritarian and punitive ways or inconsistently crossing boundaries by sharing too much personal information and then avoiding and retreating from the student. These dynamics created an undercurrent of tension throughout the practicum for students and intensified students' reactions to challenging practice events by operating as a double burden, whereby the student was concerned about the event and also concerned about how to relay their concerns to an instructor viewed as unsupportive or punitive. This finding is consistent with results from a national survey of critical incidents in

field learning (Giddings, Vodde, & Cleveland, 2003). Respondents identified as negative a field instructor's harsh and unyielding style; being rigid, authoritarian, overly challenging, or accusatory, and lacking empathy and sensitivity to student needs. Also reported as critical was unprofessional behavior with moderate ethical and boundary violations.

The third contributing factor to perceiving an experience as stressful relates to the organizational context of the practicum. Agency policies, observations of informal styles of communication, and staff tensions all had the potential to affect the participants. Study participants were acutely aware of organizational dynamics and their field instructors' status in the setting and how they are perceived by the team. Acutely attuned to the agency culture as it relates to staff, students, and clients, participants recalled that the environmental context affected them intensely. This variable interacted in a synergistic manner with the effect of the student-field instructor relationship. A positive experience with one lessened the negative impact of the other. When both the relationship and the organizational context were stressful, the total experience was perceived as highly negative. Although there is considerable literature on the impact of workplace stress on employees, there is virtually no literature on the effect of the organizational context on social work students. Given that the social work profession relies heavily on ecosystems theory, this is a glaring gap.

When students experienced upsetting emotional reactions, they turned to persons they felt they could trust to help them handle these reactions. As noted, when field instruc-

tors were perceived as supportive, students processed their experiences with them. Of interest was the finding that participants did not go to the field liaison for help. Different faculty field liaison models were offered by the two schools in this sample: a traditional intensive model with regular visits and a trouble-shooting model (Fortune et al., 1995) that does not include field visits. Regardless of the practicum model, almost all the participants viewed the liaisons as “nice” people who were not very effective. They described a superficial relationship that was task focused. They did not disclose problems because they feared that they would not be supported, or worse still that they would be judged, and that disclosing any vulnerability would jeopardize their future careers. Participants’ primary sources of support were family, friends, and, most significant, student colleagues. When faculty input was truly required they approached faculty members with whom they had relationships rather than designated advisers or liaisons. Once again, given the clinical literature on relationship and therapeutic alliance, it is not surprising that when feeling vulnerable and in need of support, students would turn to those they trust.

Implications for Practice and Research

The findings of this study have implications for faculty and field instructors in understanding emotional reactions of students in field placements. The themes that emerged highlight that the participants’ success in the field placement resulted from a number of factors including their own abilities and charac-

teristics and variables related to the placement such as the nature of the student–field instructor relationship and the organizational environment. These findings correspond with the ecological person-in-environment framework.

The significant variation in how participants identified and defined emotionally charged events points to the importance of validating a student’s subjectivity rather than focusing on “objective” facts. Clearly, events and situations in the practicum that match events that according to the literature are “objectively” considered traumatic were defined by participants as emotionally charged and potentially distressing. Our findings suggest that other events and situations, however, that do not fit with the traditional notion of events that can be experienced as traumatic, might also significantly affect and distress students. This finding warrants further study to categorize events and their meanings for students.

The findings highlight the potentially crucial nature of the student–field instructor relationship for the student and suggest that this relationship might serve as a significant risk or protective factor. There is unequivocal evidence about the significance of the worker–client relationship, which is considered fundamental to effective social work practice (Hollis, 1970; Richmond, 1917). The importance of the student–field instructor relationship has only recently been given due attention (Bogo, 1993) and remains underestimated (Fox, 1998). Increasingly, however, the student–field relationship has been considered central to the process of learning clinical practice and critical to the student’s satisfaction with field education (Bogo, 1993; Fox, 1998).

Further research is recommended to explore the impact of the student–field instructor relationship.

Our results also point to the impact of the organizational environment on students and its potential to serve as a risk or protective factor. A hallmark of social work practice is the person-in-environment or ecological framework. According to this perspective, because individuals are embedded in social and environmental contexts, multiple factors invariably contribute to social, emotional, and behavioral patterns (Germain & Bloom, 1999). Such factors include individual characteristics, social interactions, and ecological and cultural conditions. This perspective suggests that it may be important to take into account the effect of a placement’s organizational environment on a student’s emotional reactions and functioning.

A striking finding that emerged through analysis of the interviews is that participants turned to their friends and family for support and help in dealing with emotionally charged issues and stresses in the practicum despite the presence of faculty field liaison models. The field placement is an integral component of students’ social work education and requires further research. How effectively students manage stresses in the placement can influence their strategies in dealing with stressors that arise in their future social work practice. Research is needed to examine the ways students cope with emotionally charged events, including to whom they turn for help and the factors that influence that choice. Such research will contribute to new faculty and field models that promote student learning and development.

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