M.S.W.'S SPEAK: EXPERIENCES IN AGENCY
AND PRIVATE SUPERVISION

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ABSTRACT: This paper derives from a study of the views of twenty-one
M.S.W.'s about experiences in agency and private supervision. The contributions,
from the perspective of the subjects, of both these sources to professional develop-
ment are highlighted. Some of the less positively perceived elements of these two
forms of supervision are also illuminated.

This writer's experiences in agency and private supervision led her to the
belief that each of these sources can contribute to professional develop-
ment. Supervision from the perspective of its potential contribution to
professionalism has been of interest to many social work educators and
practitioners. Agency supervision has been well described and theorized
about in our literature, whereas private supervision has been discussed
only by Cohen (1977). In part to lessen what the writer believes is a gap
in our knowledge about this process, she explored the views of twenty-one
M.S.W.'s who, while in agency supervision, also engage supervision on a
private basis.¹ Prior to undertaking the study, the writer's practice expe-
rience suggested that agency supervision for the M.S.W. might be viewed
as fulfilling more administrative and supportive functions; private super-
vision might be considered to emphasize the development of self-aware-
ness and technical skills.

This paper sheds light on some of the above and illuminates the ways
in which these sources of supervision are thought to compare and con-
trast in the promotion of knowledge, self-esteem and the development of
self-awareness. It is hoped that this data will not only strengthen our con-
ceptualizations about private supervision but also contribute a firmer
base from which to approach supervisees.

The supervision being described is primarily provided by social

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standing of supervision. For purposes of confidentiality, data are somewhat disguised.
workers. In 95% (20) of the cases, the agency supervisors are M.S.W.'s; and in one case the supervisor is a psychiatrist. The supervisors seen voluntarily and outside of the agency were in 62% (13) of the cases M.S.W.'s and in the remaining 38% (8), they were either psychologists or psychiatrists. The writer is aware that because these findings derive from a small and probably self-select sample, there is a risk that they are biased. At the same time, because of the seriousness with which the subjects approached the study and because many were highly articulate, the results may merit consideration, particularly since so little is known about private supervision. The next portion of this paper will focus on the subjects’ views of the helpful aspects of supervision.

ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE:
PRIVATE VS. AGENCY SUPERVISION

The data to be reported in this section were gained from a group who in 95% of the cases believed themselves to be well satisfied in private supervision. In contrast, the subjects assessed agency supervision on a continuum, extending from 25% well-satisfied to 38% dissatisfied and approximately 38% ambivalent. Thus it is no surprise that when these social workers were asked about the helpful aspects of private supervision they had much to say.

The subjects consistently mentioned the educational component of private supervision; their high regard for the private supervisor’s capacity to educate was prominent. Even the subject who was somewhat disappointed with private supervision joined the rest in spontaneously mentioning the educational benefits of the process. A recurrent theme was the idea that private supervision helps with the integration of theory to practice, as illustrated in a statement by Interviewee A. who said:

Just as getting a good grasp of the theory and the literature. The supervisor’s excellent ability to integrate theory with practice and to derive technique from the theory. The private supervisor helped me to master all these areas... The private supervisor sits and listens and is capable from a relatively limited amount of information to conceptualize and give back a great deal of information both from a theoretical and practical standpoint.

That subject seems to be most appreciative of the supervisor’s knowledge and ability to communicate that knowledge. Yet, something else may be also appreciated: specifically, the private supervisor's capacity to listen is an attribute frequently mentioned. It seems possible that the experience of being listened to has some value in itself, perhaps in terms of self-