ABSTRACT. This paper presents an auxiliary tool to be used in social work supervision to help field work trainees to elaborate their feelings regarding their relationships with the client. The phenomenon of emotional blockages in worker-client relationships is familiar to agency supervisors and teachers of field work. A technique for teaching trainees in field work to deal with difficulties of this kind has been developed by the author. This technique consists in a written exercise in which the trainee composes a personal letter to the client that addresses itself to the problems in their relationship. These letters are not sent but used in supervision sessions for the benefit of the trainee.

The functions of social work supervision can be subsumed under three principal headings: advisory, didactic, and supportive (Kadushin, 1985; Middleman & Rhodes, 1985; Shulman, 1979). Our concern here will be with the didactic and supportive functions of supervision. A student’s transition from classroom study to field work training is often fraught with apprehension and stress. Strong emotions may be aroused in students from their very first encounter with a client. Students’ personal difficulties may become engaged,
resulting in either over-identification with the client or defensive behavior. They may be overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety and guilt over their professional inadequacies, or by anger over what they regard as being the supervisor’s unrealistic expectations (Dwyer & Urbanowsky, 1987; Middleman & Rhodes, 1985; Towel, 1954). Such responses tend to undermine performance and impede learning (Selby, 1955; Wilson, 1981). It is the supervisor’s task to support field work trainees in this predicament, and to teach them to turn it into a constructive learning experience (Shulman, 1979). An approach used by the author for this purpose in supervising students undergoing training in field work was to assign trainees the task of writing a personal letter to the client in which they would frankly discuss their feelings. These letters were not intended to be actually sent, but offered material for study in supervision sessions.

Epistolary exercises of this type have been used in therapeutic contexts (Bergman & Witztum, 1987; Elitzur, 1986). Here, letter writing is a remedial and nourishing experience that helps clients to confront their emotions and discover new behavioral alternatives. The same technique can be applied to a similar end in the supervision setting where it can be used in order to help field work trainees to elaborate their feelings. The task of writing such a letter can be carried out in the student’s free time and in an unstressful atmosphere that is free of the sort of criticism and control to which a supervisee must submit during sessions with the supervisor. Should the content of the letter seem to be too threatening to be shared with the supervisor, the student is given the choice of not handing it in. But even in this case the exercise is beneficial in furnishing students with the opportunity of unburdening themselves of emotional conflicts and raising them to a level of consciousness at which they can potentially be worked through.

**PROCEDURES FOR THE UNSENT LETTER EXERCISE**

On the supervisee’s completion of the unsent-letter assignment, one of two procedures can be followed. One possibility is for the supervisor to suggest a role-playing exercise in which the field work trainee acts the part of the client receiving the letter and reads it out loud, responding spontaneously to its content; the field instructor
assumes the role of the student-worker in the mood and situation set out in the letter. This role inversion in an imaginary confrontation enacted within the setting of a protected learning environment performs the dual function both of legitimating the supervisee’s feelings toward the client and of bringing home the importance that acknowledging such feelings and working them through have for one’s professional responsibility to the client. For students who function better on a cognitive than on an emotional level, the same can be accomplished by a discussion of the letter and its content. Either approach may then be followed up by suggesting that the supervisee write a letter of reply in the client’s name. This task, like the first, is carried out in the supervisee’s spare time and out of session, so that feelings can be elaborated and acceptance of, and empathy for, the client can be developed independently of the supervisor’s guidance, although with the latter’s sanction.

The examples that follow serve to illustrate the application of the unsent-letter technique in the cases of three field work trainees who had experienced difficulties in particular spheres of their relationship with the client.

Anger Following Client’s Rejection

The supervisee was a second-year female student who had been assigned the case of a client registered with a municipal welfare agency. This was the student’s first trial in field work. The client was a twenty year-old unmarried woman with a history of mental illness that had been diagnosed as being in remission. She had a two-year-old son with whom she was currently living in the home of her widowed mother. The referral was for adequate independent housing for the client and her child. After several months of treatment, the client refused to have any further dealings with the trainee on the grounds that she had obtained no results from the treatment. As is customary in such cases, the student was asked to see the client at least one more time in order to terminate treatment and submit a summary report. The student however felt incapable of meeting the client again after so blunt a rejection. At the supervisor’s suggestion, the student wrote a letter of the type described, and which is quoted in part below:
It seems odd to be writing to a client, but I thought I had to so I could make you understand how I felt throughout our relationship. Our first meeting was strange. I knew nothing about you and no one gave me your file. I was just told, “This is your client—go make an appointment to meet her.” Frankly I was apprehensive about our meeting, not knowing what to expect . . . But when you told me about your domestic and financial difficulties, I wanted very much to help you. Maybe too much . . . I was aware of your impatience from the very beginning . . . You rejected everything you regarded as unimportant to you. I felt that you came just to get through the “rigmarole” so you’d get the material benefits you wanted, rather than to talk and listen . . . You knew the ropes and how to get the most out of the system, and you used me to do it. I find it hard to be angry with you, though. It’s just that I identified myself too much with you and was too anxious to help . . . You mean a lot to me and I’ll always be thankful to you for teaching me so much about social work and myself . . . One last thing, and this only concerns you indirectly. They said at the agency that it was a mistake to give me your case . . . I think that this mistake more or less hurt us both. My teacher at college says we learn from our mistakes. But in our profession we do our learning on human beings. I certainly wouldn’t want a surgeon who believed in “learning from mistakes” to operate on me.

In the letter the student gives vent to her resentment of the client, the supervisor, the agency, the system, and the profession itself. Nevertheless she is aware, too, that the source of her vulnerability is within herself, and she acknowledges that her agenda was different from that of the client. She also expresses a warm sense of identification with the client, and an ironic awareness of the client’s position as a guinea pig in a learning experiment. When the letter was submitted, the supervisor praised the student for her honest presentation of her experience. By modeling the ways in which the supervisee might cope with her anger, the supervisor succeeded in making the student aware that her anger was directed against two principal targets—the client, and the field work instructor. This obstructed the student’s progress in both treating the client and accept-
ing guidance from the supervisor (Kahn, 1979). Once this was realized and accepted by the student, the way was open for terminating treatment. The student met the client a number of times, and found it possible to deal with her anger and disappointment and to make a professional separation.

**Guilt Following Termination of Treatment**

The supervisee in this instance was also a second-year female student undergoing field work training. Her case assignment was a four-year-old girl living at a children’s home with her three-year-old brother. The mother was confined to an institution for the mentally disturbed. At the end of the academic year, the student could not bring herself to terminate treatment and take leave of the little girl, to whom she had grown strongly attached. Once again, the supervisor suggested that the student might try her hand at the un-sent-letter exercise.

The letter opens with the student’s assessment of the client in purely personal and emotional terms, and unencumbered by theory or professional jargon. Thus we read:

> Whenever I think of you I see a terribly grown-up little girl—grown-up because of the role you have taken on, or think you should take on: to be kind and a source of comfort, to be a peacemaker, a mediator, a provider, and so much more . . . Sometimes I want to scream and tell you this is wrong, a sure path to self-destruction. Believe me I know because it’s my field . . . I know how unnecessary and harmful it all is.

This highly emotive presentation of the student’s attitude represents the first time in the course of supervision that the trainee had allowed herself to speak explicitly of her emotional involvement and overwhelming sense of identification with the client—feelings so powerful that they make her want to throw off the restraints of the professional relationship. Screaming, she speculates, might have been more effective than routine treatment. She elaborates:

> We had very few meetings and I was pained by every cancellation . . . since at each additional meeting you and I could
have made further progress. You, by allowing yourself to feel pain and anger; I, by coming to know that my new way was the better way—what might be called my self-therapy.

Concluding the letter, the student explains why treatment must be broken off and she and the client must separate. She then speaks of how similar she and the little girl are in their personalities, and expresses her concern over the girl’s future should these shared traits get the better of her:

In my case, I tended to retreat more and more into my shell until I was twenty-two. You may turn to more extreme measures and at a much earlier age . . . especially if you keep on locking everything up inside of you. . . .

After the letter was read aloud, the student revealed that she had become aware of her overidentification with the client’s behavioral pattern of being the “good girl” that never loses her temper. By reexamining her attitudes toward significant others in her own life, she was able to learn more about herself. Quite apart from the importance this had for the supervisee’s personal development, it also represented a breakthrough in the way in which she related to the client’s needs and problems. The student thus experienced a radical change both in her self-estimation and in her consciousness of her professional role. She could now separate herself from her client. By making manifest to both herself and her supervisor her inability to deal with negative feelings and to express them, she was now in a position to allow the client to do the same on her own, and could take an objective view of the client’s problems. In consequence the supervisee had matured both personally and professionally.

**Problems in Empathy**

The field work trainee in this example was a male student aged thirty-eight, and therefore older than the average social work major. He is also the father of a fifteen-year-old autistic boy whom he is bringing up at home. The client assigned to him was a five-year-old mentally handicapped boy with an IQ of 70 who had been placed in a children’s home.
During supervision the student’s manifest attitude toward the client was intellectual and emotionally detached. There seemed to be no progress in either the student’s relationship with the client or the client’s treatment. This was attributed by the supervisee to his inexperience and ignorance of treatment techniques. The supervisor had no success in getting the student to discuss his feelings about the situation. Instead, the student pressed the supervisor to recommend advanced reading material that would help him in dealing with the client. Even when the subject of the supervisee’s autistic son came up in discussions, the student persisted in keeping the conversation on a purely intellectual plane. At the supervisor’s suggestion, the student composed an unsent letter in which he tried to explain the meaning that his relationship with the client had for him. The following is an abridged text of the letter:

... I didn’t know how to reach you at first. Your reactions seemed so strange and even frightening to me ... I had no idea of how to penetrate your tormented little world, of how to overcome all of those cruel separations, disappointments, and disappearances of familiar faces which you must have experienced ... In the course of your treatment, which I’m sure did you some good, I too was a receiver. You gave me so much - your willingness to accept, to create a relationship, to imitate, to learn, and to teach others ... I was afraid for what the future had in store for you, having to grow up in institutions and to end up in a home for the retarded ... I have an autistic son and I know that if he had been left to grow up in an institution, as his therapist had recommended, he could never become independent ... I think everybody has the right to grow up in a family ... and I’m certain that you could grow and develop in a warm and secure family environment. I know that in treating you, something in me is overcompensating for what happened with my own son, who is now fifteen. When he was born I was too young and too busy to be able to deal with his needs ... You gave me the experience of paternity.

The content of the letter is self-explanatory. The student was able to take advantage of the opportunity afforded by the letter in order
to take stock of himself and explore and articulate his most private feelings. He also elected to show the letter to the supervisor, so that a candid and warm discussion could take place concerning the topics brought up in the letter. No attempt was made to apply therapeutic techniques, since this would have exceeded the scope of the supervisor's authority.

Supervisory efforts were therefore confined to helping the student to elaborate his feelings. Accordingly, it was suggested that the student write another letter, this time to himself and in the person of the client. This letter took the following form:

You've been studying for some years and have chosen to specialize in a helping profession, and now you go around waving your diploma as evidence of your expertise . . . But look at me, only a five-year-old and just learning to say his first words . . . You have a home to go to while I am too weak to be able to cope with all these changes . . . Talk of empathy! Have any of you ever tried to step into my shoes? You have labeled and institutionalized me as a backward child, and forgotten that feeling secure is an essential condition for development . . . What is to become of me? . . . It's true that you gave me hope of a relationship, but this too is going to end at some point. I'm learning ways of defending myself by forming superficial relationships and fighting for my place in the world, but I am still unhappy and without roots. The pain is terrible . . . Have you ever felt the hurt of abandonment and betrayal, and the awful loneliness? Who asked any of you to interfere in the first place? I blame you and society for confining me just so your conscience shouldn't bother you!

This comprehensive indictment, written by the supervisee in the client's name against both himself and the system he represents, stems in part from an unresolved conflict centering on an ethical issue of the profession. The problem derives from the knowledge that, on the one hand, successful treatment depends on the depth and quality of a worker's relationship with the client, and that, on the other hand, the professional relationship also requires this connection to end once treatment is terminated. This contradiction is a
source of difficulty for many students who are at the same stage of professional development as the supervisee. In his case, however, the problem was aggravated by the student's sense of guilt and anxiety concerning his son—feelings that his relationship with the client had brought to the surface. Writing this letter seemed to have unlocked the supervisee's capacity for compassion and empathy with the client, as well as helping him to come to terms with his feelings concerning his own child. This emerges from a third letter, written once again in the client's name as a response to the first unsent letter:

It is true that the more you give the more you receive. At first I was willing to give . . . but your tolerance and love, your willingness to allow our relationship to develop at a pace that let me understand, helped me slowly to emerge from my self-imposed cage . . . You gave me the strength and experience to create a mutual relationship that will remain with me, no matter where others may put me, until I grow up and become independent. As for your relationship with your son, you were young at the time and preoccupied with your own grief . . . Now, all you can do with your guilt is to learn from it how to give. Our separation will be very painful for me. But however much it may hurt, the memory of this experience will stay with me as something good that has taught me to relate to others. This is all due to you. So don't be sad. You gave me something I wanted to reject, and now it will remain with me always.

In this last exercise the supervisee shows himself to be on the way to resolving the problems brought up in the first two letters. He has come to terms with his guilt feelings concerning his son; has learned to accept the necessity of his inevitable separation from the client and, ultimately, from his own son as well, and has acknowledged the value of his contribution as a professional to the life of the client. Concomitantly, his relationship with the client improved perceptibly, and his approach to treatment was broadened in scope and deepened.
CONCLUSION

The five letter-writing exercises considered in the foregoing were all carried out by social work students who had experienced different functional problems in their relationship with clients during field work training. In each instance the exercise was useful in helping to define and deal with the particular difficulties the student had encountered. Since the letters had been written under supervision, the students were able to elaborate their feelings with the assistance of the supervisor. However, the technique might be profitably used, as well, by practicing social workers for their own improvement, if they have sufficient experience to undertake elaboration on their own and unaided.

REFERENCES


