Research article

Child protection workers dealing with child abuse: The contribution of personal, social and organizational resources to secondary traumatization

Shlomit Weiss Dagan, Anat Ben-Porat *, Haya Itzhaky

School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan 52900, Israel

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The present study compared secondary traumatization among child protection social workers versus social workers employed at social service departments. In addition, based on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the study examined the contribution of working in the field of child protection as well as the contribution of background variables, personal resources (mastery), and resources in the workers' social and organizational environment (social support, effectiveness of supervision, and role stress) to secondary traumatization. The findings indicate that levels of mastery and years of work experience contributed negatively to secondary traumatization, whereas exposure to child maltreatment, trauma history, and role stress contributed positively to secondary traumatization. However, no significant contribution was found for social support and effectiveness of supervision. The study identifies factors that can prevent distress among professionals such as child protection workers, who are exposed to the trauma of child abuse victims. Recommendations are provided accordingly.

In recent years, there has been increasing awareness of the negative consequences experienced by social workers who treat trauma victims (Canfield, 2005; Iliffe & Steed, 2000). In this connection, Figley (1995) proposed the concept of secondary traumatization, which relates to the behavioral and emotional consequences of exposure to the traumatic events experienced by significant others, and to the stress experienced as a result of helping the victims of those events. According to Figley, therapists can be "infected" by the trauma victim, and can experience a range of post-traumatic symptoms similar to their clients.

Studies have found evidence of secondary traumatization among therapists working with trauma victims in various areas, such as family violence (Ben-Porat & Itzhaky, 2009), mental health (Cunningham, 2003), and sexual abuse (Brady, Guy, Poelstra, & Brokaw, 1999; Kassam-Adams, 1995; Schauben & Frazier, 1995). However, the literature review indicates that there is a serious dearth of research on the problem of secondary traumatization and its specific implications for social workers in the field of child protection. Social workers dealing with children at risk who are victims of abuse and neglect are at the forefront of the struggle against this problem. Hence there is an ethical obligation to help those workers deal with distress that might emerge as a result of their work (Sommer, 2008).

---

* Corresponding author.

Many studies have attempted to identify the factors that contribute to secondary traumatization among different populations of therapists, with emphasis on factors relating to the workers and their environment (Cunningham, 2003; Dane, 2000; Iliffe & Steed, 2000). However, very few studies have integrated these resources from a holistic perspective that considers personal as well as social and organizational factors.

Against this background, the present study aimed to examine the unique manifestations of secondary traumatization among child protection social workers through a comparison with social workers employed at social service departments in Israel. The rationale for comparing those two groups is based on differences in the extent of their exposure to child abuse victims as well as on differences in their role definition and characteristics, as we will explain below. The study also aimed to identify personal resources and as well as factors relating to the workers' social and organizational environment that can prevent the development of secondary traumatization.

The theoretical framework of the study based on Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, which assumes that people strive to retain, protect, and build resources (Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993). According to this theory, stress is defined as a reaction to the environment in which there are perceived threats to one's resources (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001). The model identifies categories of personal and environmental resources that play a central role in the lives of human beings (Hobfoll, 1989). The unique contribution of COR theory is its examination of social workers from a holistic perspective. Based on this approach, the present study examined the contribution of personal resources (background variables and mastery) as well as factors relating to social and organizational resources (social support, exposure to child maltreatment, effectiveness of supervision, and role stress) which can prevent the development of secondary traumatization among social workers.

In Israel, the role of child protection social workers as stipulated in the law is to protect needy minors who are at risk for situations such as juvenile delinquency, neglect, and various types of abuse perpetrated by the adults who are responsible for them (Faber & Slotzky, 2007; Jackman-Ladani, 2007). These workers are usually the first ones to meet abused children and their families after the trauma, and they function primarily in crisis and emergency situations. In addition, because they are in the front line of protecting these children and in light of their authoritative professional role, these workers bear a heavy burden of responsibility and often have to deal with opposition from the parents in implementing court decisions or intervention programs stipulated by the courts. In light of their distinctive role, child protection workers are exposed to the details of the children's trauma in their daily work as earwitnesses and sometimes as eyewitnesses. In this capacity, they also have to provide oral and written documentation of the trauma on behalf of the children and bring the situation to light.

In contrast, social workers at social service departments are responsible for dealing with families and individual adults. Their role is to provide assistance in situations of distress that derive from financial, personal, and family difficulties as well as from illness and physical or emotional disabilities. Among other clients, workers at social service departments treat the families of child abuse victims under the care of child protection workers. Their intervention is diverse, and can be either short-term or long-term, depending on the cooperation of the clients.

The results of the few studies that have been conducted among child protection workers indicate that they are at high risk for secondary trauma symptoms (Dane, 2000; Meyers & Cornille, 2002; Pryce, Shackelford, & Pryce, 2007; Van Hook & Rothenberg, 2008). However, very little research has been conducted on the factors that cause secondary traumatization among this population of workers, or on the unique characteristics of the problem among these therapists compared with other populations of therapists.

Background Variables and Personal Resources

According to COR theory, several individual factors such as personality may affect one's resources and play a role in the development of stress (Langelaan, Bakker, van Doornen, & Schaufeli, 2006). Of the factors that have been associated with secondary traumatization in the literature, findings have revealed that years of work experience is related to the development of a professional identity, confidence in one's professional abilities, and the capacity for emotional regulation. Notably, studies have found that young therapists show higher levels of secondary traumatization (Craig & Sprang, 2010; Van Hook & Rothenberg, 2008). However, other researchers have proposed that the relationship of work experience to levels of stress is curvilinear rather than linear. That is, new workers as well as older workers with many years of experience have reported higher levels of stress than workers with average work experience (Rudolph, Stamm, & Stamm, 1997; Steed & Bicknell, 2001).

Another factor that has been associated with secondary traumatization in the literature is the worker's personal trauma history. COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) refers to a cycle of losses, in which an early loss can make it difficult for individuals to overcome later losses in life. In that context, workers who have been exposed to trauma in the past are at risk for experiencing secondary traumatization (Figley, 1995). Existing research conducted among therapists working with trauma victims has revealed a significant positive correlation between the therapist's exposure to trauma or abuse in the past and manifestations of secondary traumatization in the present (Braid & Jenkins, 2003; Moore, 2004).

Regarding personal resources, Hobfoll (1989) attributed considerable importance to mastery as a key resource for coping with stress and distress. The importance of mastery for therapists lies mainly in the ability to set boundaries between their personal and professional lives, as well as in their perception of themselves as having control over their world (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995). Studies have revealed a negative correlation between mastery and secondary traumatization (Adams, Boscarino, & Figley, 2006; Folkman, 1984; Hobfoll & London, 1986; Hobfoll & Walfisch, 1984; Killian, 2008).