Shared vicarious trauma among professional social workers: A qualitative study of the Palestinian experience

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• Abstract
This study explored the perceptions of Palestinian social workers regarding the effect of working under Israeli occupation with traumatized clients in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Shared vicarious trauma means that the social worker and the client experience the same stressful environment or events. This study looked at how shared vicarious trauma influenced social workers’ feelings toward their jobs, their ability to do their work, and the quality of their performance.

• Methodology
This study employed a multiple case study design utilizing a qualitative research methodology. A non-probability, purposive sample of four nonprofit, social service organizations serving Palestinian children and families was selected. Executive Directors were interviewed in English. Focus groups (25 social workers among four agencies) were conducted in Arabic.

• Findings: Executive Directors
The Executive Directors described how working and living in a turbulent environment has interrupted organizational services. The managers expressed concern that their staff often felt helpless to rectify the trauma done when children witness house demolitions and see Israeli tanks in their villages. They expressed concern that social workers who come to the profession to help children and families are frustrated by conditions that harm their clients and over which they have no control. The administrators told of their own experiences with checkpoints, being detained, and intrusive interrogations.

• The Executives reported seeing signs of stress in their workers that were expressed in anger and depression. The directors spoke of agency-sponsored activities like stress management training, individual and group supervision, and retreats to combat the trauma. Agencies also sponsor monthly lunches or summer picnics to foster a feeling of community and to offer a break from the stress of work.

• Findings: Social Workers
The focus groups revealed that social workers have experienced problems related to the political situation, including crossing Israeli military checkpoints to visit clients, conducting services in conflict-affected areas, and witnessing violence against children and women. Social workers reported being arrested and investigated regarding their casework and community development activities. The social workers said the environmental realities postponed counseling sessions, forced cancellation of activities, changed schedules, or required them to leave before planned activities had been completed. The focus group participants spoke of the lack of international concern for Palestinians as an additional stressor in their personal and professional lives.