

Social Workers' Motivation to Continue in the Field after Violent Assault by a Client

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between violence against social workers and their motivation to continue working in the field in Palestine. A questionnaire was administered to 67 social workers. The main results show that when violence against social workers increases, their motivation to continue working in the field decreases. In addition, the results reveal that female social workers showed higher motivation to continue working in the field than male social workers who faced the same degree of violence; younger social workers showed higher motivation to continue in the field compared to seasoned counterparts. Implications for social work practice are discussed.

Keywords: Social Workers, Clients, Violence, Motivation, Palestine.

Introduction

Research has shown that client violence against social workers is common (e.g. Badkhen & Staff, 2008; Koritsas, Coles & Boyle, 2010; MacDonald & Sirotich, 2001). Common sources of this violence are the power/control relationship between social workers and their clients and the perception of the latter that while social workers intervene in their private life they are unhelpful (Littlechild, 2005). Studies also report the damaging effects of client violence on social workers such as fears, anxiety and low level of job satisfaction (Beaver, 1999; Littlechild, 2005). However, scholars noted that most of these studies were conducted in UK or USA (Koritsas et al., 2010). Indeed, the researcher of this study observed that little attention has been given to the problem of violent assaults against social workers in Palestine. To fill the gap, this study designed to identify types and degree of intensity of violence against social workers working in governmental and non-governmental social service agencies in Jerusalem district. Secondly, it aims to identify the relationship between demographic variables (age, gender, & level of education) and motivation of social workers to continue work in the social work field, despite facing clients' violence. Such a study will enrich and add knowledge to the social work field as well as develop the basis of research in this area and will encourage other researchers to conduct future studies.

Literature Review

Social workers find themselves in dangerous positions when attempting to provide services to their clients. Moreover, social workers unlike most other professions find themselves experience a paradox. While they offer help they at the same time represent authority and as a result clients become angry and resentful (Schultz, 1989). The three most common types of violence against social workers are physical assaults, verbal violence and property damage. Physical assaults typically include incidence in which the client comes into a contact with intent to cause harm. Verbal violence tends to include abusive language or physical gestures that indicate intent to harm the social worker. Property damage refers to physical damage to the social worker at his private property or home or at the agency property (Newhill, 1996; Newhill & Wexler, 1997).

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Most studies have examined the prevalence of violence against social workers in developed countries. In Australia, Koritsas et al. (2010) showed that 67% of a sample population was exposed to at least one form of violence in workplace. They also found that client verbal violence was the most common form of violence; 57% of sample of social workers reported that they have experienced verbal violence. Badkhen & Staff (2008) conducted a study in the Boston area and found that a third of social workers had been threatened at their workplace. Violent acts upon social workers have included shooting, punching, killing and kicking. In a study conducted in California Robin (2005) found that social workers were subjected both to physical and psychological assaults. 62% of the social workers had been exposed to physical and psychological abuse and 14% of them reported they had been exposed to verbal violence. MacDonald & Sirotych (2005) found that 57% of social workers were subjected to some form of violence; 87.8% were exposed to verbal violence and 63.5% were subjected to physical violence. MacDonald and Sirotych (2005) found that 7.8% had been severely injured and 53.8% of those abused needed medical treatment. Beaver (1999) found that 62.8% of a sample of social workers faced violence; 50.7% faced verbal violence and 19.7% faced physical violence.

In a literature review conducted recently by Robson, Cossar & Quayle (2014) it was found that verbal aggression and threats towards child and family social workers are commonplace, but physical violence is rare. This high frequency appears to have led social workers to downplay the danger it may pose and almost accept it as part of the job, which result in under-reporting. In addition, there does not appear to be consensus regarding the risk factors most commonly assessed with violence in child and family services. Only few studies on client violence towards social workers were conducted in Moslem societies. El-Gilany (2010) investigated the prevalence of violence against social workers in health care institutions in Saudi Arabia. The results showed that the rate of emotional violence was 92.1% and physical violence was 7.6%. In a study conducted in Iran Padyab, Chelak, Nygren, & Ghazinour (2012) found that 67% of a sample of social workers had experienced violence during the previous year of the research, with considerably higher magnitude of psychological violence than physical violence.

In a study conducted by Newhill (1996) among random samples of social workers from Pennsylvania and California the majority of the clients involved in violence were male. 78% of those were involved in property damage. 73% in threats, and 60% in attempted or actual physical attacks, but female clients were significantly more likely to be involved in actual attacks than attempted attacks and clients most likely to be involved in violence against social workers were teenagers or young adults. In a study undertaken among social workers in the county of Hertfordshire, England, Littlechild (2005) found that certain social service users had enormous resentment against the invasion of their privacy and family life and the treats and violent incidents were very often part of a pattern of control used to try to minimize the intervention of social services. All social workers interviewed found that the power/control dynamics arising from intervening in people's lives, and how this leads to anger and aggression towards them and within the most difficult situations of aggression and violence the role of the social workers was perceived by clients as unhelpful, interfering, negatively judgmental, and too powerful.

Scholars also noticed the relationship between gender and violence against social workers. A number of studies found that female social workers face more violence than male social workers (Beaver, 1999; Littlechild, 2005). Other studies indicated that male social workers experienced more violence than female social workers did (see e.g., Newhill, 1996; Robin, 2005). Additionally, the research showed that social workers holding a graduate degree face more violence than social workers holding an undergraduate degree do and; social workers who lived in the city faced more violence than other social workers did. (Beaver, 1999)

A number of scholars have examined the impact of clients' violence on social workers. The evidence reviewed reveal that violence against social workers contribute to high levels of stress, fears, anger, anxiety, feelings of vulnerable, low level of job satisfaction and role conflict (Beaver, 1999; Littlechild, 2005). Padyab et al. (2012) found that social workers who had been victimized by physical violence by clients were more worried about it in their workplace and psychological violence was associated with poor psychological wellbeing with regard to physical symptoms, anxiety and sleep disorder. None of the personal risk factors such as gender, age, marital status, work experience and education was significant with regard to client violence.

Savaya, Gardner & Stange (2011) found that the following four categories of critical events turned out to be upsetting events that caused social workers a great deal of pain, frustration, and self-doubt: client aggression and violence, clients violation of unwritten rules of the profession and worker's expectations, inherent professional dilemmas and workers' personal issues.

In more than half of the critical events involving clients, social workers reported being the targets of hostility, anger, or aggression by clients, clients' family members, or others involved in the case. Broadly speaking, these instances fall into two types: actual, attempted, or threatened physical violence and verbal aggression. In all physical violent physical instances, the perpetrator suffered from severe behavioral or psychiatric problems or from substance abuse.

Beaver (1999) found a significant correlation between violence against social workers and career return. Lyons, Lavalley & Grimwood (1995) found that verbal and physical abuse was one of the reasons for leaving the profession among social workers. 92% of the respondents had been verbally abused, 32% experienced physical violence and 68% were threatened with violence. Almost a fifth who had left the field of social work has experienced client violence and another 12% of those who were victims of client violence said they had considered leaving their career.

Nazzal (2012) examined the relationship between violence acted upon social workers by clients and social workers' motivation to continue working in their field after experiencing violence. She found that verbal violence decreased when the motivation to continue working increased. In addition, the results showed that as the motivation increases, the physical violence decreases. This study also showed a significant relationship between job satisfaction and motivation to continue working in the social work field. Nazzal (2012) study indicated that there is no association between gender and motivation to continue working, no statistical difference between motivation and education level, and no statistical difference between work experience and the motivation to continue to work in the field of social work.

A scant number of studies have examined the prevalence and impact of clients' violence against social workers in Palestine. To fill the gap this study examined the relationship between violence against social workers by clients, and the motivation to continue working in the social work profession at the governmental and non-governmental organizations in the province of Jerusalem.

Research Questions

This study examines the following questions:

1. Is clients' violence against social workers associated with social workers' motivation to continue working in the profession?
2. Is verbal/ physical violence against social workers associated with social workers' motivation to continue working in social services?
3. Is the level of motivation to continue working associated with gender, age, and level of education?

Method

Study Sample

The study population consists of social workers who work in the governmental and non-governmental organizations in Jerusalem Governorate- the areas that are under the Palestinian Authority (Abu Dies, Eizariya & Al-Ram). The questionnaire was given to all member of the population in the region (N = 115). We received 88 forms back for 76% of the total number of forms distributed. Only 58% of the forms received (67 total) were valid for statistical analysis (for detail see Table 1).

Table #1: Distribution of the Demographic Variables

Variables	Number	Percent
Gender		
Male	26	39%
Female	41	61%
Age		
≤ 30	25	37%
31 – 35	13	19%
36 – 40	14	21%
≥ 41	15	22%
Education Level		
BA	52	78%
MA	15	22%

Instrument of the Study

The researcher used a questionnaire that was developed by Nazzal(2012). The first part of the questionnaire consists of questions about demographic characteristics including gender (1= male, 2= female), age(1= less than 30 years, 2= 31 to 35 years, 3= 36 to 40 years, 4= above40), level of educational (1= Bachelor's degree, 2= Master's Degree).The second part consists of 13 questions about the exposure to the verbal/physical violence that social workers have experienced by clients such as "I have been verbally abused by clients", "I was threaten by client", "I was upbraiding", and "I was threatened that one of my family could be harmed by the client." The items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 to 4; "disagree at all" (1), disagree (2), somehow agree (3), agree (4), completely agree (5).

The third part of the questionnaire consists of 6 questions about motivation to continue working in the field of social work, such as "I would like to continue working in my social work field," "I feel happy if I continue working in my work social work field," "I would like to improve in my social work field." Also, this part consists of 6 items about job satisfaction such as "I am satisfied with my salary," "I am satisfied with treatment of my boss," "I am satisfied with the reward that I received at my work." The items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 to 4. "disagree at all" (1), disagree (2), somehow agree (3), agree (4), completely agree (5). Seven items were used to measure verbal violence; the measure demonstrated acceptable level of reliability ($\alpha = 0.89$). Six items were used to measure physical violence. The measure showed acceptable level of reliability ($\alpha = 0.95$). Six items were used to measure the motivation to continue working in the field of social work. The measure also demonstrated acceptable level of reliability ($\alpha = 0.84$). Six items were used to measure job satisfaction indicated acceptable level of reliability ($\alpha = 0.60$). The Cronbach's Alpha reported by Nazzal: Verbal violence ($\alpha = 0.86$), physical violence ($\alpha = 0.91$), motivation to continue working in the field of social work ($\alpha = 0.89$), job satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.79$). To ascertain validity, our research was given to four doctoral degree social workers and psychology holders from three different Palestinian universities: Al-Quds University, Birzeit University, and Al-Quds Opens University who evaluated and corrected for errors.

Data Analysis

Several statistical procedures were used to examine the research questions. Bivariate correlation was used to examine the relationship between the study variables: violence towards social workers, and their motivation to continue working in the field. Independent-samples t-tests and analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to examine the relationship between motivation to continue working and gender, age, and level of education. Then hierarchical regression was used to examine the relationship between motivation to continue working in the field and age, gender, education and job satisfaction.

Results

The results obtained from Pearson correlation showed significant relationship between violence against social workers and their motivation to continue working in the profession. More specifically, the results revealed a significant relationship between verbal violence and motivation to continue working in the social work profession; as exposure to verbal violence by clients increases, motivation to continue working in the field decreases ($r = -0.278$, $p < 0.05$).

Additionally, results indicated that a relationship between physical violence and motivation to continue working in the field; as exposure to physical violence by clients increases, motivation to continue working in the field decreases ($r = -0.366$, $p < 0.05$).

The results of T-Test indicated that there are significant differences in the level of motivation to continue in the profession of social work despite exposure to violence based on gender ($t(65) = -10.94$; $p < 0.05$); female social workers showed higher motivation to continue working in the profession compared to male social workers. Results of ANOVA showed significant differences in the level of motivation to continue working in the social work profession by age ($F(3,66) = 95.12$, $p < 0.05$); younger social workers are more motivated to continue working in the profession despite exposure to client violence. In addition, the results of ANOVA indicated that there were significant differences in the motivation to continue working in the field of social work according to educational level ($F(1,66) = 37.4$; $p < 0.05$). Social workers that had higher education levels were more likely to have higher motivation to continue working in social work field despite being exposed to violence.

Finally, the results of the first step of hierarchical regression showed that socio-demographic variables were not significant in predicting motivation to continue working the field of social workers. Results of the second step indicated that the model is significant and explained more than 30% of the variance in motivation to continue working in the field of social work [$R^2 = .34$, $F(4,62) = 8.03$, $P < 0.001$]. The regression coefficients showed that only job satisfaction significantly predicted motivation to continue working in the field.

Table # 2: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Motivation to Continue Working in Social Work Field

Variable	Step 1				Step 2					
	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p value</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p value</i>		
Gender		.17	.19	.87	.38		.18	.17	1.08	.28
Age		-.02	.08	-.28	.77		.004	.07	-.04	.96
Education Level		.27	.12	2.26	.02		.19	.10	1.85	.06
Job Satisfaction						.65	.13	4.88	.00***	
<i>R</i> ²		.08					.34			
<i>F</i>		2.01					8.03***			
<i>Adjusted R</i> ² square		.044					.299			

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $P < .05$.

Discussion

This study was conducted to examine the effect of clients' violence against social workers on their willingness to continue working in the social work profession in the Palestinian district of Jerusalem. The findings indicated that the greater exposure to verbal or physical violence by clients, the lower motivation the social workers have to continue working in the field. This result is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Beaver, 1999; Nazzal, 2012). It is likely that their willingness to discontinue their professional career is due the consequences of exposure to these client violent behaviors such as physical injury, which needed medical treatment (MacDonald & Sirotych, 2005) and poor psychological well-being, such as high level of stress, fears and low level of job satisfaction (Beaver, 1999 & Littlechild, 2005). It seems that social workers are not equipped enough to prevent these violent behaviors or to handle them effectively.

The results of this study also provide evidence that for the association between gender and motivation to continue working in the profession; women were found more likely to have higher level of motivation to continue working in the profession compared to men when exposed to client violence.

This result is consistent with other studies (see e.g. Shawamreh, 2007). This result may be related to the fact that male social workers experienced more violence than female social workers did (Criss, 2009). It is also possible that women are more capable to handle client violent behaviors with more caring and understanding attitude towards violent clients. An alternative explanation is that women are less inclined than men to discontinue their professional career due to less alternative professional careers. These may also encourage them to downplay client violent behaviors.

In line with the results of previous research (see e.g. Nazzal 2012), the results of this study provide also support for the association between age and motivation to continue working in the social work profession. Younger social workers were more motivated to continue working in the profession versus older social workers. It is possible that older social workers are more experienced to handle these violent behaviors and to accept it as part of the regular social workers regular activity.

Finally, this study found that social workers with higher level of education were more likely to have higher level of motivation to continue working in the social work field despite exposure to violent behaviors. These findings are in line with results indicated by other scholars (e.g. Nazzal, 2012; Schwemra, 2007), but contrary to the results of Mansour's (2010) study. It is possible that social workers with high level of education are more equipped to handle violent events in social services and to accept them as part of the nature of social work profession. They are also more aware to the circumstances that lead social services clients to adopt violent behavior in their contacts with social workers.

Study Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size is small. Second, research findings may not be generalizable due to sample limited geographical coverage and, third, the research does not explore other factors for profession turns such as alternative professional careers. It also did not study several factors that may affect the decision to discontinue their career such as the characteristics of the population served, the severity of the violent events and their professional commitment.

Implications

The results of this study highlight several implications for social work practice and policies. The results draw attention to the important of providing workshops to the local community focusing on increasing the awareness of local community about the roles of social workers in providing services for the community and emphasizing the risk and abuse that social workers have faced. In addition, there is a need to provide training for social workers about how to defend and protect themselves when they expose to violence by clients. Additionally, there is a need to build effective protection systems inside each social work agencies to protect social workers. Finally, developing clear policies and regulations, especially in the Ministry of Social Affairs, to protect social workers from potential continuous harm is crucial.

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