



Explaining the Experiences of Social Workers in Utilizing Professional Capital to Deal with Client Violence

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Abstract

Introduction: Establishing an appropriate and effective professional relationship in social work practices is always emphasized, but sometimes this relationship is likely to be exposed to violence. The purpose of this study was to explain the experiences of social workers in utilizing professional capital to deal with clients' violence.

Methods: The present study was conducted using a conventional qualitative content analysis approach through 20 semi-structured interviews with 17 social workers selected via purposive sampling. The interviews continued until the data saturation and the identification of related themes and categories.

Results: Based on the findings from the data analysis, four main themes (knowledge, experiences, techniques, and commitment to professional principles and values) and 14 subthemes related to the professional capital were identified.

Conclusion: The results of this study showed that the social workers try to cope with the violence of clients by utilizing knowledge, experiences, professional techniques and their commitment to professional principles and values in such a way to cause the least possible harm to the clients and themselves. Promoting the education and learning of violence coping skills, especially during internship courses, is one of the issues that need to be addressed from a social, organizational, and academic perspective.

Keywords: Professional capital, Social workers, Client violence

Introduction

In the past centuries, despite significant advances in technology, human beings have always faced hostility and violent confrontations. Violence is the act that one person does with the intent to harm or injure another person (1). Workplace violence, as the name suggests, refers to the types of violence that occur at work, and a person is abused, threatened,

or assaulted. It is part of the occupational hazards of the workplace (2, 3).

Social workers are the second most vulnerable group to violence, and at the turn of the 21st-century, various indicators have been used to refer to physical and verbal violence by clients against social workers (4).



A study by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare found that 47% of participants were concerned about the health of their workplace and 41.4% of students had experienced violence (5). The results of a survey by Padyab et al. on more than 390 social workers working in social welfare centers in Iran showed that 67% of social workers experienced violence at least once during the past 12 months (6).

Establishing good and effective communication in social work practice has always been emphasized. Social work seeks social change, solving problems in human relationships, empowerment, and emancipation for the promotion of individual health and well-being. A social workers act as the interface between the individual and the environment and their relationship with individuals is shaped in their social context (7). Providing service to target groups and preventing them from being psychologically and socially harmed is one of the main goals of social workers.

Social work is a growing profession and one of its most important characteristics is the response to human needs in the context of society. To respond to these needs, a social worker must learn a variety of skills such as cognitive skills (developing mental capacities to think about situations, individuals, structures, and society) and communication skills (developing cognition, cognitive planning, and performing action plans) (8).

The working areas of social work are very diverse. Social workers usually work in health centers, schools, social services and support organizations, child welfare centers, family services, correction and rehabilitation centers, family courts, and private counseling clinics (5, 9). Social workers are usually not at risk when performing their duties, but sometimes in specific circumstances, they are exposed to violence and risks on the part of clients and these violent actions have become a typical issue at the workplace (5, 10).

Although there have been numerous quantitative studies on the type and extent of violence against social workers, studies with a qualitative approach to this issue have been very few and have not covered all aspects of client violence against social workers. Therefore, there are still unexplored issues in this profession that need to be explored in-depth (11-13).

Social workers should always exercise caution when working. How social workers deal with violence in their workplace or when visiting a client's place and

house and what knowledge they use to deal with clients' violence to reduce harm to both the client and themselves are issues that have been less addressed in research conducted both inside and outside Iran. This being so, little attention has been paid to understanding the various strategies adopted by social workers to cope with client violence, which is a reason for the necessity of conducting qualitative research in this area.

The knowledge that social workers apply when confronted with violence will be complex and varied, depending on the context and culture of that community and the impact of long-term social problems on violence (14). Given the scarcity of research conducted in both Iran and other countries on the experiences of social workers in utilizing the professional capital to deal with client violence and its dependence on the social context, the researcher decided to explore deep experiences of Iranian social workers in utilizing the professional capital to deal with client violence by taking into account the cultural conditions and norms of Iranian society. The insights from this study can be used to provide a better understanding of client violence and offer solutions and strategies to cope with this type of violence and reduce it. Besides, the findings of this study can be used to enhance coping and professional skills and provide support for professional relationships between social workers and clients. The purpose of this study was to explain the experiences of social workers in utilizing professional capital to deal with client violence.

Methods

There is little knowledge about how social workers use the professional capital to deal with client violence, how coping with violence is closely linked to social psychological processes, and how individuals interact with client violence depending on environmental and social circumstances and individuals' previous experiences. Depending on their work experience, education, and context of human interactions, social workers may use different professional knowledge and skills in dealing with violence. Accordingly, since this study sought to explain the experiences of social workers in using the professional capital to deal with clients' violence, a qualitative approach was applied through conventional qualitative content analysis. The interviewees in this study were social workers working in different work environments.

For ethical considerations, the data were collected through formal legal procedures by obtaining

permission from University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences and receiving the code of ethics. The confidentiality of the participants' data as well as the participants' freedom to stop cooperation or withdraw from the study at all stages of the study and their right to be informed of the results of the study were taken into account by the researcher throughout the study.

The participants were selected using the purposive sampling method. The inclusion criteria were willingness to participate in the interview, having prior experience of being exposed to violence, working for more than one year as a social worker, having at least a bachelor's degree in social work, residing in Tehran, and having an Iranian nationality. The researcher interviewed 17 social workers (5 males and 12 females) and the interviews continued until the data saturation.

The data were collected through face-to-face and semi-structured interviews. Each interview began with a topic guide such as: *"Talk about a true experience of encountering client violence during a professional relationship"* or *"What knowledge and skills did you use when dealing with violence?"* To clarify the concepts and to deepen the interview process, follow-up and exploratory questions were also asked as the interview progressed. The average interview duration was 45 minutes. The data collection was completed and reached the saturation point with 20 interviews.

The data were analyzed simultaneously with the conventional qualitative content analysis technique. To this end, each interview transcript was reviewed to immerse into the data and come up with a general impression and insight of the whole dataset. Then, three members of the research team individually read the interview transcripts to better understand the content of the participants' statements. Semantic units were then identified based on the research objectives and questions. Afterward, important points and concepts were extracted using open coding by considering the manifest and latent content of the semantic units. Based on the existing differences and similarities, the extracted codes were classified into broader categories (data reduction to describe and understand the phenomenon in question) and this process continued until extracting relevant themes (15). The identified categories were then named based on their apparent content, which helped the researcher to come up with a better understanding of the subject. Next, the categories were placed into broader categories until four main categories

remained (16). These categories reflected the experiences of social workers in utilizing professional capital to deal with client violence. During this process, the data and the original transcripts were repeatedly reviewed and the categories were regularly checked to ensure that the results reliably showed the true content of the data. MAXQDA software (version 10) was used to facilitate the process of reviewing, listing, sorting, classification, repeated comparison of different data, and retrieving the quotations in the data analysis process.

The accuracy and validity of the data were ensured by the triangulation method (a validation process that enhances the research validity by combining different perspectives and methods, collecting data from different sources, and converging researchers' views), data collection (data, resources, and time), setting aside the researcher's initial assumptions, reducing the effects of bias (17), taking into account maximum sampling variability, accurate recording of the data, acceptability, good communication of the researcher with the participants, long-term involvement with the context and data collected from the interviews and observations, and the data review by the participants, peers, and external observers (18, 19). Therefore, the researcher carefully selected people who were willing to share their experiences and participate fully in the study. Moreover, the participants were selected by taking into account their age, education, and work experience. The researcher's ideas and assumptions were controlled by the researcher and members of the research team to prevent their impact on the data analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, the data were reviewed by the experts to ensure the consistency of the extracted categories with the participants' statements and views. This study was conducted for 8 months from April to early December 2016. Besides, it was tried to use exact quotations from the participants' interviews, so that readers could assess whether the findings of this study are of relevance and applicability to them.

Results

The participants in this study were 17 social workers (5 males and 12 females) with a mean age of 39 years. Their work experience ranged from 3 to 35 years (17.23 years on average). Concerning their level of education, 7 participants held a bachelor's degree in social work and social services, 3 held a master's degree in social work, 3 held a bachelor's degree in social work and a master's degree in other fields, and 4 participants held a Ph.D. degree in

social work (Table 1).

The results of data analysis indicated that when dealing with violence, social workers used professional capital, which consists of “knowledge”, “experiences”, “techniques”, and “commitment to professional principles and values” (Table 2).

Knowledge

Social workers use knowledge as a professional capital when confronting violence. The concept of knowledge was classified into three subcategories of “applying the instructions”, “introducing oneself and one’s profession”, and “learning to cope with violence”.

Applying the instructions

The participants found the lessons and instructions learned during the study very useful, and others considered the experience to be important. One of the participants stated, *“I’m working for 18 years. When I look at the past, all the experiences I have gained are not detached from the books I had read or the courses I had passed. At that time, I thought just experience would work, while everything I was doing was rooted in science”* (A social worker with a master’s degree working in the welfare department). Another participant stated, *“During 26 years I have been working, I have found the experience to be very*

practical than knowledge. I do not say knowledge is not helpful, but I have gained a lot of experience myself” (A social worker with a bachelor’s degree working in a hospital).

Introducing oneself and one’s profession

The participants stated that they were exposed to less violence when they told clients about the functions of a social worker and how they could help them. One of the participants stated, *“Any client who referred to me expected that I would do something miraculous. So, I would introduce myself and my career first so that they would get to know me and my profession and how I could help them”* (A social worker working in a bank).

Learning to cope with violence

Very few participants had received training on how to deal with client violence, which was one of the shortcomings they complained about. However, they acknowledged that they had learned many things they were doing through training courses. An experienced social worker stated, *“I did not receive direct training on how to deal with violence but I believe social work training courses were perfect and if we apply what we have learned, there will be no need for special training”*.

Table 1. The participants’ demographic data

Variable	Male	Female
Number	5	12
Age	26-45	32-65
Work experience (year)	3-18	8-35
B.A. in social work	3	3
M.A. in social work and other fields	1	5
Ph.D.	1	4

Table 2. The use of professional capital by social workers to deal with client violence

Main category	Themes	Subthemes
Professional capital	Knowledge	Applying the instructions
		Introducing oneself and one’s profession
		Learning to cope with violence
	Experiences	Acquiring violence coping skills
		Practicing professional principles
		Disregarding violence
	Techniques	Paying close attention to the client’s talk
		Keeping eye contact with the client
		Giving information about duties
	Commitment to professional principles and values	Respect for human dignity
		Confidentiality
		Self-awareness
		The client’s right to make decisions
		Impartiality

Experiences

Acquiring violence coping skills

The participants stated that the knowledge and skills they had learned during their career and the internship period for coping with violence were very useful. *“As I completed my internship course at centers where I was exposed to risk and violence, I learned how to turn what I had learned into skills and experience, and internship courses are aimed to help us gain skills”* (A social worker and Ph.D. student).

Techniques

A majority of participants in this study stated that they used professional techniques to better deal with client violence. These techniques were subcategorized into “practicing professional principles”, “disregarding violence”, “paying close attention to the client’s talk”, “keeping eye contact with the client”, and “giving information about duties”.

Practicing professional principles

The participants stated practicing professional ethical principles, showing respect for the client’s human dignity, and regarding all clients equal, are very effective when confronted with violence. One of the participants stated, *“It was only me and then ten thousand prisoners. The only way to communicate with them was to respect them and to show that, in my view, all of them are equal in terms of their human dignity”* (A social worker with a bachelor’s degree working in prison).

Disregarding violence

According to the participants, a skill widely used in professional communication to deal with client violence was the participants’ disregard for violence. One participant who worked in a hospital stated, *“If I want to pay attention to all this verbal violence, I get a headache and I can’t handle the clients’ issues. Sometimes, I have to close my eyes to these kinds of violence”*.

Paying close attention to the client’s talk

Some participants stated that some clients had learned to talk aggressively and that the only useful way is to remain silent and pay close attention to the client’s words. A male social worker with experience of working with children of different ethnicities in slum neighborhoods said, *“When I was trying to get Afghan girls to attend classes, the father of one of them came to me angrily and said*

that I was disrespecting their family’s honor and asked me why I was encouraging their daughters attend a class where boys could harass them. He was yelling and groaning constantly. I first closed the door so that he could let me know what he meant by shouting. I listened to him carefully and learned what the problem was”.

Keeping eye contact with the client

Another technique used in all professional communications is eye contact as was pointed out by the participants in this study. *“Usually when a patient or the person accompanying him/her comes to my room, I know their problem is not solved, and that’s why they have referred to me. Even when they talk to me aggressively, I do not take my eyes off them, but I try to keep my eye contact, and they get quiet when they see I’m paying close attention to them”* (A social worker working in a hospital).

Giving information about duties

The participants stated that as some clients do not know enough about social workers and job descriptions, they have irrational expectations and sometimes illegal requests. A social worker working at a bank stated, *“Our clients don’t know anything about social work. For example, one of my clients was expecting me to testify in court and I explained to her that it was not possible because it is not within the scope of my legal duties and her sons threatened me”*.

Commitment to professional principles and values

“Respect for human dignity”, “confidentiality”, “self-awareness”, “the client’s right to make decisions”, and “impartiality” were the professional principles and values that were considered by the participants as the components of the professional capital used to cope with and mitigate violence.

Respect for human dignity

All participants believed in respect for human dignity as one of the core principles of their profession and were committed to it. It involves showing respect for clients’ human dignity and their individuality and accepting them. A very experienced social worker stated, *“One way is to respect the clients since when mistreated clients see the social worker respects them, they see it as a valuable behavior and do not allow themselves to continue their aggressive behavior. A social worker must show that he/she values the clients’ issues and*

problems and is ready to help them solve their problems and that the social worker is doing his or her best to serve the clients' best interests and he/she is not against the clients but a contributor".

Confidentiality

Another professional value that was emphasized by the participants was confidentiality and keeping the clients' information private. First, confidentiality helps a social worker to determine his/her role in a professional relationship that would not lead to unrealistic expectations for the client. Second, the client is assured that their problems will be addressed by professionals. Third, the issue will arise when the client is aware of it. Fourth, the interests of society are considered. Fifth, by respecting and adhering to the principle of human dignity, the social worker can raise the client's problem in professional teams to get it solved. One of the participants said, *"I had a client that had to undergo surgery and her father said he would give consent, but the insurance agent said he must present his daughter's birth certificate so that they know if she is married or single. I knew her daughter was about to get divorced. Her father called me and I unintentionally told him that everybody here knew that his daughter is about to divorce and the insurance agent wanted to know if his daughter has a husband or not. The client's father got very upset and angry and he told me that it was not my business. I was to be blamed because I did not keep my client's problem secret and exposed it and thus her father took the issue to the hospital manager"* (A social worker working in a hospital).

Self-awareness

Self-awareness means every social worker must practice and be aware of his or her obligations before entering the professional career. They also must scrutinize their own personality and contemplate on their actions, behaviors and speeches, and recognize their emotional and psychological problems so that there would be no misunderstanding in their relationships with clients. In addition, low self-awareness can pave the way for violence. *"When I was a student, we had a social work professor that forced us to practice and internalize the principle of self-awareness in five sessions. We got tired at the time but when I started my professional career, I realized that commitment to self-awareness was the most important principle, because if I had not known myself well, I might have*

retaliated physical violence committed by a client. I judge my behavior even now that I'm no longer working in the rehabilitation center" (Social worker with the experience of working as the manager of a rehabilitation center).

The client's right to make decisions

One of the most difficult things about social work is observing the client's right to make decisions. When social workers are requested for help, they must help clients to solve their problems. However, every client has the right to accept or reject the assistance offered by the social worker because the problem is related to the client. The participants stated that there were times when the client refused to communicate with the social worker and disregarded them because the client did not refer to the social worker by his/her own free will. The participants also stated that they believe in the clients' right to decide about their problems and whether they want to communicate with the social worker or not. A participant who had worked in a rehabilitation center and university stated, *"There was a girl who was arrested and kept in our center. She did not speak at all. I wanted to talk to her, she refused it aggressively. I left her alone so that she could talk to me whenever she wished while trying to gain her trust. At last, she came to me a few days later, and our professional relationship began"*.

Impartiality

Like confidentiality, the principle of impartiality was very popular among the participants. According to this principle, social workers must avoid convicting or acquitting the client as it is a matter outside the jurisdiction of the social worker. In other words, social workers must avoid any ethnic or religious prejudice in their judgments in order to recognize the clients' problems correctly.

One of the participants working in a prison stated, *"Clients who are arrested and brought to prison for any reason have endured all sorts of slander and stigma by all people including the escorting soldier, the judge, the jailer, and our colleagues in the prison. The clients are brought here with utter despair. They may behave less violently if I treat them decently, not judge them, let them start communicating with me at their own free will, and let them know that I am different from others"*.

Discussion

The increasing prevalence of workplace violence

against social workers has become a major concern for the social workers. Exploring the skills and techniques used by social workers as professionals when dealing with violence in such a way to cause the least possible harm to the clients and themselves seems essential. Given the few number of researches in Iran and other countries on workplace violence against social workers and the dependence of the issue on the culture and social context, a conventional qualitative content analysis method was used in this study. Based on the results of data analysis, four main themes including knowledge, experiences, techniques, and commitment to professional principles and values were identified. All social workers' actions to deal with client violence in the present study were shaped by the knowledge, experiences, techniques, and commitment to professional principles and values called the professional capital (20). The professional capitals are so intertwined that there is no gap between them and social workers do their best in the light of the science and knowledge they have acquired. The results of this study concerning the social workers' knowledge are in line with those of the studies on the application of social worker's knowledge and the skills they have acquired (10, 21-28), introducing oneself and one's profession (29-31), and violence-coping skill training (27, 32-35). Social workers receive both scientific and practical instructions during their academic studies and, when they acquire practical knowledge in internship courses, they bring science closer to practice and this association becomes more prominent by gaining more experience (36, 37). This knowledge includes knowing how to set a goal, assessing the situation (people, problems, workflow, and institutions), knowing how to communicate professionally, conducting motivational interviews, making home visits, being familiar with relevant theories, and associating them to professional practices and operations while working with the client (31, 38). The present study and studies on social work and healthcare-related occupations have shown that health care providers and social workers must use their knowledge in dealing with violence and communicating with clients (10, 25, 26, 39).

A review of the literature on the professional capital showed that the acquisition of violence-coping skills is one of the issues related to social workers' experience (40). According to the findings of this study, some participants who acquired necessary experiences, knowledge, and skills were better able to take professional action in dealing with client

violence. Acquiring the skills to deal with violence and its impact on social workers' communication was also underlined in other studies (41-44). In his book on social security for social workers, Bibby & Lamplugh pointed out that any social worker who works in high-risk centers or has to do home visits must learn the skills to deal with violence (10).

Social workers, whether engaged in client service or other roles, are constantly practicing professional principles and values including respect for human dignity, confidentiality, self-awareness, impartiality, and observing the client's right to make decisions (45-47). Practicing professional principles was the first and foremost method used by social workers in dealing with and preventing client violence. This result was in line with the results of other studies (32, 48, 49).

Social work is based on ideology and value. The resulting values and ethics are effective guides for social workers in their daily practice (31, 50). Having eye contact, paying attention to the client's talk, and disregarding violence are techniques that social workers can use in their relationships (51). Paying attention and listening carefully to the client's talk were also among the most important techniques to reduce or prevent violence addressed in studies relevant to (52).

One of the limitations of the present study was that clients were not willing to participate in the interviews and the current study was based on the experiences of social workers only. Therefore, it is recommended to examine how social workers can treat and reduce violence from the perspective of clients as the clients' experiences can also reflect the extent to which social workers benefit from professional capital in the face of violence.

Conclusion

This study attempted to improve the professional work processes and explain the experiences of social workers in utilizing professional capital to deal with client violence.

Using their knowledge, experiences, and professional techniques and showing commitment to professional principles and values, social workers try to deal with client violence in a way that minimizes the potential harm to both clients and themselves. Promoting the education and training on violence-coping skills needs to be taken into consideration and addressed from macro, academic, organizational, and social perspectives. While working with clients, social workers are required to continually strengthen

their professional and coping skills by benefitting from the professional capital.

To prevent and reduce violence, in addition to using the results of this study and the practical and scientific instructions in workplaces and educational settings such as internship fields, strategic planning is needed at the micro and macro levels. This can increase the awareness of academics and social planners by using professional capital to reduce client violence and develop and improve the quality of social interventions.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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