

Internship supervisors' perspectives of group work within social work practice

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Abstract: *Group work's prominence within masters' level social work education in the U.S. has steadily diminished over the years. Simultaneously, anecdotal reports indicate group work is continuously utilized in practice. The authors developed a survey for internship supervisors at their home institution to assess 1) the use of group work within the field; 2) the desirability of group work expertise as an employment/internship consideration; and 3) internship supervisors' assessment of their own knowledge and preparation for supervision around group work issues, and their interest in group work continuing education and/or certification programs. Findings suggest that group work is widely used in social work practice settings, group work expertise is desired in hiring interns and new professionals, and while internship supervisors feel competent in supervising interns, they are interested in participating in continuing education and group work certificate programs. Recommended advocacy strategies to enhance the status of group work education in U.S. higher education are discussed.*

Keywords: groupwork education; groupwork practice; social work education; continuing education; internship supervision

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Introduction

Group work has long been a core methodology within the profession of social work in the United States (U.S.) For decades, students in U.S. graduate social work programs would elect to specialize in casework, group work or community organization. With the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) 1969 decision to move to a generalist rather than a methods-based approach, group work education within masters level social work programs suffered a severe decline in focus. The literature is replete with documentation of social group work's diminished role within the academy (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994; Carter, et al., 2018; Drumm, 2006; Goodman & Munoz, 2004; Kurland & Salmon, 2004; LaRocque, 2017; Simon & Kilbane, 2014; Simon & Webster, 2009; Simon, Kilbane, & Stoltenberg, 2017; Sweifach, 2014). Concentrations and specializations in group work virtually disappeared, appearing in 76% of graduate schools in 1976, 7% of programs in 1994, and 2% in 2010, and this despite the fact that there has been more than a doubling of the number of accredited U.S. masters of social work (MSW) programs since 1976 (Simon & Kilbane, 2014). A recent review of the websites of accredited masters' level schools of social work within the U.S., reveals that no school currently offers a concentration or specialization in group work. Moreover, many schools no longer even offer one discrete required course in group work (Simon & Kilbane, 2014; Sweifach, 2014). Often, group work content is embedded within an introductory methods or practice course taught by faculty who

themselves have not been well-trained in group work (Hessenauer & Lind, 2013; LaPorte, & Sweifach, (2011); LaRocque, 2017; Simon & Kilbane, 2014; Skolnik & Skolnik, 2021; Sweifach, 2014).

While there has been a vociferous and longstanding outcry among social group work advocates and the professional membership association, International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG) that advocates on their behalf, most MSW programs marginalize group work content (Middleman, 1990; Simon & Kilbane, 2014; Simon, Kilbane, & Stoltenberg, 2017; Sweifach 2014). Perhaps this diminished status would be of little concern if group work were not being used in the field. Anecdotal reports, however, indicate that group work is broadly utilized within social work settings and with diverse populations. Similarly, there are anecdotal reports that group work expertise is valued when hiring social workers and student interns. There is a need to validate these perceptions within the literature.

The question of whether internship instructors are well-prepared in group theory, technical skills, and group supervision has also been an area of concern in the literature for decades. (LaRocque, 2017; Simon, Kilbane, & Stoltenberg, 2020; Simon, Kilbane, & Stoltenberg, 2017; Skolnik & Skolnik, 2021; Tully, 2015). Do social work practitioners and internship instructors feel adequately prepared/competent in their group work knowledge, skills and supervisory capabilities? Do they see a need for additional training in group work education? One study found that only 25% of respondents to a survey offered continuing education training in group work to internship supervisors/instructors (Simon, Kilbane, & Stoltenberg, 2017). In addition, there is a dearth of certificate training opportunities in social group work methodology in the U.S. (M. Macgowan, J. Letendre, personal communications, May 15, 2024; Simon, Kilbane, & Stoltenberg, 2017).

It stands to reason that marginalized group work content and courses, faculty with less commitment and training in the modality, and curricula that often do not articulate the importance of this broad-based methodology, would graduate practitioners without the essential group work knowledge and skills to practice and supervise effectively. Do these practitioners, once in the field, recognize a deficiency, and if so, are they interested in receiving post-graduate training in group work via continuing education events or certificate programs? A few studies indicate that this ongoing education warrants greater attention

(Knight, 2014; Knight, 2009; Simon & Kilbane, 2014; Simon, Kilbane & Stoltenberg, 2017), but again, there is little empirical research on this.

To begin to explore these questions, a survey was developed and distributed to internship supervisors affiliated with the authors' home institution. The survey posed questions on the use of group work methodology; the desirability of group work expertise in selecting internship students and hiring social workers; interest in continuing education training; and/or a certificate in group work. The overarching objectives of the study included developing: 1) a better picture of the extent of use of group work within the field; 2) an understanding of the desirability of group work expertise as an employment/internship consideration; and 3) an understanding of internship supervisors' assessment of their own knowledge and preparation for supervision around group work issues, and their interest in group work continuing education and/or certification programs.

Methodology

Research Design and Data Collection

Survey methodology for gathering data was employed in this quantitative study. A convenience sampling method was utilized for distributing the survey to internship supervisors associated with a large school of social work located in the Great Lakes Region of the United States. This school is a private, religiously affiliated program, situated in an urban setting offering BSW, MSW and PhD programs. The school has been continuously accredited by CSWE and its predecessor since 1921. Its curriculum requires one discrete group work course for all BSW and MSW students. In addition, it offers one advanced group work elective for graduate level students. All internship students are required to complete a group work experience but as with many other schools, there is no enforcement process to ensure students actually fulfill this requirement.

Table 1

Comparison of Program Characteristics

Variables for Comparison	Home Institution	CSWE Mean
Number of graduate students enrolled in MSW program	531	293
Number of full-time faculty	32	11
Number of part-time faculty	72	18
Number of MSW degrees conferred	247	108

(CSWE, 2023; P. Carney, personal communication, December 9, 2024)

The survey tool was developed by the researchers. The following definition of group work, taken from an established, frequently used group work text, was provided at the beginning of the survey.

Group work: Goal-directed activity with small treatment and task groups aimed at meeting socio-emotional needs and accomplishing tasks. This activity is directed to individual members of a group and to the group within a system of service delivery and a larger community and societal environment. (Toseland & Rivas, 2017, p. 11).

The survey items were reviewed by group work experts and modifications were made as recommended. The survey tool consisted of three sections, with a total of 16 items. One section addressed the use of groups at the agency, group work experiences for interns, the importance of group work skills for interns and potential employees, and the supervisor's level of preparedness. Another section asked supervisors about their education, experience with group work and group work supervision, and interest in further group work education/training. A final section asked questions about the agency and its service/practice focus.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted from the home institution. The researchers sought and were granted permission to use the University's internship supervisor listserv with the stipulation that all direct communications remained between the school's internship directors and supervisors. The researchers had no direct access to social work agencies or to the staff providing supervision to university interns. The school's internship directors were responsible for distributing the survey to the individual supervisors and emailing two reminders encouraging survey completion. Researcher involvement

was restricted to speaking at two general meetings for supervisors to encourage completion of surveys.

A letter to internship supervisors providing information on the purpose of the study, the request to participate, and IRB approval, was authored by the researchers and distributed by the Office of Student Services. Supervisors gained access to the survey through Qualtrics, an online platform. Surveys were anonymous and requested no identifying information.

Data Analysis

Basic descriptive statistics were used in this study to analyze the data. Survey data were primarily frequency-based although some written explanations were requested of respondents. The responses to one question were subjected to coding by the three researchers and themes were developed. Reliability of these themes was determined through a researcher process of reading the responses individually, meeting and discussing the relevant themes, and repeating this process until agreement was reached among the three authors. Other explanatory responses were summarized and are included in the results section below.

Results

Of the surveys distributed to internship supervisors ($n = 775$), one hundred sixty-four surveys (21%) were initiated with 155 (20%) completed. Not all respondents answered all the items on the survey, accounting for differences in response totals.

Characteristics of Respondents and Agencies

Supervisors were asked to identify the focus of practice of the agency. A checklist was provided, and multiple responses were allowed. Nearly one-third of the respondents were employed in mental health ($n = 61$, 31%), followed by schools/education ($n = 26$, 13%), substance abuse ($n = 25$, 13%), and homeless/employment/housing ($n = 24$, 12%). Other less frequently identified agency affiliations include child/family welfare,

elder care, hospital/medical settings, policy/legislation, and other. Agency practice affiliations are displayed in Table #2.

The majority of internship supervisors were employed at public agencies ($n = 63$, 55%) with the remainder employed in private agency settings ($n = 52$, 45%). Six supervisors (5%) did not indicate the type of agency setting.

Table 2

Agency Practice Focus	n	%
Mental Health	61	31
Schools/Educational	26	13
Substance Abuse	25	13
Homelessness/Employment/Housing	24	12
Child/Family Welfare	18	9
Elder Care	14	7
Hospital/Medical	12	6
Policy/Legislative	3	2
Other	16	7
Total	199	100

Note. Multiple responses allowed.

Supervisors were asked whether they had completed a group work course as part of their BSW/MSW programs. Seventy-three percent ($n = 90$) responded yes, 22 percent ($n = 27$) responded no, and 5 indicated not sure ($n = 6$). Supervisors rated themselves highly on their own knowledge of group work. This item ranged from 1 (not knowledgeable) to 10 (very knowledgeable), with a mean of 7.9 ($SD = 1.6$).

Participants were asked in what year they received their MSW degrees. The largest percentage (32%, $n = 34$, 2010-2019), indicates respondents had been practicing between one and nine years. The next highest percentage had been practicing for 10-19 years (31%, $n = 32$, 2000-2009), followed by the third highest percentage who had been practicing for 20-29 years (24%, $n = 25$, 1990-1999). It should be noted that 12 respondents had a degree other than an MSW. These degrees included counseling, clinical and/or educational psychology, and non-profit management.

Use of Group Work at Agencies

The majority ($n = 137$, 88%) of internship supervisors indicated that their agencies offered group work services. They were then asked to identify reasons for choosing to provide group work services (Table 3). A checklist was provided, and multiple responses were allowed. Appropriateness, efficiency, staff interest and/or expertise were the most frequently mentioned. Of those respondents ($n = 15$) who provided written explanations for their designation of 'other', four categories emerged. These include satisfying a community need ($n = 4$), meeting agency work needs ($n = 4$), evidence-based support for this modality ($n = 3$), and interpersonal learning ($n = 4$).

Table 3

Reasons for Using Groups at Agencies	<u><i>n</i></u>	<u><i>%</i></u>
Appropriate for the population we work with	109	28
Appropriate for the type of problem we work with	104	26
Efficiency in providing services	87	22
Staff interest in providing services	65	16
Third Party reimbursement requirements	14	4
Other reasons given	15	4
Total	394	100

Note: Multiple responses allowed.

Eighteen supervisors indicated they did not use group work in their agencies. These respondents were asked to identify the reason(s) for this decision. Seven supervisors stated group work was not appropriate for the population, and four indicated it was not appropriate for the specific types of issues that brought clients into the agency. Two supervisors stated that while group work services might be appropriate, they lacked personnel with the requisite group work skills. Other responses cited by the remaining four supervisors included insufficient funding, a history of unsuccessful group work service delivery, and the agency mission being other than clinical client services. One supervisor did not comment.

Importance of Group Work Skills in Hiring

Internship supervisors valued the possession of group work skills as an important criterion when hiring social workers or professionals in similar fields ($n = 78$, 68% yes; $n = 5$, 4%, no; $n = 32$, 28% sometimes). When the affirmative responses are combined with the sometimes responses ($n = 110$, 96%), it is clear that the overwhelming majority of internship supervisors look for group work skills in hiring for employment.

Use of Interns for Group Work Services

A total of 117 internship supervisors provided data on the use of interns at their agencies. Almost all supervisors ($n=108$, 92%) stated their agencies provide opportunities for interns to run groups as part of their experience. Second year MSW students were used more frequently to provide group work services ($n = 60$, 51%) than first year MSW students ($n = 15$, 13%), however, at least one-third ($n = 42$, 36%) of the agencies use a combination. Internship supervisors prioritized possession of group work skills for their interns. The desirability for interns to possess group work skills, ranged from 1 (no desirability) to 10 (very high desirability) with a mean of 6.4 ($SD = 2.4$). A total of 49 (43%) internship supervisors seek group work experience in interns, while 65 (57%) do not.

Supervisors were asked how prepared interns were for facilitating groups. The responses ranged from 1 (not at all prepared) to 10 (very well prepared) with a mean of 4.8 ($SD = 1.6$). When asked how prepared they felt to supervise interns in the provision of group work services, the vast majority indicated feeling prepared ($M = 8.5$, $SD = 1.5$). The responses ranged from 1 (not at all prepared) to 10 (very much prepared).

Further Education in Group Work

A majority ($n = 70$, 57%) of internship supervisors expressed interest in group work skills training if offered by the university. Some ($n = 20$, 16%) stated they were not interested, and 26% ($n = 32$) indicated they might be interested in additional training. When the positive responses were combined, over 83% of respondents were potentially interested in further group work training. The vast majority ($n = 105$,

86%) would expect continuing education units for this training. More intense group work training such as a certificate program was of interest to approximately two-fifths of the responding internship supervisors ($n = 50$, 41%), with just under a third expressing no interest ($n = 37$, 30%) or uncertainty ($n = 35$, 29%).

Discussion

This study sought to explore whether the anecdotal reports indicating that group work is being widely utilized and valued within social work practice settings, have support. The literature on this issue, to date, is scant. Filling this gap in the literature is essential for guiding future professional and academic group work advocacy efforts, and thus the impetus for this inquiry. The data from this study found that group work is, in fact, being widely utilized in social work agencies, that group work skills are valued by internship supervisors across settings and populations, and that group work expertise is also valued in the hiring process of both social work interns and social work professionals. In addition, the study respondents demonstrated interest in enhancing their group work skills through continuing education and/or group work certification.

The Value of Group Work Expertise for Interns and New Employees

This study sought to explore the perceived value of group work expertise among social work interns and staff. Study results supported the idea that coming to the agency with group work skills was valued by internship supervisors. When accepting students for internships, respondents indicated that those who possessed a group work background were valued. The same held true for new social work agency hires. This information seems pertinent for constituencies responsible for ensuring that future social work professionals have the requisite group work skills sought by agencies. This study challenges the perception that group work is perceived as an insignificant component of social work education.

Interest in Continued Group Work Education

Internship supervisors expressed interest in furthering their group work knowledge. This could be addressed in three ways - group work focused orientation or training sessions targeted for internship supervisors, continuing education workshops in group work, or group work certificate programs. Since most internship departments do not provide specific education in group work supervision, the inclusion of such sessions could ensure a higher awareness of these processes (Simon, Kilbane & Stoltenberg, 2017; Skolnik & Skolnik, 2022). A proliferation of continuing education programs focused on group work is another relatively easy option for enhancing practitioner knowledge and skills. The majority of internship supervisors in this study were interested in additional continuing education training. A more intensive group work training experience is a certificate program in group work. Certificate programs also garnered interest from these respondents. Since agencies are looking for both interns and personnel with expertise in group work, supporting continuing education and the more intense training offered through certificate programs, seems logical. Social workers would have opportunities for enhanced skills and knowledge benefitting their clients and agency; students would benefit from more knowledgeable supervision and preparation for the profession; and the profession would benefit from a renewed focus on the art and science of group work, a core methodology that has been increasingly marginalized by inattention and a lack of prioritization. Such programs and the outreach necessary to reach practitioners should begin immediately. Clearly, this study indicates there is a market for such offerings.

Implications for Social Work Education

This study provides evidence that group work as a service delivery model and the concomitant desire for personnel with group work skills are prevalent and substantial. There is, however, a dichotomy between what academia in the U.S. is offering its students and what the actual practice community demands of its workforce. It is imperative that schools of social work and the practice community are in sync. Unfortunately, this has not been the case for decades. U.S. schools of social work have consistently and systematically diminished the prevalence of group work content within their programs. The number

of discrete, free-standing group work courses has severely declined, and group work specializations have disappeared. Furthermore, while internships have traditionally required group work experiences, less attention is being given to group work in internships (Shulman, 2010; Tully, 2015).

One can question whether current internship supervisors, many of whom may not have taken a distinct group work class, are able to effectively supervise their interns in this modality. This study indicates that supervisors feel confident in their ability to supervise interns' group work practice, but it also indicates that approximately one-quarter of the supervisors have not taken a course in the theory and practice of group work. One therefore can question the accuracy of this perception, especially in light of the questionable nature of the content and delivery of group work courses. This warrants further exploration.

The results of this study point to the need for a critical and timely review of the ongoing diminished attention to group work education within schools of social work. The call for increased focus on group work skills has a long history documented in the social work literature. Findings from this study add to this call.

Advocacy efforts should aim to influence those with decision-making power over social work education, and to match educational programming to the actual practice needs of agencies. The International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG), the premier professional association whose mission is to advocate for the promotion of group work within academic, practice, and research communities, is the logical organization to lead this effort. The authors urge IASWG to work with U.S. accrediting bodies such as the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), professional associations such as the National Association of Social Work (NASW), licensing boards, and schools of social work on the following actionable strategies:

- Organize a coalition of stakeholders who collectively develop and implement concrete strategies to address the dichotomy between group work education and agency practice needs.
- Hold the Council on Social Work Education accountable for addressing the mountain of data which documents the long-standing dichotomy between group work education and social work practice. CSWE is the body with the authority to oversee curricula.

It is time to forcefully confront this problem and demand change.

- CSWE should hold schools of social work accountable for ensuring that students receive group work experiences in their internship. Schools must be made to enforce policies that require inclusion of this practice method in internship experience.
- Embrace and support the global social action group that has spontaneously arisen to call attention to and to impact such educational changes. Members of this group include long standing international group work educators, practitioners, and researchers who have witnessed the precipitous decline in the presence and status of group work education. This group, which has recently been granted committee status within IASWG, must be empowered as a critical voice for academic change.
- Develop a collaboration between IASWG and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) to ensure that sufficient group work questions are incorporated into the examination for licensure eligibility. Without such focused questions, those who pass the licensing exam and the schools and faculty who prepare students to take the exam will continue to perceive group work as less relevant than other modalities.
- Propose a mandate, endorsed by CSWE, that the Standards for Social Work Practice with Groups (IASWG, 2022) be included in every social work course with a group work focus. The Standards represent the values, knowledge, and skills essential for ethical and effective group work and offer guidance for the practice of theoretically sound practice.
- Educate internship supervisors and liaisons through onboarding, orientation, and continuing education training about the broad-based nature of group work. Internship personnel may have a narrow understanding of group work and might not consider task groups such as board or committee meetings, task forces, or teams as potential avenues for students' group work experiences. Sharing and discussing a definition of group work such as the one embedded in this study, could promote supervisors to provide increased group work experiences within their agencies.
- Target fundraising and dedicate scholarships to encourage dissertations on group work related topics. One study (Simon, Kilbane & Stoltenberg, 2020) indicates that writing a group work

focused dissertation leads to a career-long connection with group work. Since social work faculty typically stem from the ranks of doctoral programs, offering funding or scholarships for such dissertations could increase the number of faculty hires with a background in group work.

Limitations

This study surveyed internship supervisors from a single, large, urban school of social work in the U.S. Thus, the sample is relatively small and geographically limited, which could influence the generalizability of its findings. The responses are the opinions of a limited pool of internship supervisors. Hence, further research utilizing samples from institutions which reflect diversity of geography, size, and professional focus, is recommended. Similar research conducted in other regions of the world might yield additional information regarding these findings.

Due to the anonymity built into the survey, the researchers cannot determine whether the surveys represented 155 internship supervisors from distinct agencies or whether there were some supervisors operating out of different departments within the same agency. The ability to understand the differential use of groups within a single agency could provide additional insights into how the decision to offer group work is made. Due to the restrictions placed on the survey tool, this type of information is not available to the researchers.

Furthermore, supervisors who responded to the survey may have had an internal bias towards group work which could have contributed to their inclination to complete the survey. It is also possible that respondents recognized the researchers' names as being group work advocates, thereby contributing to potential internal bias. Here too, further research would help to address this.

Conclusion

Schools of social work, practice settings, and professional associations all stand to benefit when there is a clear understanding of the extent to which groups are used in the field, the desirability of group work

expertise as an employment consideration, and the level of interest in group work continuing education and certification programs. Anecdotal reports indicate that group work is widely utilized within social work settings, and this research study, despite its limitations, provides support for these statements. Similarly, this study provides support for the perception that group work is valued when hiring interns and new practitioners. It also documents internship supervisors' interest in furthering their expertise through continued group work education.

While this study provides information about the current landscape of group work practice in the U.S., it is vital to build upon these findings to capture a fuller and more accurate picture of the utilization of group work within the practice arena and the need for additional educational opportunities. The authors urge replication of this study in diverse geographic regions and at heterogeneous institutions, to broaden and further validate its findings. This study indicates that group work is valued and used within the practice community. It is, however, well-known that group work education has long been diminished across schools of social work within the United States. It is imperative that this dichotomy be addressed as a means of bridging the gap between current group work education and the use of group work in social work practice settings.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [SRS], upon reasonable request.

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