

# Strengths-based group supervision with social work students

Mari Alschuler<sup>1</sup>, Thelma Silver<sup>2</sup>, and Linda McArdle<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** *This paper integrates the theoretical models of the strengths perspective with narrative theory and reflective practice, while incorporating the concepts of parallel process and the Socratic method into the group supervision of social work students. With the strengths perspective as a unifying model in social work today, it is suggested that this model also can reflect the supervisory parallel process. Thus, just as we strive to work with clients in a cooperative partnership that emphasizes their strengths and abilities, empowerment, resilience, and diversity, so, too, we need to bring these concepts into the supervisee-supervisor relationship.*

**Keywords:** *group supervision; student supervision; groupwork; narrative therapy; Socratic questioning; strengths perspective; group work*

1. Assistant Professor of Social Work, Youngstown State University
2. Professor of Social Work at Youngstown State University
3. Faculty member, School of Social Work, University of Akron

**Address for correspondence:** *Youngstown State University, 1 University Plaza, Youngstown, OH 44555, USA. mlalschuler@ysu.edu*

## **Introduction**

Over the last 20 years, social work intervention with client systems has moved towards models that emphasize the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013). In the educational arena, supervision of social work students in their field placements has also begun to emphasize models that incorporate concepts of the strengths perspective (Bransford, 2009; Lietz & Rounds, 2009). These concepts can also be applied to group supervision. The purpose of this paper is to present a beginning theoretical conceptualization of integrating the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013) in group supervision with social work students while utilizing specific techniques. These strength-based techniques include narrative theory (Freeman, 2011; White & Epston, 1990), reflective practice (Schön, 1983), and strategies including the Socratic method (Barsky, 2010). This model can utilize the diversity of both supervisors and students who have multiple viewpoints, values, and beliefs, and enhance the students' integration and application of knowledge and skills.

## **Group supervision**

Nearly all trainees in the helping professions receive supervision during their internships. Supervision of social workers dates back to the earliest days of the profession (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). Field education of social work students has often been provided through the use of group supervision in addition to, or instead of, individual supervision (Bogo, Globerman, & Sussman, 2004).

Supervision has been divided into a tripartite schema consisting of administrative or managerial tasks, educational or clinical tasks, and supportive tasks (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). Supervision is typically provided in individual or group formats; some agencies provide one or the other, or both. Lietz (2008) suggests that group supervision is both effective and efficient and can provide trainees with supervision in all three functions. Further, group supervision permits supervisors to view interns from a different vantage point compared to how each student presents him or herself in individual supervision.

In addition, agencies find group supervision to be more cost effective, and supervisors find it more efficient in terms of time.

One of the advantages of group over individual supervision is that supervisees can receive multiple viewpoints about work with diverse clients, which fosters critical thinking and creative problem-solving. Another advantage is that group members share common problems and insecurities about their work, alleviating anxiety and preventing non-disclosure. Further, the participants receive emotional support through mutual aid and begin to develop a sense of professional identity (DiMino & Risler, 2012; Ellis & Douce, 1994; Kadushin & Harkness, 2014; Lietz, 2008; Milne, Sheikh, Pattison & Wilkinson, 2011).

There are also several challenges to group supervision (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). The supervisor, as group leader, must facilitate cohesion among the group's individual supervisees, based on their developmental level, educational ability, and emotional needs. As in all groups, there is an inherent risk of groupthink and the stifling of creativity. However, it is the supervisor's responsibility to create an atmosphere of safety and trust, and to encourage mutual aid among group members.

Further, group process needs to take center stage in group supervision, according to DiMino and Risler (2012). Supervisors have to pay close attention to group dynamics. Conflicts, competition, and 'sibling rivalry' between group members must be managed in order to develop intimacy and trust. The group setting is the ideal place to learn how to deal with power struggles, diverse points of view, expectations, and need for support (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014).

Balancing group-as-whole and individual issues, managing group process and group dynamics are other issues which may cause some supervisors to offer only individual supervision (Ellis & Douce, 1994). Depending on the supervisor's skills and willingness to explore cultural diversity or other differences, there is a risk of ignoring such differences. DiMino and Risler (2012) further contend that the supervisor needs to attend to his or her own use of self; protect boundaries, including dual relationships with supervisees; and be willing 'to take risks and become vulnerable' (p. 67).

According to Bogo and McKnight (2005), there has been a dearth of empirical research on the effectiveness of all types of supervision

in the helping professions. Many of the empirical studies reviewed in their meta-analysis of articles about supervision from 1994 to 2004 examined perceptions of general aspects of the supervisory relationship; others examined supervisory process and client outcomes more specifically. Unfortunately, the authors decided to focus solely on studies conducted within the U.S. There were many other limitations to the articles they reviewed: doctoral studies; exploratory studies; convenience sampling; measurement bias; and the use of self-report measures.

Milne et al (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of eleven controlled studies, with a goal of developing evidence-based training in clinical supervision. This review only covered individual supervision, which was a limitation. The authors concluded that 'no apparent consensus exists on what constitutes effective supervisor training' (p. 54), and that there is limited information on how to evaluate this training.

Kadushin and Harkness (2014) described some positive results of research comparing group to individual supervision. Supervisees receiving group supervision stated they had received training in a wider variety of diverse cases; obtained direct advice and feedback from both peers and supervisors; and saw their peers as capable of providing them with valuable consultation. However, after summarizing several empirical studies since the 1970s, they concluded that individual supervision 'is a preferred option when supervisees are offered a choice' between the two modalities (p. 295).

In a Canadian qualitative study, Bogo et al (2004) looked at key factors and processes in group supervision of field students. Their pilot study relied on retrospective recall by past field group supervisees and the actual study used an all-female sample of 18 students over two academic years in the late 1990s. Five supervisors led seven groups; all but one field instructor were also female. Both supervisees and supervisors were predominantly Euro-Canadian. Group process issues were rarely discussed openly in the groups; supervisors did not appear to facilitate these groups in a manner that allowed students to express their insecurities. Students' peer relationships appeared to have influenced how issues of conflict, trust, cohesion, competition, and anxiety about competence were discussed or managed.

Bogo et al (2004) pinpointed the necessity to have competent supervisors leading student groups. They described the values of

modeling participation and openness, which facilitated students' risk taking; promoting group norms, which allowed the members to establish safety and a climate of trust, which further led to sharing their vulnerabilities and anxieties, reducing their fear of criticism; facilitating group dynamics, which prevented favoritism and monopolization, using direct confrontation when necessary to diffuse conflict; and giving constructive feedback, which encouraged open communication and peer-to-peer feedback.

The authors summarized their study with a list of emerging themes which they posited as recommendations for the group supervision of social work field students (Bogo et al, 2004). The group supervisor should provide:

1. clear expectations about how the group will operate, such as time per student for case presentations and the order and format of presentations (logistics);
2. a constructive learning climate by managing group member behaviors through modeling;
3. assistance to supervisees as they establish group norms;
4. active intervention should behavioral (non-normative) problems occur;
5. timely and constructive feedback; and
6. educational information on group process and group dynamics, providing members with the opportunity to enact these.

## **Strengths-based group supervision**

The strengths-based model of group supervision incorporates concepts from supportive supervision (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014); cooperative supervision (Proctor & Inskipp, 2001, as cited in Ögren & Sundlin, 2009); and empowerment, resilience, and self-efficacy (Kearns & McArdle, 2012) within the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013). In supportive supervision (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014) the supervisor reaches for the strengths of the supervisees through recognition of their successes, and the provision of positive reinforcement of the skills and assets that are demonstrated. The supervisor motivates and provides a place of safety, support, and mutual aid. In group supervision, the

supervisees also take on the responsibility to reach for their peers' strengths and give support.

Strengths-based supervisors assist supervisees in focusing on what is working in the present, rather than pathologizing clients or their own abilities. In strengths-based group supervision of students, skill development can occur through storytelling about cases and reflective and Socratic questioning. By training supervisees in narrative techniques such as re-storying, strengths-based supervisors can assist group members' ability to remain attuned through a 'not-knowing stance' (Freeman, 2011) which serves to strengthen their relationship with their clients by de-emphasizing the power differential. By reflecting on their work during supervision, student supervisees listen to narratives and learn to move within them to co-create shared experiences with clients through parallel process.

Proctor and Inskipp (2001) describe training group supervision of therapists as falling into three functions (as cited in Ögren & Sundlin, 2009). The first is 'authoritative,' and focuses on the supervisory dyad; it is called 'supervision *in* the group.' The second is 'cooperative,' which relates to 'supervision *by* the group.' The third type, 'participative,' or 'supervision *with* the group' is placed between the other two types, as if on a continuum. In a participative group, the supervisor 'focuses on the individual group members, and encourages the supervisees' active participation in the supervision' (p. 133).

The current authors believe that group supervision using a strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013) lends itself to being a cooperative type of supervision, or supervision *by* the group. Proctor and Inskipp (2001) state that a cooperative relationship with clients is a key concept in the strengths perspective; in this manner the social worker engages collaboratively with the client to improve the client's life (as cited in Ögren & Sundlin, 2009). Applying this concept to group supervision, the supervisor engages with the group cooperatively to enhance students' skills and abilities. The field supervisor and the group members act in partnership in setting the agenda and providing support, encouragement, and feedback to one another during supervisory groups.

## Student group supervision

### Introduction to case example

The following is a case example of social work student group supervision which demonstrates the cooperative type of supervision described above (Proctor & Inskipp, 2001, as cited in Ögren & Sundin, 2009). This case example is presented to illustrate the concepts of the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013), resilience and empowerment, self-efficacy, and diversity. Following the case example, each of these concepts will be defined and applied to the case example. In addition, parallel process will be defined as it relates to group supervision and the strengths perspective.

This case example is presented for demonstration purposes. It is not expected that this example is universally applicable, as the three students in the example have a connection to a single client, and the students interned at the same field site. Thus, the main purpose of this case example is to apply the concepts of the strengths perspective.

### Student group supervision case example

One of the authors of this paper was an external field group supervisor for three Caucasian students who were interning at the same organization that works with delinquent youth. The students were an undergraduate Social Work (BSW) student, Eve, a first year Social Work Masters (MSW) student, Ann, and a second year MSW student, Beth. This supervisory group occurred during the second semester of field for the two MSW students, and the first semester of field for the BSW student.

*We sat down to begin this group supervision session. MSW student Ann opened her notebook with her process recording. The other MSW student, Beth, said to Ann that she looked ready to begin. I agreed that Ann looked ready to begin and said that if that was okay with them, it was all right with me to start with Ann. Ann began her narrative of her session with an African-American male youth client. Beth gave much encouragement and support to Ann as she discussed the client, because Beth had this youth as a client early the previous semester, and he had not been responsive to her. However, Ann seemed to be developing good*

*rapport with the client who was very active in his sessions with her. The client had a strong interest in the technology of music which Ann appreciated and understood. Beth pointed out to Ann that she was using one of her strengths to engage the client. Eve, the BSW student, then became involved in this discussion of the client, because the client had been referred to a group that she facilitated, and she provided information to Ann about her group.*

This example demonstrated the type of cooperative supervision that Proctor and Inskipp (2001) had described (as cited in Ögren & Sundlin, 2009). This was supervision *by* the group; the field instructor acted in partnership with the students. In a similar way, the student, Ann, partnered with the client in their mutual interest in music, to bridge some of their differences. Moreover, the statement that Beth made, that Ann was able to engage the client when she had been unable to do so, is a very supportive statement, as was the comment that Ann was using her strengths to focus on her client's strengths. This was the type of positive feedback and mutual aid that could encourage resiliency and self-efficacy, and also could lead to a sense of empowerment in the supervisee (Kearns & McArdle, 2012). Thus, this case example demonstrates how a few of the concepts of the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013) can be applied to group supervision.

As mentioned above, conflicts and competition can arise in group supervision as conflict is a part of group process (DiMino & Risler, 2012). If, in the case example above, hypothetically, Beth and Eve had been overly critical of Ann as she presented, how could the supervisor use a strengths-based approach in the group?

*As Ann began her narrative of her session with the African-American male youth client, Beth seemed to become overly critical and Eve joined in on the criticism. The supervisor noted that Beth and Eve wanted to give feedback. However, feedback is more helpful when it is stated in the positive of what could be done differently. The supervisor suggested that perhaps Beth and Eve could restate their responses in regards to what was positive about Ann's intervention and give other options of intervention.*

In this hypothetical version of the case example, the supervisor is reaching for strengths in the students who were being overly critical, and encouraging them to develop more supportive and strengths-based responses. Concepts from the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013),



including empowerment, resilience, self-efficacy, and diversity, are reviewed below and connected to the case example.

## **Empowerment**

One concept that relates to group supervision and the strengths perspective is the concept of empowerment, which means enhancing one's ability to identify and utilize the resources in oneself and in one's environment (Saleebey, 2013). In group supervision, the student not only accesses her abilities to reflect on her own practice, but she also utilizes her abilities to assist her peers, which can be an empowering experience. In the first case example, as Beth shared her encouragement and support to Ann in her ability to interact with a youth who had proved difficult for Beth to engage, this was empowering for Ann and focused on her strengths, abilities, and interests.

## **Resilience**

Another concept in the strengths perspective that applies to group supervision is the concept of resilience (Saleebey, 2013). Resilience combines both mastery and flexibility, and is impacted not only by individual attributes, but also by social and interpersonal factors. However, resilience does not only relate to individual personality or social support of others, but also relates to mutuality and shared experiences. Resilience has a component of reflection which adopts a person-in-environment focus as the supervisee examines the impact of the work on her or himself (Collins, 2007, as cited in Adamson, 2012).

Thus, resilience is a multidimensional concept and lends itself to support by others, either personally or professionally (Kearns & McArdle, 2012). Through this support, supervisees can learn task-oriented coping and problem-solving skills. Moreover, resilience is also a concept that incorporates diversity of experience, as group members share their different methods of mastery and problem solving. Kearns and McArdle considered resilience as:

... evaluating 'what is' against the hope of 'what could be,' the balance of

optimism and realism. Other themes proposed are universality in terms of a shared experiences, belief in change, and crucially, meaningful relationships with others. (p.387)

All of these components of resilience can relate well to group supervision where students can share experiences and provide feedback to each other on balancing hope and reality in their field sites, and support one another's application of knowledge and skills.

In strengths-based group supervision, the supervisor and student supervisees can listen to students who are presenting cases, and then provide realistic feedback (realism), while also reaching for their strengths and abilities so that the students can believe they can improve upon their future interventions (optimism), thus helping to build resilience.

In the case example, the statement Beth made that Ann was able to engage with a client that Beth had been unable to connect with was a supportive statement. This is the type of positive feedback and mutual aid that can encourage resiliency.

## **Self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy relates closely to the concept of resilience and is the sense an individual has that she can impact on the events in her life (Bandura, 1982, as cited in Kearns & McArdle, 2012). Research has identified that high self-efficacy relates to one's ability to grow and learn, especially in response to emotionally challenging situations. Through the support of one's peers and a group supervisor, students may attain a more positive sense of self which can then impact their openness to learning, and their development as professionals.

In a small qualitative study of the supervision of new social workers working in Children's Services in the U.K., Kearns and McArdle (2012) reported that self-efficacy related to the quality and nature of support received from supervisors and peers. As students in supervision groups understood the impact of their interventions, their perceived self-efficacy improved.

In the above case example, Ann received support from her peers for the rapport she was able to establish with the client. This positive

support may lead to a sense of accomplishment and mastery and encourage self-efficacy in the supervisee.

## **Diversity**

It is important to recognize the role of diverse membership within supervision groups (Corey, 2008). This includes the supervisees, their clients, and the supervisor. Ideally, group composition issues should be handled during the initial stages of group formation (Barsky, 2010). Diversity factors should cover a wide range of issues, such as sexual orientation, cultural background, religion and spirituality, age, disability, gender, gender identity, and political beliefs (Ellis & Douce, 1994).

To respond to their multiethnic student body in the multicultural society in Israel (Arkin, Freund, & Saltman, 1999), the faculty at the University of Haifa utilized a group supervision model. The Haifa model incorporated a group developmental perspective which utilized both individual and group supervision with the students. According to this model, differences are viewed as strengths that could be easily integrated with the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013). The authors concluded that this group supervision model worked well for a diverse student body.

The diversity in the example above included differences in the students' level of social work education: BSW student, first-year MSW student, and second-year MSW student. There was also diversity between the interns, who were Caucasian females, and the client, an African-American adolescent male.

The three students had different perspectives on the youth because of their different educational levels and their own strengths, abilities, and personal experiences. It was Ann's unique interest in music that provided an opening to engage the youth and bridge the differences between them in terms of age, race, and culture.

## **Parallel process**

The concept of parallel process, initially grounded in psychoanalytic theory, views the social worker-supervisor relationship as reflecting issues present in the client-social worker relationship (Ellis & Douce, 1994; Ganzer & Ornstein, 1999). Parallel process has since been examined from other theoretical perspectives, such as narrative theory (Miehls, 2010).

Supervisors need to remember that they are role models, and just as they relate to students as partners, in a parallel way this can reflect on how students relate to their clients. Ellis and Douce (1994) suggested that material which is resolved in supervision may thus become resolved in future client sessions.

With the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013) as a unifying model in contemporary social work and social work education, it is suggested that this model also can reflect the supervisory parallel process (Miehls, 2010). Similarly, as we strive to work with clients in a cooperative partnership that emphasizes their strengths and abilities, empowerment, resilience, and diversity, so, too, we need to bring these concepts into the supervisee-supervisor relationship.

Strengths-based supervisors assist supervisees in focusing on what is working in the present, rather than pathologizing clients or their own abilities. In strengths-based group supervision of students, skill development can occur through storytelling about cases and reflective and Socratic questioning. A strengths-based approach to group supervision can be demonstrated through various models. The following section will focus on utilizing narrative methods.

## **Narrative approaches to group supervision**

### **Narrative therapy**

Narrative therapy (NT), as developed by White and Epston (1990), is a postmodern method within the paradigm of social constructionism, which posits that reality is formed through linguistic and other agreements by those living in a particular society and culture during a specific historical period (Whiting, 2007). Active listening to narratives includes hearing and observing changes in the narrator and

listeners' behaviors that signal the emergence of problem-saturated narratives. Listening to clinical narratives in a group setting allows for the production and consideration of multiple viewpoints. Freeman (2011) asserted that NT:

creates a shared emotional connection or bond between the narrator and listeners as they enter and live through or relive a client's narrated experience; reveals narrative indicators that document how the narrator and listeners shift from standing outside the narrative to moving into it as a shared experience; leads to a shared transformation or growth process between narrator and listeners that is integrated into future (a) lessons learned from being in the same emotional and narrative space; and (b) ways of being or identity, both individually and collectively. (p. 27)

NT focuses on client empowerment through collaborative conversations, such as those fostered through group supervision (White & Epston, 1990). Client stories often contain images or metaphors which may be conduits for uncovering strengths. NT uses techniques such as re-authoring or re-storying narratives in order to obtain some distance from the problem, and to begin to disconnect their sense of self from their problem self (Howard, 2008).

Supervisors can adapt concepts and strategies from NT to narrative supervision (NS) to help supervisees develop a strengths-based, revised life narrative focused on their own strengths, supports, and resources. A strengths-based approach to group supervision, then, may be demonstrated through narrative means. NT and NS can be implemented in group formats as well as in individual sessions.

### **Narrative supervision**

Storytelling is a selective discourse: what we choose to tell is countered by what we choose to omit. Supervisees are selective in the stories they import to supervision. A client tells a story; a supervisee tells a story about the client that is imported into the supervisory session; supervisors tell stories about past experiences with their own clients. What is learned in supervision is then exported back to direct practice by the supervisee via parallel process.

NS uses the tenets of NT (White & Epston, 1990), with its emphasis

on ‘collaborative enquiry’ in which the supervisor assists supervisees in “re-authoring” or “re-storying” their experience in a way that allows for more distance from the problem’ (Howard, 2008, p. 109). In group supervision, supervisees as well as the group leader permit the speaker to create variations and revisions of the client material they present in the group, taking into account the multiplicity of values, beliefs, and backgrounds represented by the members of the group.

One NT technique that can be used in NS is externalizing problem narratives while focusing on the supervisee’s strengths. The supervisor can help group members shift their narratives away from a story about what they might have done wrong to a story in which they are able to recreate their stories as ‘evidence of their strengths and resilience’ (Freeman, 2011, p. 26). Supervisors can help supervisees attain emotional distance from problems they may have been having with clients in order to not equate themselves to the problem (Gard & Lewis, 2008).

One of the goals of NS is to help the supervisee approach case material, self-awareness, and use of self in a more positive stance. The supervisor’s role is to validate trainees’ progress and independence, help them feel safe enough to share *all* of their experiences in supervision, focus on what worked, and ensure that they view their self-criticism, not themselves, as the problem (Freeman, 2011; Gard & Lewis, 2008; Howard, 2008; Kelley, 2013).

Group supervisors using NS can train supervisees to look at how they interpret and make meaning of the world and the stories they tell within the group setting. Group NS lends itself to an exploration of cultural differences and interactions of multiple identities among group members. The supervisor may ask group members to explore how their individual identities might be contextualized within the wider sociocultural and political realms (Kearns & McArdle, 2012).

As in clinical practice, if supervision is problem- rather than strengths-based, supervisees may be hesitant in sharing mistakes, uncertainty, or other concerns, such as fear of judgment or a personal history of oppression. They may have withheld some stories due to a history of oppression or fears of discrimination. Supervisors can help supervisees break these silences and ensure that voices silenced in the past are released and heard in the safe space of the supervision group. By helping supervisees generate or re-author resilient stories

in the holding environment of the group experience, they can learn to 'incorporate vital and previously neglected aspects of lived experience' (Gard & Lewis, 2008, p. 31), including any prior experiences of having been silenced or negated by oppression or discrimination.

Another technique that can be utilized in group supervision is to help supervisees develop a 'not-knowing' stance while listening to clinical material (Bransford, 2009; Freeman, 2011). This attitude refutes the supervisor's role as expert, and reduces the inherent power differential in the supervisor/supervisee dyad. The group supervisor first creates a safe space for all group members and then helps members practise 'containment' as one member of the group presents a client (Bransford, 2009). As the trainee talks, students are instructed to silently observe their own thoughts and bodily sensations. Along with the group members, the supervisor also listens actively from this not-knowing stance, checking for metaphors, images, beliefs (which may be faulty), and how language is uniquely used by each storyteller. Group members' reactions are then allowed to resonate; the supervisor should follow suit, according to Bransford (2009, p. 123).

Active listening within supervision groups utilizing NS can be viewed as 'a shared experience and transformation process' (Freeman, 2011, p. 26). According to White and Epston (1990), listening to spontaneous narratives includes hearing and observing changes in the narrator and listeners' behaviors that signal the emergence of narrative indicators. The supervisor locates the problem-saturated narrative within its sociocultural/political context, and helps group members translate the story into one in which the problem is separated from the person (Kelley, 2013).

Citing an example of a supervision group for MSW students in field placements which utilized a narrative approach, Bransford (2009) reported that the students were 'better able to attend to the often painful narratives of clients' profound losses...better able to hear and appreciate the many instances of resilience and perseverance contained within these stories.' This process also helped student trainees in group supervision to 'honor a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives' (p. 119).

The instillation of hope through the search for unique outcomes is an important element of strengths-based practice (Saleebey, 2013). One of the goals of NS is to help supervisees 'envision a more positive

professional future rather than one dominated by themes of self-blame, burnout or withdrawal from the profession' (Howard, 2008, p. 111). During group supervision, participants are helped to mutually search for any unique exceptions when the supervisee presenting case material showed mastery of a new skill, self-awareness, or movement toward goal attainment. Through a NS approach, then, group supervisees can learn how to re-story through collaborative conversations with peers in the group and with their supervisor.

By partnering with students in a group setting, the supervisor engages with them to further develop their stories. Another way the supervisor can facilitate group supervision is to use specific questions designed to seek understanding of client issues that may not have been previously considered (Barsky, 2010). Questions may be designed to encourage reflection, critical thinking, or 'not knowing' as supervisees educate one another as well as the supervisor, who also embodies the not-knowing stance regarding the issues the group seeks to resolve. These techniques will be described below, followed by an example of a collaborative, interprofessional team group conference which utilized a strengths-based approach, Socratic questioning, and narrative supervision.

## **The Socratic method of inquiry**

Strengths-based supervision (Saleebey, 2013) may also be facilitated through the use of pointed clinical questions during group supervision (Barsky, 2010). Socrates used this educational method as a means to stimulate debate between individuals with opposing viewpoints. Socrates realized that this dialectical technique permitted group members to ask and answer questions, ultimately resulting in heightened critical thinking. Through guided oppositional discussion aimed at pitting one point of view against another, students are allowed to strengthen their perspectives and to think about the question before speaking.

Socratic methods can be adapted for group supervision to assist professionals who are challenged to understand difficult clinical practice issues (Barsky, 2010; Copeland, 2010; Straker, 2014). Using the Socratic method of inquiry, the group supervisor asks one or more participants a series of questions in order to help them discuss and



analyze a case scenario in unique ways, using different perspectives (Yassour-Borochowitz, 2004). Participants generate their own understanding, knowledge, or truths from engaging in a dialogue with the facilitator (Maxwell, 2007).

Barsky (2010) has suggested that, in order to adapt the Socratic method of inquiry to a group educational context, the facilitator may use a number of strategies linked to the first two stages of the generalist problem-solving process (p. 149). When utilizing the process in a supervisory capacity, the process begins with the 'Engagement Stage,' which introduces issues to be discussed and an explanation of the Socratic inquiry method (p. 149). Participants are given an opportunity to raise concerns about the process at this stage. The supervisor then demonstrates empathy regarding students' concerns, and suggests ground rules for a safe environment for discussion and learning. The Engagement Stage allows all participants to develop consensus regarding the issues for discussion, learning objectives, and agreed-upon ground rules.

The second stage of the process is the 'Assessment and Learning Stage' (Barsky, 2010, p. 149). At this time, the case situation is presented, giving students an opportunity to express their initial views, restate their previously discussed views, demonstrate understanding, or invite clarification. Questions are then posed by the supervisor to raise doubts about the students' previously held views, allowing them the chance to look at the case from a different perspective. To heighten the critical thinking process, the supervisor then poses a series of hypothetical questions designed to raise exceptions to current issues under discussion. The purpose of this step is to raise doubts about the participants' strongly-held beliefs and to foster self-awareness.

This stage of the process challenges the supervisor to 'take the member's views to an extreme' (Barsky, 2010, p. 150). This provides an opportunity for the supervisor to demonstrate an interest in learning from the students. Participants then consider what might happen if their concepts were applied to every case they encounter. This serves as an opportunity to change how they might view the issue, given the new information that they have obtained through the assessment process. The facilitator's role also involves patience and understanding as supervisees attempt to reason through their issues and thinking to find possible answers to their dilemmas.

## **Types of questions used in Socratic inquiry**

### *Conceptual clarification questions*

These questions provide an opportunity for students to analyze what they are asking and thinking about. This type of question allows students to link the concepts that support their argument. These questions may be identified as the ‘tell me more’ questions that assist them in probing deeper into their critical thinking process. Typical questions include ‘Can you give me an example?’ or ‘Are you saying ... or ...?’

### *Probing assumptions*

This type of question probes unquestioned suppositions and previously-held beliefs which are the foundation of an argument. Many times, the participant’s assumptions may be based on strongly-held familial belief systems which may prove difficult to change when challenged. Probing questions might include ‘How did you choose those assumptions?’ or ‘What would happen if ...?’

### *Probing rationale, reasons, and evidence*

When students provide a rationale for their arguments, the role of the supervisor is to probe the underlying source for their rationale. The goal is to challenge participants to dig into their reasoning rather than taking it at face value. Questions that probe into rationale and require evidence include: ‘How do you know this?’ or ‘Can you give me an example of that?’ or ‘What do you think causes ...?’

### *Questioning viewpoints and perspectives*

Strengths-based supervisors (Saleebey, 2013) should recognize that the participants’ position may be challenged using many different versions of their argument. The goal should be to challenge each student to identify their position and show that there are other, equally valid, viewpoints to consider. Examples might include the following: ‘What alternative ways of looking at this are there?’ or ‘What are the strengths and weaknesses of...?’

### *Probe implications and consequences*

The participants’ arguments may have logical implications relative to

the problem or case issue. Do these arguments make sense? The role of the supervisor should be to question whether the consequences are desirable (Straker, 2014). Questions linked to implications and consequences tend to include ‘What are the consequences of that assumption?’ or ‘What are the implications of ...?’ or ‘How does ... affect/fit with what you’ve learned before?’

According to Barksy (2010), the use of Socratic inquiry focuses primarily on the Assessment and Learning stage. This method provides an opportunity for understanding a situation rather than treatment planning, implementation, and follow-up stages of the problem-solving process (p.150). Socratic questioning may be used with other groups, as in the development of learning experiences for social work students (Corey, 2008). It may also be useful with clients who are faced with problems coping with how to handle difficult ethical issues (Reamer, 2006). The ultimate goal for use of this method in the group context would be for the participants to gain a better understanding of the issues that need to be dealt with and methods to be considered when trying to resolve them.

## **Interprofessional group supervision simulation example**

Students in social work, nursing, nutrition, and speech therapy formed a supervision group led by instructors from each of those four fields of practice. This interprofessional supervision group met four times per semester and utilized case simulations to facilitate the development of professional case assessment and potential interventions. As an example, one of the nursing instructors role-played a client in the scenario that follows.

Historically, the pre-existing problem inherent in interprofessional teamwork was social in nature. Based on this assumption, the supervisory team identified the significance of applying an Adlerian perspective to the interprofessional process. Utilizing this approach allowed the faculty supervisors an opportunity to develop a sense of belonging and ‘team connectedness’ in the group process (Corey, 2008).

## **Simulation scenario**

Mrs. E is a 74 year old African American woman married to her husband for 50 years. Mr. E has a history of late-stage liver cancer. Mrs. E and her husband had one son who was killed in the Gulf War. Their daughter-in-law and grandson are very supportive and assist the couple. Mrs. E's husband reported that his wife (our client) has become increasingly forgetful and appears depressed most days. She has been fearful about his health and their potential inability to remain in their home based on their combined health concerns. Mr. E is realistic about his own prognosis and is unsure how to identify and provide appropriate care for his wife now and in the near future. Mr. and Mrs. E and their daughter-in-law have visited several local assisted living facilities, but they are unsure if Mrs. E's care would be manageable at that level.

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The 'community-based health care team' was represented in the simulation by students from the four professions. They were then requested to analyze the case scenario from their respective vantage points, and to provide recommendations.

After the case simulation, the faculty facilitated the collaborative discussion among the student teams in group supervision. The faculty members assumed roles as 'seekers of understanding.' The ground rules were that discussion about the client scenario would take place in a safe environment in which all participants could share critical thinking and their personal perspectives. The group facilitators helped the students identify issues in ways they might not have previously considered, such as from a strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013). They used a series of Socratic questions to assist the interprofessional students to discuss and analyze the simulation scenario (Barsky, 2010; Copeland, 2010; Straker, 2014). Faculty processed group members' impressions about client needs, potential diagnoses for Mrs. E, opportunities for interprofessional collaboration, and so on. The purpose of the simulation was, ultimately, to foster cohesion among the student teams.

At the Engagement stage (Barsky, 2010), supervisors requested students utilize empathy and concern for the family. During the Assessment and Learning stage, after the case presentation, students were invited to provide ideas, thoughts, and preliminary analyses

related to Mrs. E and her family. Supervisors posed questions that sought to elucidate different points of view about possible diagnoses, such as dementia, clinical depression, or delirium. Faculty provided hypothetical questions to raise exceptions to current issues, such as the effects of Mr. E's terminal illness and impending death on Mrs. E.

During the final case analysis, group members were encouraged to share their perspectives regarding the work that had been done throughout the process with this client, and were able to develop mutual aid. The discussion served to challenge their previously-held beliefs regarding interprofessional team roles, personal convictions and values based on earlier learning regarding discipline-specific responsibilities, and best practices that would ultimately benefit the patient.

In conclusion, the student participants' evaluation of the group supervisory experience reflected their unanticipated enlightenment that resulted from the interprofessional group interaction. The simulation and subsequent group processing of the case scenario challenged group members' previously-held beliefs regarding roles based on their disparate disciplines, and encouraged members to think of themselves as interprofessional learners. The use of pointed questions allowed the group members to recognize the different ways of viewing the client's situation based on the dialogue stimulated by the interprofessional team during the Socratic inquiry process (Barsky, 2010). The supervisor gave group members the opportunity to focus on what the members were saying by reflecting on their subjective experiences. In this way, the interprofessional experience and group supervision allowed the students to develop cohesion and mutual aid.

## **Discussion**

This paper represents a beginning theoretical conceptualization on utilizing the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013) in conjunction with narrative supervision (White & Epston, 1990), Socratic inquiry (Barsky, 2010), and an awareness of the importance of parallel process (Miehls, 2010) in group supervision. Both examples presented relate some of the practical uses of this approach for group supervision of students. Both are illustrative of student group supervision utilizing

two different approaches in two different settings, while applying a strengths perspective.

The above discussion demonstrates how the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013) can be used with student group supervision, making the process more positive, participatory, and collaborative. A strengths-based approach to supervision focuses on what is working rather than on a deficit narrative. Through group supervision, students develop resilience by sharing experiences and accessing their diverse skills and life situations (Kearns & McArdle, 2012). Through utilization of techniques derived from narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) and Socratic questioning (Barsky, 2010), supervisors can encourage students to share details of their client work with the other group members.

By stressing the importance of the supervisor enabling student participants to enter into their own subjective reality, they may become more open to collaborative teamwork without losing their own sense of identity in the group process. Using the support of the group can be empowering and can increase supervisees' sense of efficacy (Kearns & McArdle, 2012).

In conclusion, the role of the supervisor is critical in the development of student learning through the use of alternative methods of thinking and interacting in a collaborative group setting. The use of pointed clinical questions and applied case scenarios in Socratic inquiry may lead students to develop agreements and a 'common understanding' regarding client issues (Barsky, 2010). Ultimately, strength-based group supervision may develop increasingly professional interactions among students, leading to a mutually supportive team process. This process can assist students in developing the skills, knowledge, and professional use of self that will enable them to become competent and effective professional social workers.

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