Encountering Violence in Field Work: A Risk Reduction Model

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ABSTRACT. The increase in violence in our society has been well documented in the media as well as in professional journals. Social workers experience a particularly high incidence of physical and verbal violence. This article presents a current review of the literature on violence, describes a Risk Reduction Model for social work practicum education, and discusses implications for further study. The literature review includes reported incidence, the professional response, and the impact on social work education. The Risk Reduction Model addresses school policy and procedures, a school based teaching module, training for field work instructors, and consultation to agencies regarding their safety policies, procedures and training.

KEYWORDS. Occupational safety, risk reduction, social work education, violence

INTRODUCTION

The increase of violent incidents on the streets, in the home and in the workplace has been well documented in professional journals as
well as in the public media (Braverman & Braverman, 1994; Castelli, 1994; USA Today, 1994). Violence in the workplace is the third leading cause of death for the general population and the number one cause of death for women. Perpetrators may be clients, co-workers, family members or friends (Etter, 1994; Henry, 1994; Horowitz, 1996; Kedjijian, 1993; Perry, 1994).

Recent reports of social workers murdered or critically wounded by clients has brought national attention to the safety of social workers (Dillon, 1992; Hidalgo, 1994; Horejsi, Garthwaite, & Rolando, 1994; Landers, 1993; San Francisco Chronicle, 1996; Scalera, 1995; Weaver, 1995). In fact, staff in the health care and social service industries experience a particularly high incidence of violence (Fed/OSHA, 1996). Given the dual role of the social worker as helping professional as well as agent of social control this is not surprising (Newhill, 1995; Griffin, 1995).

The threat of violence—and the FEAR of violence—have important implications for social work practice and education. Left unaddressed they will compromise the social worker/client relationship, the professional delivery of services and, in the case of graduate and undergraduate students, negatively impact learning, as well. Yet there has been little attention given to violence in either social work practice or education (Grossman, Ageson, Dunkel, & Foster, 1990; Tully, Knopf, & Price, 1993).

This article reviews the current literature on violence, presents a risk reduction model developed for social work practicum education, and discusses implications for further study.

**DISCUSSION OF TERMS**

Three terms are used throughout this paper: violence, safety, and risk reduction.

The authors define violence as all assaultive behaviors, including physical and verbal threats. While safety is the term most often found in the literature and in common usage, the authors prefer the term risk reduction. Safety is an idealized goal and implies a greater capacity to control the environment than is realistic. More importantly, the use of the term safety signifies a certitude that perpetuates denial of the risks associated with social work practice. Risk reduction, on the other
hand, describes a set of achievable interventions aimed at recognizing, managing or avoiding dangerous situations.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

The social work literature on work-related violence falls into three categories: reported incidence, professional response, and the impact on social work education and practice.

**Reported Incidence**

Violence toward helping professionals has been studied in a variety of settings: acute hospitals, inpatient psychiatric settings, outpatient clinics, skilled nursing facilities, and clients’ homes (Carmel & Hunter, 1989; Engel & Marsh, 1986; Fed/OSHA, 1996; Mayer & Rosenblatt, 1975; Maypole, 1986; Meddaugh, 1986; Meloy, 1987; NASW NEWS, 1997; Tryon, 1986). Of the 150 social service workers surveyed by Schultz, 83% reported violence ranging from physical assaults to destruction of property. Physical violence was most likely to occur in correctional settings, health and mental health settings, and in settings that serve the disabled and aged (Schultz, 1987).

In a national study (Tryon, 1986), 81% of the 300 therapists surveyed had experienced at least one incident of physical attack or verbal abuse in their private practice or in agency settings. This survey also reported that while men were more likely than women to experience verbal abuse, women were as likely as men to be physically attacked or harassed. A study of child protection workers found that 10% had been hit, 8% had experienced “close calls,” and 97% had been screamed at or cursed by one or more clients in the preceding year (Horejsi, Garthwaite, & Rolando, 1994).

One study found that only 18% of the actual assaults on staff at a state mental hospital were formally recorded during a one year period (Lion, Snyder, & Merrill, 1981). Therefore, all studies of incidence need to be evaluated carefully due to under-reporting, minimizing of incidents, and unclear definitions of what is being studied.

**The Professional Response**

Helping professionals generally have difficulty acknowledging vulnerability. Instead, professional staff may take personal responsibility
for the occurrence of violent incidents as a defense against feelings of powerlessness. They may resort to blaming themselves or each other for unconsciously provoking the client, or they may attribute the violence towards themselves to their own lack of training and experience. Professional social work culture does not encourage discussion about violence. This contributes to denial, isolation and the belief that each person is the only one who has feelings of fear and guilt (Grossman, Ageson, Dunkel, & Foster, 1990; Morrison, 1987-88).

**Impact on Social Work Education**

Students, reflecting their professional role models, remain silent about their fears. This silence contributes to an environment in which questioning and discussion is discouraged. Students report feeling hesitant to express negative or fearful feelings. They fear that expressing their feelings may jeopardize a satisfactory evaluation. This fear is not unjustified; field work instructors may interpret the student’s fear as a marginal commitment to the profession, an admission of limited clinical skills, or unconscious racism (Gibson, McGrath, & Reid, 1989; Mayer & Rosenblatt, 1975). In a discussion of cross-cultural supervision and student fears, McRoy wrote, “Most of those [students] who did cite problems expressed great reluctance to discuss these with either the field instructor or field liaison” (McRoy, Freeman, Logan, & Blackman, 1986).

Students who have chosen to help others may experience cognitive dissonance when they are threatened by their clients. Given the primacy of clients’ needs and the feelings triggered by violence and the fear of violence, it is predictable that students, mirroring their instructors, also manage the dissonance with minimization and denial. Anger and resentment towards clients causes further feelings of guilt. Grossman, Ageson, Dunkel, and Foster (1990) found that having chosen social work as a profession, students are loathe to see themselves as potential victims of those they want to serve (Engel & Marsh, 1986; Grossman, Ageson, Dunkel, & Foster, 1990).

Fifty percent of the field work instructors surveyed by Grossman, Ageson, Dunkel, and Foster (1990) thought there were unaddressed safety issues in their agencies. While 72% of their agencies had policies regarding safety in the workplace, only 50% of these agencies provided in-service training specific to the policy. Even when there
was a policy, 31% of the field work instructors reported that they did not orient students to it.

Along with the field work instructors and students, the field work directors surveyed in social work schools thought there was need for more attention to this issue. They raised the question whether schools of social work sufficiently address violence and/or risk reduction in their academic curriculum (Grossman, Ageson, Dunkel, & Foster, 1990). Griffin states: “Very few social work programs, undergraduate and graduate, prepare students for potentially violent clients” (Griffin, 1995).

A RISK-REDUCTION MODEL FOR FIELD WORK EDUCATION

Based on these findings, the authors have developed a proactive risk reduction model for social work education. There are four components of this model: (1) school policy and procedures, (2) a school based teaching module, (3) training for field work instructors, and (4) consultation to agencies regarding their safety policies, procedures and training. Each will be discussed in the following pages.

School Policy and Procedures

A school’s policy includes expectations of field agencies and a statement of its responsibility for presenting curriculum content on risk reduction. In order to implement the policy, it may be included in the field manual given to all students and field work instructors. In addition, field faculty periodically train field work instructors to the policy and review it with them during their site visits.

The policy also requires field agencies to make a serious effort to promote safety in the field setting. In fact, one criterion for approving an agency as a field placement site is that the agency has a risk-reduction policy or a plan to develop such a policy. Its policy must address building and office security, emergency procedures, selection of clientele, management of violent clients, and safety precautions on home visits.

A school expects field work instructors to orient students to their own agencies’ policies and procedures, preferably during the students’
first week of field work. Furthermore, field work instructors are required to document this orientation on their students’ learning agreements. Finally, throughout the year during clinical supervision, field work instructors continue to review the policy and procedures, as well as other safety concerns.

**School Based Teaching Module**

In a prior survey by Grossman, Ageson, Dunkel, and Foster (1990), students responded to questions about violence in field work in various ways. One graduate student identified feelings of fear:

I was a little scared after I reported a client who had tried to poison his family. He didn’t know I was reporting him and he came to school the next week and I was told to talk to him. I’m still not too comfortable talking to him.

Another student’s comment reflected her awareness of vulnerability:

We work with clients in violence ridden areas—lots of shooting, drug deals, assaults. It is unnerving sometimes but we take measures to be as safe as possible.

In an alarming anecdote, which revealed both denial and a lack of judgment, a student described locking up his client’s knife each time they met:

Ordinarily interns would not be asked to deal with clients like this, according to the director, so I am happy to be entrusted with the extra responsibility.

To address these kinds of concerns, field faculty use a risk reduction module to teach first year students prior to their beginning field work. The early introduction of the module helps students understand the school’s commitment to their safety, prepares them for the field work experience, and assures them that risk is not a taboo subject of discussion. The goals of the curriculum are to increase student awareness, without creating overwhelming anxiety, about situations they may encounter as interns, and to develop basic social work skills which they can readily use in dangerous situations (Parker, 1995; Star, 1984).
The teaching module includes material designed to develop the following skills:

- risk assessment
- street safety
- use of agency safety devices
- de-escalation
- decision-making when threatened or attacked, and
- use of self

In presenting this material, field faculty stress that, while thousands of social workers have served families in difficult situations for almost a century, few social workers or social work students have been harmed by clients. They teach how problem-solving skills and methods transfer to potentially dangerous situations. They emphasize the school’s policy that students should not enter nor remain in a client’s home or anywhere else where they feel unsafe.

Faculty use a lecture-discussion format to impart this basic information, give substantial opportunity for deliberation and supportive listening, and foster peer consultation. They present this material with an understanding of students’ personal and professional development. They encourage students to examine their expectations about the professional social work role and the reality of social work practice today. While faculty introduces the subject in one class, they raise safety concerns throughout the year for continued discussion.

**Training for Field Work Instructors**

Field faculty orient field work instructors to the school’s risk reduction model. They discuss the school’s commitment to risk reduction, review the field work policy and describe the curriculum. They emphasize three areas in the risk reduction training for field work instructors: assessment of student readiness, assignment of cases, and preparation for home visiting.

Field faculty teach field work instructors to assess a student’s readiness to undertake potentially dangerous activities by examining the student’s past experience, skill level, and performance history. Since many students overestimate their prior experience and wish to assume professional responsibilities beyond their capabilities, field faculty urge field work instructors to exercise caution when making field
assignments and to confer with the field faculty before they expect a student to do any of the following activities:

- physically restraining clients
- transporting clients
- contacting clients with a recent history of violent behavior
- working in the office when other staff are not present.

Further, field faculty ask field work instructors to review with students basic street safety precautions, risk assessment, the school’s risk-reduction policy and the agency’s safety policy and procedures, before they make their first home visit. Finally, they teach field work instructors how to address risk reduction issues as an ongoing part of clinical supervision.

**Field Faculty Consultation to Agencies**

The final component of the risk reduction model is consultation by field faculty to agency personnel, including field work instructors, on their agencies’ safety programs, their policies, procedures and training of students.

**Policies**

An agency’s safety policy implicitly acknowledges the potential dangers inherent in its social work practice. A strong safety policy begins with a proactive statement declaring the agency’s concern for everyone’s safety and its view that violence is not acceptable. It establishes the agency’s expectations for a professional response to threatening behavior and holds blameless those who experience a dangerous or injurious incident.

**Procedures**

Agencies’ administrative procedures focus on implementation of their stated policies. Students need to know before they begin field tasks what the agency protocols are for the following:

- use of safety devices (e.g., alarms, buzzers, codes to call emergency staff, etc.)
- arrangement of office space
- location of emergency supplies
- prohibitions/authorizations of weapons
- use of offices after daytime hours
- transportation of clients
- performance of home visits
- critical incident debriefing.

**Training**

Frequent training can improve the likelihood of avoiding assault (Carmel & Hunter, 1990; Astor, Behre, Wallace & Fravil, 1998). Risk reduction policies and procedures can only be effective if all social work staff and students are alerted to their existence and encouraged in their use. Both the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) (1996) and CalOSHA (1995) guidelines urge employers to provide formal instruction to all employees, including supervisors and managers on the specific hazards and protocols in their agencies. Further, OSHA encourages agencies to train all new and reassigned employees in an initial orientation before beginning their new job duties. The risk reduction program presented here extends the recommended OSHA guidelines to students and relies on field faculty to raise the subject of training in their consultation to agencies.

**Role of Field Faculty**

The support that field faculty offer to agency personnel during consultation is particularly important. Agencies may request assistance from the school in developing their safety programs and can expect field faculty to help with their specific concerns about student safety. Prompt field faculty response acknowledges the importance of their safety concerns. Field faculty help agency personnel identify potential problems, provide information about resources, and supply technical support.

**SUMMARY**

In summary, this article has explored the implications of violence—and the FEAR of violence—for social work practice and field education.
The authors reviewed current information regarding violence in social work practice, discussed social work practitioners’ responses to violence and presented a risk reduction model for field work education. This risk reduction model includes the development of school policy and procedures, classroom instruction for students, training for field work instructors, and field faculty consultation to agencies regarding their safety programs.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

In examining risk reduction in social work education, the authors identified emerging issues that need further examination. The changing practice environment is the most important reality facing social work today. Increasingly, social workers serve an involuntary, hostile and armed clientele. Additionally, social workers often see their clients in neighborhoods with high crime rates. The 1996 NASW Policy Statement on Women in the Social Work Profession (1997) cites OSHA (1996) findings that identify “social workers as being at high risk for violence in the workplace.” In this environment, the helping role of social workers is frequently overshadowed by the social control functions they perform, causing some in the community to view social workers with escalating suspicion.

A number of issues have not been addressed in this article including the impact on social work students of institutional forms of violence and of the relative vulnerability of social workers in different settings and in different roles, and the effects of risk reduction efforts with different client populations. While it has been substantiated that social workers face dangers in their work, the particular variables are not sufficiently identified. Does increased amphetamine, PCP and cocaine use impact the perception or predictability of danger to social workers? Does the lack of familiarity with neighborhoods or groups of people contribute to fear with or without basis? Is risk reduced when social workers see clients in or out of the office? While these different venues feel more or less safe to different social workers, are they really? Is it possible to develop a risk assessment tool for social workers?

Differential class and culture between social work practitioners and students vis-a-vis their clients also needs further exploration. How does the social worker’s class and culture affect her/his perception of
risk? Does racism and/or the fear of appearing racist impede reporting dangerous incidents or discussing them with supervisors, field work instructors, and field faculty? Will discussing these issues change how well students learn to assess risk in the field? Will such discussions improve students’ relationships with their schools, their field work instructors, their clients?

Finally, we need to develop an evaluation tool and an outcome study following the model’s application. How effective are risk reduction efforts? Do they produce measurable increases in students’ perceptions of safety in the field? Most importantly, do they in fact decrease violent incidents?

CONCLUSION

In keeping with the 1996 NASW Resolution on Violence in the Workplace, social workers find that “safety in the workplace is as important a professional value as providing quality social work services to our clients” (Social Work Speaks, 1997). While the model presented here addresses social work students in their field placements, it is also easily applied to all social workers in their agency practice settings. Risk reduction measures in social work agencies, how staff and students are trained to recognize and manage dangerous situations, need to be discussed by faculty and agency personnel involved in field work.

Social work educators cannot shield students from the realities of violence; students in their field work placements already serve clients in potentially dangerous situations (Murdoch, 1993). Therefore, the schools of social work must take a leadership role in developing curriculum on risk reduction. Educators have a responsibility to teach the skills needed to assess danger, take appropriate precautions, and increase effective management of dangerous situations. In addition, we have the responsibility to develop, jointly with the field work agencies, a method for training social work students how to reduce risk.

While field work instructors are responsible to alert the school to their developing concerns and changing conditions, they cannot be expected to raise these issues without support. Strengthening the communication links between field work instructors, students, and the schools is seen as a primary responsibility of the school’s field faculty.
Schools must be cognizant of the delicate balance between these players. Too much attention to violence may only heighten anxiety to unwarranted levels, while too little attention may result in students who are unprepared to assess the real potential dangers they face in this profession.

The ultimate goal of a risk reduction model is to provide education and training for those students who will continue the historical mission of social work to help the oppressed, disenfranchised and most needy in our society. To the extent that the schools of social work heed the authors’ recommendations, field faculty should be able to advance the content, reliability and impact of our knowledge base in this most compelling arena.

REFERENCES


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