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Fieldwork Supervision & Mental Health of Social Work Students

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ICIT + Dr. Walter Yung, Prof. Helen Ho & Dr. K.C. Li

6-8/2/2025 hosted by the **GCC**, Paper # **5-4**

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1. AIM

- ◆ **Fieldwork practicum** are essential components of social work education, providing students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge and skills in real-world settings.
- ◆ This can also be highly stressful, potentially affecting students' **mental health**.

This paper aims to explore relationships of the **quality of supervision and the mental well-being of social work students during their practicum.**

2. Mental health and the stressors of Social Work student

- ◆ The World Health Organization (2021) defines mental health as encompassing an individual's emotional, psychological, and social well-being influencing their capacity to *cope with stress, engage in interpersonal relationships, and make informed decisions.*
- ◆ Social work students encounter a range of **stressors** that can substantially affect their academic performance and mental health.

3. Literature Review

◆ A literature review by Collins (2006), Dan (2019), Gair and Baglow (2018), McGavock and Spratt (2014), Thomas (2016), and Lee and Kearney (2020) identifies **several** critical areas of stress, including *academic pressure, financial strain, emotional challenges, personal life stressors (such as family responsibilities), perfectionism, self-doubt*, and the difficulties associated with field placements.

◆ Particularly, Ying (2011) emphasizes that **field placements** are a vital component of social work education; however, they can also serve as a significant source of stress. Social work students often encounter difficulties in translating theoretical knowledge into practical application. Additionally, interactions with clients may elicit strong emotional responses, especially when addressing issues related to trauma. Adjustment to the placement environment might also pose stress.

Functions of Fieldwork Supervision (Kadushin, 2002)

- ◆ **Administrative**, which includes promoting and maintaining high standards of work, coordinating practice with administrative policies, and ensuring the efficient operation of the office.
 - ◆ **Educational**, aimed at fostering the professional development of each student in a manner that encourages the realization of their potential for utility.
 - ◆ **Supportive**, where the fieldwork supervisor plays a crucial role in maintaining harmonious working relationships.
- Effective supervision facilitates the integration of theoretical knowledge and practical application, while also addressing the **emotional needs** of students, thereby fostering a more comprehensive educational experience.

5.1 Research Methods

The study utilized a quantitative design and employed two main instruments:-

1) Supervision Quality Assessment Scale (**SQAS**)

SQAS was developed by **Dan** (2019) to evaluate the quality of supervision across various professional contexts, particularly in social work, counseling, and education. This tool focuses on the three key dimensions of supervision that are essential for effective supervision. There are a total of 25 items, using a five-point Likert Scale. A score between 25-50 reflects low supervision, between 51-75 reflects medium quality supervision, and above 76 points to high quality supervision.

5.2 Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales (DASS)

- ◆ DASS is a standardized set of self-report measures designed to evaluate **levels** of depression, anxiety, and stress among individuals.
- ◆ It is widely recognized in both clinical and research settings for its effectiveness in identifying and quantifying the **severity** of emotional states, thereby assisting professionals in guiding treatment and interventions.
- ◆ Its versatility and user-friendliness make it a **valuable** resource for understanding the mental health of placement students.

5.3 The DASS-21 comprises three distinct Subscales

- ◆ The **first** subscale, depression, assesses feelings of hopelessness, loss of interest, and low self-esteem.
- ◆ The **second** subscale, anxiety, measures symptoms such as nervousness, panic attacks, and physiological arousal.
- ◆ The **third** subscale, stress, evaluates levels of tension, irritability, and difficulties in relaxation. Each subscale consists of a series of statements that respondents rate based on their experiences over the preceding week. The DASS-21 categorizes respondents into five levels for each condition: normal, mild, moderate, severe, and extremely severe.

6. Questionnaires

On-line questionnaires were sent to social work students taking their fieldwork practicum around the mid of their placement.

174 valid responses were received from two levels of programme

- ◆ Higher Diploma in Social Work
- ◆ Bachelor of Social Work

(including both full-time and part-time modes of study.)

7.1 Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Study Program

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Bachelor	109	62.6	62.6	62.6
	Higher Diploma	65	37.4	37.4	100.0
	Total	174	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: Study Mode

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Full-time	142	81.6	81.6	81.6
	Part-time	32	18.4	18.4	100.0
	Total	174	100.0	100.0	

7.2 Profile of Respondents

Table 3: Gender

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Male	88	50.6	50.6	50.6
	Female	86	49.4	49.4	100.0
	Total	174	100.0	100.0	

Table 4: Age

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Under 20	21	12.1	12.1	12.1
	21 - 25	47	27.0	27.0	39.1
	26 - 30	36	20.7	20.7	59.8
	31 - 35	27	15.5	15.5	75.3
	36 - 40	27	15.5	15.5	90.8
	41 or above	16	9.2	9.2	100.0
	Total	174	100.0	100.0	

7.3 Profile of Respondents

Table 5: Practicum

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Practicum 1	88	50.6	50.6	50.6
	Practicum 2	86	49.4	49.4	100.0
	Total	174	100.0	100.0	

Table 6: Grade

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	A	1	.6	.6	.6
	A-	29	16.7	17.3	17.9
	B+	63	36.2	37.5	55.4
	B	48	27.6	28.6	83.9
	B-	15	8.6	8.9	92.9
	C+	6	3.4	3.6	96.4
	C	3	1.7	1.8	98.2
	C-	1	.6	.6	98.8
	F	2	1.1	1.2	100.0
	Total		168	96.6	100.0
Missing	System	6	3.4		
Total		174	100.0		

8.1 FINDINGS

The perception of the quality of supervision was on the high side, as 140 (80.5%) students regarded that the supervision provided by their supervisor were with **high quality** (Table 7).

Table 7: Classifications according to SQAS

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Low Quality Supervision	5	2.9	2.9	2.9
	Medium Quality Supervision	29	16.7	16.7	19.5
	High Quality Supervision	140	80.5	80.5	100.0
	Total	174	100.0	100.0	

8.2 FINDINGS

Presented in Tables 8 to 10 indicate that students generally experienced higher levels of **anxiety** compared to stress or depression. Specifically, 18 students (11.3%) were categorized as experiencing severe to extremely severe anxiety.

The **mean scores** for the various mental health measures were as follows: 6.66 for depression, 6.53 for anxiety, and 8.54 for stress, showing students had higher level of stress on the average.

These results suggest a significantly elevated level of **stress** among students participating in fieldwork placements.

Table 8: Depression score

	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Normal	124	71.2	71.2	71.2
Mild	16	9.2	9.2	81.6
Moderate	22	12.6	12.6	94.2
Severe	12	6.9	6.9	100.0
Total	174	100.0	100.0	

8.3 FINDINGS

Table 9: Anxiety score

	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Normal	108	62.1	62.1	62.1
Mild	17	9.8	9.8	71.9
Moderate	31	17.8	17.8	89.7
Severe	6	4.4	4.4	94.1
Extremely severe	12	6.9	6.9	100.0
Total	174	100.0	100.0	

Table 10: Stress score

	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Normal	143	82.2	82.2	82.2
Mild	16	9.2	9.2	91.4
Moderate	15	8.6	8.6	100.0
Total	174	100.0	100.0	

8.4 FINDINGS

Table 11: Quality of supervision among students in different category of depression

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	
Normal	124	102.4274	18.33481	8.650	<.001
Mild	16	80.3125	27.21940		
Moderate	22	88.7273	21.92451		
Severe	12	108.0833	21.91495		
Total	174	99.0517	21.26009		

Table 12: Quality of supervision among students in different category of anxiety

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	
Normal	108	101.8333	18.96258	2.891	<.024
Mild	17	92.1765	20.43354		
Moderate	31	91.8397	24.78453		
Severe	6	87.6667	21.91495		
Extremely severe	12	108.0833			
Total	174	99.0517	21.26009		

Table 13: Quality of supervision among students in different category of stress

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	
Normal	143	100.3077	19.43434	7.945	<.001
Mild	16	80.5000	27.61159		
Moderate	15	106.8687	21.51035		
Total	174	99.0517	21.26009		

8.5 FINDINGS

- ◆ Significant differences were identified between the **quality of supervision** and **students' mental health status**.
- ◆ Most pronounced difference in **depression levels**, with an F value of 8.65 ($p < .001$). Students classified as **highly depressed had an average score of 108.09** on the **Quality Supervision Assessment Scale**, whereas those with **mild depression averaged 80.31**.
- ◆ Smallest difference was noted in **anxiety levels**, with an F value of 2.891 ($p < .024$); **highly stressed students reported an average score of 108.08**, while those with **severe anxiety averaged 87.67** (see Tables 11-13).
- ◆ Students experiencing **higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress tended to rate the quality of their supervision more favorably**, in contrast to those in the **mild category**, who provided lower ratings despite still categorizing the supervision as high quality.

8.6 FINDINGS

- ◆ Students facing greater mental health challenges perceived **their supervisors as providing effective support.**
- ◆ Students in a normal mental health state rated the quality of **supervision as the second highest** among all categories, indicating that individuals without significant mental health concerns **recognized and appreciated the support received.**
- ◆ The maximum achievable score on the Supervision Quality Assessment Scale is 125, and respondents reported a **mean score of 99.05**, reflecting a **high level of satisfaction with their supervision.**

9. DISCUSSION

- ◆ Effective supervision can **mitigate** some of the stressors associated with fieldwork, providing students with the necessary guidance and support to navigate their experiences successfully.
- ◆ Supervisors who **understand** the complexities of students' situations can tailor their support to meet individual needs, fostering a more conducive learning environment.
- ◆ The high mean level of reported stress among students **underscore** the challenges inherent in fieldwork placements. As these experiences are integral to professional development, ensuring that students receive adequate support is paramount. This study reinforces the importance of ongoing training and development for fieldwork supervisors to enhance their skills in providing effective supervision.

10.1 The Impact of Supervision Quality

- ◆ There were significant differences between the **quality** of supervision and students in different mental health status. Students who reported higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress also rated their supervision more favorably.
- ◆ This paradox suggests that students may **perceive supportive supervision as a buffer** against the stressors associated with fieldwork, even when they are experiencing mental health challenges, or the **supervisors well understood** the situation of the students and thus able to **provide more support** to those in need.

10.2 The Impact of Supervision Quality

- ◆ **Effective supervision can mitigate the adverse effects of stress and enhance students' learning experiences.**
- ◆ The findings align with previous studies that emphasize the importance of a **supportive** supervisory relationship in social work education.
- ◆ For instance, Baird (2016), Casado, B. L., Negi, N. J., & Hong M. (2012) noted that a safe supervisory **relationship** can help normalize student anxiety and promote learning, suggesting that supervisors play a vital role in shaping students' emotional experiences during their placements.

11. Mental Health Challenges in Fieldwork

- ◆ The elevated levels of stress reported by students underscore the inherent challenges of fieldwork placements. As Todd et al. (2019) noted, **social work students often face a "toxic brew" of financial, academic, and personal stressors** that can lead to mental health issues.
- ◆ With average **DASS** scores indicating high levels of stress, it reflects the broader trend observed in social work education, where students frequently report feeling overwhelmed by their responsibilities.
- ◆ Study's results highlight the **need** for social work programs to address the mental health needs of students proactively.
- ◆ The high levels of reported **stress** suggest that institutions must prioritize mental health support as an integral part of the educational experience.
- ◆ This aligns with Todd et al. (2019), who argues that social work educators should view **mental health** issues through a social justice lens, advocating for systemic changes to support students effectively.

12.1 Recommendations for Improvement

- ◆ **Enhance supervisor training** to incorporate mental health awareness and support strategies. Dill and Murphy (2022) suggest that **supervisors equipped with the skills to recognize and address mental health concerns** can provide more effective support to students.
- ◆ **Regular check-ins between supervisors and students** should be implemented to foster open communication and facilitate the early identification of mental health issues. Dill and Murphy (2022) emphasize that this proactive approach can **create a supportive environment** where students feel comfortable discussing their challenges. To this end, mid-term and final meetings should be scheduled to evaluate students' performance during placements and assess the supervision situation.
- ◆ **Promoting peer support networks** can enable students to share their experiences and coping strategies, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and enhancing resilience. If feasible, colleges should arrange partnerships within each placement unit to foster mutual support among students.

12.2 Recommendations for Improvement

- ◆ **Actively promote the mental health resources** accessible to students, including counseling services, workshops, and stress management programs.
- ◆ **Awareness campaigns** can help destigmatize the act of seeking help and encourage students to utilize available resources when necessary. Research has demonstrated that access to mental health services can significantly improve students' academic performance and overall well-being.
- ◆ **Integrating mental health education into the social work curriculum** can empower students to manage their well-being and understand the importance of seeking help when needed. This education should encompass topics such as self-care strategies, stress and time management techniques, and the significance of recognizing when to seek assistance.
- ◆ Educating students with mental health programs can **empower** them to take proactive steps in managing their well-being as social work students.

13. CONCLUSIONS

- ◆ **Underscore** the significant correlation between supervision quality and the mental health of social work students during their placement.
- ◆ **Advocate** for the implementation of strategies aimed at improving the quality of supervision, which can ultimately support students' mental well-being and enhance their learning experiences in the field.
- ◆ **Continue** to evolve, prioritizing mental health and effective supervision, will be essential to prepare competent and resilient practitioners.

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