Training Students for a Shared Traumatic Reality

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A *shared reality* is a situation in which both the intervener and the client are exposed to a similar threat. In the wake of the recent increase in acts of terror and natural disasters, both clinical and research literature have been focusing greater attention on the problems of a shared reality and the implications for the helping professions (Gibson & Iwaniec, 2003; Howard & Goelitz, 2004; Shamai, 2003). Findings indicate that under these circumstances, therapists feel their ability to help is impaired and they experience heightened work-related stress as a result of greater demands on their professional time, the sense that they are professionally unprepared for the situation, and the loss of boundaries between their personal and professional selves (Kretch, Ben-Yakar, Baruch, & Roth, 1997; Nuttman-Shwartz, Karniel-Lauer, & Dassa-Shindler, 2004).

Consequently, there is also increased awareness of the need to prepare helping professionals for shared reality situations. Two methods are most commonly suggested to achieve this goal: (1) working with supervisors to help them manage stress and re-establish and enhance their confidence in their professional and personal capabilities and (2) conducting training workshops with an emphasis on practical skills (Fournier, 2002; Shamai, 2003). Moreover, it has been found that the most vulnerable population is young professionals lacking in experience of intervention in conditions of stress and trauma, particularly those who have undergone similar events in the past (Cunningham, 2003; Kirchberg, Neimeyer, & James, 1998). One such group is students who not only lack thorough training and sufficient professional knowledge, but also have yet to acquire experience of their own responses to providing help. In most cases, the basic curriculum of undergraduate social work studies includes no more than a theoretical course on the nature and effects of trauma aimed at providing the necessary foundation (Cunningham, 2003). Although some of the students' fieldwork may include involvement with clients who have experienced a traumatic event, most students still lack clinical experience and familiarity with the ramifications of treatment and the helping relationship in such cases. These students do not have a clear understanding of the meaning of secondary traumatization or adequate coping strategies. In addition, their ability to enjoy the advantages of a safe space is limited, as they are constantly being judged and graded. In the case of a shared reality, the students also experience a high level of anxiety resulting from their exposure to the stressful events. These circumstances constrain their capacity to bolster each other by expressing empathy and providing support. Indeed, students have been found to display a tendency for isolation, scapegoating, and interpersonal distance (Cunningham, 1999, 2004; Neumann & Gamble, 1995). Yet despite the unique features of this population, a review of the literature on training models indicates that the significance of students' exposure to trauma has yet to receive sufficient attention (Gibson & Iwaniec, 2003).

The program described in this column was designed to train students for intervention in a shared stressful traumatic situation. By combining theoretical studies, practical training, and fieldwork, the program was aimed at enabling the containing and support environment the participants needed to function as both helpers and students. The shared reality in this case was the process of relocation necessitated by the disengagement program, Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Northern Samaria in the summer of 2005.

FIELDWORK

Twenty college students were matched with adolescents in the regional school who expressed interest in participating in a "Big Brother/Big Sister" program. In other words, the college students were to function as friends and support figures for the teenagers. The choice of this model of intervention was based on previous findings showing that adolescents experience a considerable level of distress in the wake of

conditions of insecurity and relocation (Sagy & Antonovsky, 1986).

The participants were undergraduate students from a social sciences faculty in a community college in southern Israel near the Gaza Strip. Although they were not among those being evacuated, they were deeply involved in the process for two reasons: first, their communities would absorb the evacuees, and second, after disengagement, the border with the Palestinian Authority would be closer to their homes, making them more vulnerable to terror attacks. Furthermore, several of the students had been evacuated from Yamit in the Sinai as children in 1982, so the current evacuation could potentially reactivate their own personal trauma.

COURSE STUDIES

The fieldwork was accompanied by an academic course with the following four objectives: (1) to instill theoretical knowledge of conditions of stress, crisis and trauma, the helping relationship, and work with adolescents; (2) to instill knowledge and skills for creating an interaction in changing conditions, for example, face-to-face meetings, telephone and Internet communications; (3) to provide training, guidance, support, and supervision for the helping relationship; and (4) to process the stress experienced by the helpers themselves as a result of the shared reality.

The course consisted of seven sessions, each lasting four hours. Two hours were devoted to theories of working under conditions of change, stress, crisis, and trauma and their application to the current situation. The other two hours were dedicated to teaching practical skills and served as a supervision group that enabled the students to process their feelings about the helping relationship and their own emotional responses to the shared reality (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). Each session focused on a particular topic. For example, part one of the first session was devoted to the phenomenology of stress and trauma, and part two to creating helping relationships with the adolescents; part one of the final session was devoted to the concept of post-traumatic growth, and part two to summary and termination of the program.

ANALYSIS OF THE PROGRAM

Analysis of the training program revealed that it was difficult to implement the design in full. We identified four main modifications that were made

during the course of the program: (1) The lack of specific knowledge concerning the relocation and working in a shared reality was the basis of our initial decision to adopt the classic model of trauma for purposes of the course. Over time, however, we recognized the need to relate to the actual situation with which the students were dealing, such as the effects of sense of community, ideology, and politics on the evacuees' reactions. (2) Atypically, the students' distress was reflected in classroom behaviors such as restlessness and eating during the lessons, as well as in their demands from the staff. They asked several basic questions about practical aspects of the helping relationship, to which they already knew the answers, and showed a reluctance to be in contact with the teenagers. Their involvement in the shared reality also seemed to impair their ability to absorb theoretical knowledge. As a result, the lecturers often neglected the theoretical material and unconsciously blurred the boundaries between theory and practice, exhibiting a tendency to function more as therapists or supervisors. This strategy confused the students, evoked frustration, and strengthened the staff's propensity to respond to the students' needs and devote a large portion of class time to creating a holding and containing space. (3) We had planned for the students to make home visits to the teenagers during the period before actual relocation. Unfortunately, this became a risky venture: The teenagers' homes frequently came under fire, the area was repeatedly declared a danger zone by the army, and the roads were closed. There was growing fear that one of the students or adolescents might get hurt. These circumstances presented a special challenge. The students tended to process their feelings and apprehensions in the classroom, revealing distress, fear, and a need for help and support. We could not ignore these reactions, which appeared to stem both from the risk they had to take to meet with the teenagers and from their personal response to the hotly debated issue of disengagement in general, and the fact that the college was so close to the border in particular. As a result, we made ourselves available to them outside the classroom, providing support by phone if needed and investing a lot of time in learning the students' professional and personal needs. In addition, we helped them find alternative means by which to develop and maintain the helping relationship, such as e-mail, text messages, or phone calls. Most students dealt with these difficulties by creating special settings in

which they could meet the teenagers face-to-face. (4) In our discussions we related more to macro and political perspectives than we had planned. As every member of Israeli society had an opinion regarding disengagement, and the staff and students were no exception, the national controversy permeated the classroom and often interfered with the lecturers' attempts to remain focused on the central goal of the program. Instead of trying to ignore the issue, we discussed the link between political participation and professionalism in class and grappled with it in practice. We found that confronting the ideological controversy head-on reinforced basic professional values of human dignity and freedom.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A shared reality challenges students' ability to deal with threat and crisis. It requires several resources in terms of money and time, as students need a great deal of support, a containing environment, and a relevant knowledge base to establish effective helping relationships. We found a large gap between the design and implementation of the course, introducing modifications to provide the students with a professional shield so that they could work with the teenagers in an appropriate and ethical manner.

The recent increase in traumatic events throughout the world, whether acts of terror or natural disasters, makes it necessary to train social work students for conditions of shared reality and to include such courses in their core curriculums, not merely to design them ad hoc as a response to acute situations. We recommend that suitable training programs continue to be developed and that sufficient time be allocated to theory and practice. Students need a more secure base of wider knowledge to be able to operate effectively in an intense experience. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the lecturers, too, are part of the same shared reality, a fact that is likely to affect their ability to teach and to analyze the experience. As the staff may be perceived as vulnerable, students might be reluctant to reveal to them their political views or unique needs as helpers (Nuttman-Shwartz & Shay, 2006). Thus in situations of shared reality, means should be found to support the staff as well. **SW**

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