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THE PROCESS OF SUPERVISION OF STUDENT'S RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK

Foreword

The ensuing account represents the evaluation of an eight year period of continued experience in the teaching of a two-semester course in Thesis at the School of Social Work of the University of Puerto Rico, as a full time member of the faculty. The writer has drawn too for this report on the contents of an unpublished article prepared by Miss Julia Denoyers (2),[1] another member of same faculty and field instructor in case work who was enrolled in the Thesis course in 1944. Miss Denoyers wrote her research project under the direction of the author and graciously consented to express in writing, at the request of the author, her viewpoints on the effects of this course.

During this eight year period under scrutiny there have

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[1] Numbers appearing in parenthesis refer to the numbered references in the bibliography.

been twenty-four students enrolled in the course in Thesis, of whom ten succeeded in the satisfactory completion of the project, six are struggling still for the termination of the project and the others were casualties at various stages of the game, two of them even at the point of the second draft. Besides this learning experience in tutorial teaching, the author supervised the projects of two other students who were enrolled in accredited Schools of Social Work in the Continent, and who prepared their degree project *in absentia*, and of five students at the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work while in residence at that School for the Doctoral Program.

Gordon has claimed that around $1,000,000 are being invested each year in research projects by the students receiving graduate degrees; or, that the time and students devoted to research projects each year is equivalent in man-power to a full-time year round staff of 200 to 300 people engaged in social work research (3).

To answer in part the question which Gordon poses as to whether the social work profession is receiving returns in knowledge commensurate with this investment in the research process, the author believes that more light should be reflected on the process now being used to supervise the production of this research.

For the years 1944 to 1950 and 1951 to 1955 the author has been supervising student's research and trying to find a written source which would help her to learn more about what she was doing. Social work as a profession directed to influence or help the social process —the psychic interaction that takes place between people in connection with adjustive efforts of group and communal living— is earmarked for continuous and dynamic changes. It is difficult, therefore, to write on some perennial aspects of a subject that is ever changing. Yet, having failed to find any source on this aspect of research, the decision to write this paper was made in the hope that it may stimulate someone else to produce a better and more complete work on the subject.

Process

In order to evaluate the contents of the process of supervision in student's research, a condensed description of the over all operations performed will be attempted first after which a detailed exposition of the contents, methods, limits and movement will follow.

Whenever there was more than one student enrolled in the Thesis course, the beginning of the session was marked by a meeting of all. This period was used for an informal, tentative discussion of the field situation into which they came. This situation included:

1) The place of the research project in the total social work curriculum: meaning, relationships, objectives.

2) The methods employed in teaching: mostly tutorial; definite scheduled time for individual conferences which the students were expected to use at will; use of time limits, minimum number of hours a week to be spent in the investigation; handling of the written material at least 48 hours in advance of an appointment; role of the advisor; use of the Manual.

3) Emphasis on the need to explore various subjects as potential topics, by looking into the list of thesis titles submitted to the member schools of the American Association of Schools of Social Work, by conferring with the various members of the faculty, by interviewing the executives or sub-executives of the social agencies in the community, by looking into the general library stacks for which they were granted special permission by virtue of being graduate students in the School of Social Work.

4) The borderline between the Agency's area of competence, the student's and the School.

Place of the Research Project in the Social Work
Curriculum

In making the introduction of the research project to a new crop of second year students, a review of the *creed* or platform

of the particular school in which they were enrolled, as stated in the official bulletin for the current year was done. It was ascertained first, what was the tone and level of thinking of these students in regards to the project. If there was a gap or a deviation on the part of some of the students from the particular philosophy of the School, the difference was set for discussion until a tentative agreement was reached between instructor and students. In general, the research project was considered as an opportunity to apply the techniques of social work investigation, which in turn was thought of as providing for the evaluation of the activities of the profession in terms of the purposes of the latter, as well as the contribution of knowledge to increase "the accuracy of target"... or effectiveness of help.

Emphasis was made on the part played by the project in the exercise of originality and ingenuity, as evidenced in the selection of one topic to the exclusion of others; in the need for experimental design, in the selection of tools that would lead to a more reliable and valid inquiry, in construing a frame of reference and scheme of interpretation, and, in the formulation of inferences and conclusions.

The relation the project should have with the areas of specialization or areas of major interest of the students was stressed too. It was pointed out that usually those areas to which the student has devoted more time seem more fertile for prodding; or reversing the argument, that queries were more prominent in the more familiar areas. The intimate tie between thorough knowledge of a field and the selection, gauging, refinement and application of the instruments of research was also commented.

The concrete expectations of the School in the concomitant outcome of the research project were summarized as the development of concepts and attitudes typified by the inquiring mind; the urge to persevere until a discovery was achieved and the recognition that knowledge in social work is tentative, subject to needed verification.

Review of Knowledge and Preliminary Observation

The value of these two phases in the planning and conduct of genuine research should be thoroughly stressed. To have the student go over the list of theses titles as published by the member schools of the American Association of Schools of Social Work is a very fruitful procedure. As a trainee in research the student should develop the habit of searching first all the written material referring to his field of interest and related fields as well as consulting those experts in the same fields. This practice will contribute to a desirable growing conviction, that knowledge is gained through an ordained coherent sequence of activities. Another not less important boon for the research trainee is to visualize that in the definition of his particular problem all his predecessors have a bearing.

Relations Between the School and the Social Agencies

The School should assume the leadership in formulating the lines of communication, responsibility and function of each of the parties concerned: the School, the student and the Agency. In this learning situation the School should protect the student from an inauspicious venture which could maim his possibilities of obtaining the degree at the end of two academic years. Besides fixing the policies governing these relations in the Thesis Manual and circular letters to this effect, the School should be on the alert for new circumstances which might modify the existing policies, and which in turn should be a matter for discussion between the representatives of the School and the representatives of the Agencies. From time to time the Supervisor of Theses should point out to the School Administrator the convenience of including in the agenda of joint meetings for the faculty and Agency representatives, the discussion of these relations from different angles of approach.

The student should be encouraged to assume the leadership in the initiation of appointments with the Agency officials who have the authority to grant permission for such inquiry. In this

respect, it should be made clear to the student that the conduct of a research project with agency material is an enterprise of mutual benefit for the parties concerned. Usually the student is inclined to think that he is asking for a large favor from the Agency and that he should be contented with whatever concessions the Agency is willing to give. One way to show to the student the form in which the Agency is to benefit also is to convert into money values the cost of such research enterprise if the Agency would do it with its own resources.

The School should use every opportunity available to interpret to the Agency that the analysis and conclusions of the research project are exclusively in the province of the student's responsibility. All the agreements reached with an Agency should be written and signed by the School representative, the Agency representative and the student. This is the best safeguard against any possible deterrent action.

The Tutorial Method of Teaching

Highet has paid eloquent homage to the deeply formative influence of the system of tutorial teaching, sometimes called the Greek or Socratic method:

"...this system is the most difficult, the least common, and the most thorough way to teach. It is most difficult because it demands constant alertness, invariable good humor, complete earnestness, and utter self-surrender to the cause of truth, on the part of both teacher and pupil. It is least common because it is expensive in time, money and efforts... It is far easier to give two one-hour lectures to classes of fifty or sixty than to tutor one or two pupils for two hours, questioning, objecting, remembering, following up, arguing, defending yourself and counter attacking and always moving towards a definite end which must not be hurried or overemphasized... But for the pupils, tutoring on this system is far the best kind of education. The tutor gets to know them very well —better than their parents know them, better sometimes than they know themselves! He cannot in such close relationship be tyrannous or chilly. Often he becomes both an example and a friend. He learns the pupils' weaknesses and corrects them by

gentle steady pressure. He knows the pupils' strengths, and develops them...[2]

In the same discourse he has acknowledged also that a professor who advises a graduate student on a thesis which takes a year or more to write is tutoring too "... on a rather high level".[3]

The tutorial method of teaching, for the purpose of this paper has been divided into two parts: the group conference and the individual conference. Each will be discussed separately.

a). The group conference

At the time of the first group conference the students seemed to be too dazzled by the newness and amount of material given to them and usually did not ask questions although they were encouraged to do so.

It is only when the student had started to deal with the material of his research that the questions seemed to arise. Thus in many of the individual conferences subsequent to the group conference, most of the data given before had to be reiterated but at this time they seem to have a different flavor and meaning because of the apparent development of a better grasp of the implications of the process. Not all the concepts presented in the group conference were lost, however. There seemed to be some residual amount left in them and besides they seem to have grown confidence that now that they had glimpsed the scope or "wholeness" of the enterprise they would be able to plan and estimate the nature and degree of involvement they needed to go through before they achieve the end. This initial group conference seem to generate in them some momentum, rythm, and sense of direction.

Usually there were two more group conferences called forth during the first semester; one near the midterm and another toward the end. In the second group conference the title,

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[2] Highet, Gilbert, *The Art of Teaching*, Alfred A. Knopf, N. Y., 5th printing, 1951, p. 122.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

sub-title and preliminary outline as approved by a faculty meeting were discussed. The third group conference comprised mostly the discussion of the methodology for collecting and interpreting the data as elaborated by the individual student.

At the beginning of the second semester, another group meeting of the students in the Thesis course was held, and this time, they were able to report and exchange their experiences in the collection of data, on which they had been engaged during the Christmas recess. The benefit of their own results plus the vicarious experience obtained from their fellow-members enabled them to gain more insight into the skills needed for the application of the various tools used in fact finding. Another by-product from this activity was in the verification that no matter how careful the planning of the method had been, there were always some modifications to be done when they were tried. The last group meeting of the academic year was held toward the end of the second semester, after the first draft had been presented. In this terminal meeting the students read their draft, defended their positions, and viewpoints and received the benefits of the comments and criticism of their classmates. This last session served to satisfy the intellectual curiosity or "spirit of discovery" aroused at the inception of the acquaintance with the project of their fellow researchers, to instill in them the meaning of the sense of accountability and to sharpen the student's wit in the logical analysis and judgement.

Through these group conferences the sudent is helped to arrive at a definition of his professional self in a social work research role. The integration of this new form of professional identity had been taking place gradually and in a process similar to the psycho-physical development of youth. The student's ego learns to integrate the accrued new experiences with the vicissitudes of the libido, the aptitudes of natural endowment and the opportunities offered by the emerging professional role. The meeting of the students that are undergoing similar experiences, under the direction of the research supervisor, serves as a screen on which to project the semidiffused professional images and

by seeing them thus reflected they are slowly sharpened and clarified through the consequent interaction.

b. The individual conference

The method of the individual conference as scheduled in this School contains an element which is considered contributory to the further development of the student. A fixed period of ten hours a week was always alloted for the various potential appointments, the students were notified that this time was available for their guidance provided that they call in advance for an appointment, but that it was optional for them to use it at all. Thus the responsibility for determining and deciding when they should enter into consultation rested entirely with them. This principle, in line with the Great Didactic of Comenius: "To seek and find a method of instruction by which teachers may teach less, but learners may learn more",[4] is also more in the level of the concept of graduate learning and in the disciplined use of self; i.e.; gauged to the needs of the student as these are discovered and understood by him and entrusting him with the sole control in the satisfaction of the urge to satiate this need.

It is always enthralling to observe how the gradual unfolding of the research process as applied to the project serves to elicit the pattern of the personality structure in each student. At the beginning of the contacts, the students received verbal instruction expanding the procedures described in the Manual. These instructions were related to the factual and conceptual information which he needed to function: the specific material resources from which he could draw the limits imposed by the school term, and the rules and regulations of the University; the policies and procedures which restricted the availability of the potential data in the agency; the bearing of the objectives on the sub-title, on the methods of collection, classification and interpretation; the meaning of logic by the identification of logical and non-logical inferences. After this preliminary stage, the student is encouraged to undertake solo performances.

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[4] *Education for Professional Responsibility*, Pittsburgh, Carnegie Press., Carnegie Institute of Technology, 1948, p. 128.

Since the supervisory process is focused upon making the student more self-reliant and self-critical, the supervisor was constantly placing responsibility on the student himself for seeking answer to the questions he posed.

It is at the initiation of this second phase that there emerges the personal reactions and tempo of movement which may be indicative of the development of the self and the integration of the ego. Among these emotional outlets there were expressions of panic, rebellion, submissiveness, despair, rejection, resistance, diffused anxiety ("more is expected from me than what I can do" or "I will not be able to do it —it is beyond my ability— so there is a waste of motion from the start"), open hostility, and even aggression. The effect on movement was shown by some students in realistic planning and wise use of time —a trait distinguishing the more mature integrated individual— or by a sloppy —minimum of effort— interest attitude, a characteristic of the insecure individual; or by a lackadaisical good-natured activity, as evidenced by the individual in median position of personality integration.

Movement was more painful in some stages than in others, wiht some individuals more than with others and apparently not painful at all, with a few individuals... Usually the transit from the phrasing of the objectives to the planning, devicing, and trial of the methods seemed to arouse some aches. Another sore stride taken with reluctance was the analysis of the data after it had been collected.

The acme of hostility was observed specially at the time when the first draft was due, and more so in the discussion of the first and last chapters. It was noticed too that the correction of syntax and any other use of language brought much exasperation. Throughout the whole exposition it was found necessary to stress the deletion of such common faults as the expression of judgment before presenting the supportive data; extension of conclusions beyond the population examined; projection of scope in the analysis of data; and, the surreptitious clinging to conclussions for which there was no evidence.

96

In order to introduce an objectifying value in these inter-professional relations, the supervisor suggested to the student that both should take written notes of the salient features of the conference in order to keep a running record of the process as viewed by each person at "the end of the bench".

The supervisor has tried to maintain an amiable equanimity all throughout the process with a positive and outgoing tone. Her insight into the motivation of the various behavioral patterns, the verification that as greater security developed on the part of the student, the less the need for direction; the conviction that the student's insecurity is universal and professional rather than individual; the use of criticism on a partial basis to break up the student's fear on a total basis; the use of the research project as it grew up as a structure of common knowledge and experience which they shared together so that the relationship became an experience in working together; the acceptance of her superiority in knowledge and experience to which both she and the student had had to learn to relate; all contributed to the piloting of the process to a desirable outcome.

Encouragement has been given lavishly whenever a piece of work or function merited it, like in instances of precision in thinking, logical inferences, inquisitive attitude, fruitful use of time, originality of thought, use of imagination for widening alternatives... Assurance has been given constantly that other people who embarked in this process had gone through the same mental and emotional turmoil, so as to dispel the feeling that the student was a freak.

The process was focused at all times, toward the special meaning which the learning experience had had for the student and the problems it had created for him in relation to his professional responsibility. The supervisor deliberately refrained from involving herself in the possible deeper implications of the student's feelings but concentrated upon the relationship between these feelings and the current problem confronting the student.

A special mention must be made to the use of time limits throughout the process. The Manual separates the research pro-

ject into certain arbitrary phases or tasks which must be completed by a set date. It was explained to the student that these limits had been fixed after some deliberation and exchange of experience, so as to allot a reasonable time for each activity. Their collaboration was requested, however, on a voluntary basis to determine by means of time sheets, like in their field work, whether the time set for each activity was within the range of possible accomplishment. It was explained too that they had to abide by deadlines as a *maximum*, limit to be observed if they wanted to finish within the academic year, but that they could go ahead using their own faster tempo if they were able to complete the tasks assigned before the scheduled time. Thus limits were not used as punishment but as an enabling allied to reinforce effort and as a supportive contrivance of what they could do and how soon they could do it. The use of time was deeply blended with the use and application of techniques. It was emphasized throughout the process that each student had at his disposal a segment of time (32 or 34 weeks with a minimum expenditure of 10 hours a week) for which to plan the distribution. Thus it was pointed out how the insertion or deletion of an objective to the research project affected other subsequent phases of the project; i.e., collection and interpretation of data in terms of time. The relation of the time set for the analysis of data to the time spent in the collection of data was frequently clarified, asserting that there should be at least twice the time for analysis as for collection or observation. The implications in the use of a schedule were explained not only in terms of the difficulties in its construction and its relation to the reliability of observations but also in terms of the expenditure of time that required first its drafting and second its various trial-outs. Reference was made too to how the insertion of an additional item in a schedule affected the number of combinations of items in an accelerated pattern, reflecting on the time needed for the analysis.[5]

$$^5 \ nCr = \frac{n!}{(n-r)! \ (r)!}$$

Where n = subjects and r = groups

The supervisor used the Thesis Advisor knowledge and authority as well as her own to prevent the student from engaging in a project that was outside his competence, or outside the maximum time span and/or effort at his disposal. This action was taken, however, after reasoning with the student the training and experience the student had had for the conduct of that particular project —when there was question as to competence—, or by estimating with the student when the successful completion of a project would require more than the time or effort alloted.[6] This procedure seems to add to the confidence of the student in the wisdom and good faith of the supervisor, and in the possibilities of being able to carry through because the project was within the realm of reality. It served too to add to the student's skills in planning by giving him a concrete example of what elements should be drawn for the necessary estimates. This aspect of the process is considered very important because it saves the student from a waste of drives and an unnecessary feeling of failure.

Similarities and Differences with Supervision in Case Work

For expediency's sake, the contents of Virginia P. Robinson's book *Supervision in Case Work* was selected for comparison, although the author is aware that this book is permeated by the functional or Rankian philosophy of case work. However,

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[6] Estimates of time were arrived by having the student go through the act of collecting the data for four or five cases so that he could determine how long would it take him to gather the data for the size of the minimum sample. This allowed him to determine too the availability of certain type of data because of lapses in recording or because of the ordinal classification of the files (a student who wanted to analyze the data for certain specific years found out that the records were filed by alphabetical order of surnames without heed to the year in which they were started, and the organization was 27 years old...). After going through the estimate of the time needed for gathering the data, the time needed for the analysis and then for the writing and editing of the report was calculated by a similar process. When the agencies collaborating on the project furnished some assistance: clerical help for the tabulation or graphic presentation of data, workers to help with the enumeration, or offered the services of the electrical tabulating machine center for coding, punching, sorting, verifying and tabulating, the meaning of this help in terms of time was calculated in order to extend the scope of the project.

since many of the principles advocated by Miss Robinson are of universal application, they have been much quoted by the ec- clectic in the field.

Going over her book *Supervision in Case Work* it was found that the process of supervision of student's research had some similarities with the limits which define the supervisory process in case work while the differences seemed to be in the activities of the supervisor.

According to Miss Robinson, the limits which define the supervisory process are:

1.—The professional character of the relationship

2.—The limits in time

3.—The limits in the case material

4.—The limits in relation to other factors in the learning situation

5.—Limits determined by the supervisor's equipment and the student's ability and readiness to learn.[7]

It is hoped that the preceding discussion has made obvious the analogy of the supervision of the research process with the activities one, two and five. Perhaps trait number three needs some more explanation. In case work, the student is expected to be as responsible as a worker for the small case load that is as- signed to him, but in the learning stage the supervisor must know his work since she holds herself responsible to the agency for what happens to clients. Thus the supervisor must operate as a check on too impulsive, unsound thinking and action for the protection of the agency, the client and the student.

As may be seen, in the supervision of student's research, the supervisor does not assume this responsibility to the agency but serves as a check on biased procedures and marshals the sequence of activities to vouchsafe a rigorous scientific process.

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[7] Robinson, Virginia P., *Supervision in Social Case Works*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carlina Press, 1936.

Limit number four refers specially to the coordination of class and field experiences to be kept as parts of one whole yet maintaining autonomy for supervision. This aspect varies from one school to the next (14) (15) depending on whether the course in research is taught at the same time that the course in thesis and also whether both are taught by the same person. It is the author's opinion that there is much room for improvement in this respect.

The activities of the case work supervisor, Miss Robinson broke up into four headings:

1.—Her knowledge of the student's case load and her responsibility to the agency for the case work

2.—Her contribution of information about agency policies and community resources

3.—Her contribution in discussion of the student's case work thinking

4.—The supervisor's responsibility for introducing factors of difference into the student's thinking and action.

In relation to activity number one, the supervisor of student's research exerts a function more similar to the relation of a case work supervisor with a second year student, although at no time does the supervisor of research has the responsibility to the agency which is expected of the case work supervisor. A second year student, according to Miss Robinson, takes more responsibility for his case load, selecting with the supervisor only certain cases which the supervisor will follow and carrying another group independently with the freedom to bring to her unusual question which arises.

Activity number two of the case work supervisor is assumed partially by the supervisor of research. As was stated previously, the student receives this information in his first group conference and then gets it again by small doses as he goes asking for it.[8] Policies and resources are focused on the

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[8] *Supra,* p. 91.

School as a center in its relation to other agencies and to the community resources. The student, on the other hand, is held responsible for finding out those policies of the specific agency on which he is doing research as they affect his research project.

The supervision of the research project differs outstandingly from the activity number three of the case work supervisor. In case work the student is told that

"...there are no laws, no fixed principles, no intellectual concepts, no ready-made rules which he can learn and apply routinely, ... no oportunity to watch somebody else do it and try to do likewise".[9]

This does not hold at all for research in social work.

On the other hand, activity number four of the case work supervisor is performed most frequently by the supervisor of research who has to drill the student in the multiple facets of human relationships, in the exploration of new factors contributing to a situation, and in holding loosely to any hypothesis.

Summarizing: the supervisor of student research enters into a process which is similar to the process of supervision in case work in the professional character of the relationship, in the limits of time, in the limits determined by the supervisor's equipment and the student's ability and readiness to learn, and in the supervisor's responsibility for introducing factors of difference into the student's thinking and action. It differs by continuous variables in the limits of the material, in relation to other factors in the learning situation, in her responsibility to the agency for the student's work, in her contributions of information about agency policies and community resources and, in the discussion of the student's thinking.

The most fundamental difference of all lies, however, in the focus of the process. The supervisor of case work trains the student so that he may be able to *help* the individuals at some

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[9] *Op. cit.*, p. 94.

102

point of need in his inner and outer adjustments; while the supervisor of research teaches the acquisition and practice of skills leading to the achievement of the most reliable and valid knowledge. That is, in the first process, the results lead to *concrete* results in a tangible material while in the second process it leads to newer or different concepts, premises, laws, axioms, or *abstract* results...

As a closing statement, the author would like to stress the need for more discussion and examination of this process. There should not be any waste of these scarce talents. Program design research as advocated by Marquis and Gordon should be initiated soon perhaps sponsored by the Council on Social Work Education.[10] There should be achieved also, as a cherished corolary of the whole research activity that the student would have such joy and satisfaction of this experience that he would be eager to repeat it on his own as a professional person. This is the genuine test that knowledge has become real: when the learner relives it for himself. However, present class schedules, heavily burdened faculties, course assignments, and pressures in the field work, act as powerful deterrent factors. As Charlotte Towle has hopefully expressed:

> "...Sound professional education should help the student keep his ego intact through using his strengths, through meeting valid dependency, and through not making such unrealistic demands as to break down his constructive defenses... Deep gratification in maturity can make professional learning an ardent pursuit rather than an anxious quest..."[10]

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