

Challenges for Students Working in a Shared Traumatic Reality

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Summary

The authors analyse a training programme for social work students which aims to provide the participants with tools for intervention in stress situations and crises that they experience with their clients. The present study was conducted among twenty students, who worked with adolescents during the forced relocation from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005. Analysis of their reactions to this intervention revealed five main themes: the nature of the helping relationship; integrating theory and practice; functioning in a changing and unpredictable environment; working in a shared reality; and the interaction between political attitudes and professional work. In contrast to conventional social work training, the course allotted considerable time to promoting dialogue, support, mutual aid, and reflection. It also extended the students' intervention skills to the micro and macro levels of the helping professional relationship. Despite the limitations and costs of the course, the authors recommend further development of similar programmes, and continued evaluation of their effectiveness.

Keywords: relocation, shared reality, training programme, stress, trauma

Introduction

In the wake of increasing terrorism, both clinical and empirical literature have addressed problems related to the shared reality of the practitioner and client who are exposed to a similar threat and its implications for the helping professions (Gibson and Iwaniec, 2003; Howard and Goelitz, 2004; Shamai, 2003). Research has shown that work under those circumstances does not conform to the conventional paradigm of the therapist as 'other' (Bion, 1961), in which the therapist is not part of the situation, does not experience the danger, and can therefore exercise rational judgment. Thus, findings indicate that in situations of shared reality, therapists feel their functioning is impaired (Kretch *et al.*, 1997; Nuttman-Shwartz *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, it has been found that young professionals who lack experience with intervention in conditions of stress and trauma, particularly those who have undergone similar events in the past, are at greatest risk in situations of such shared reality (Cunningham, 2003; Kirchberg *et al.*, 1998). The increase in traumatic events, including acts of terror such as the 11 September attack, as well as natural disasters such as the Tsunami in Asia and hurricanes in the southern United States, highlights the importance of preparing for situations in which students and clients may be subject to similar threats and crises. Despite this, however, little attention has been paid to the impact of working under stressful and traumatic conditions on students in general (Cunningham, 2004; Gibson and Iwaniec, 2003), and on practitioners who share the same stressful or traumatic reality as their clients in particular (Shamai, 1999).

Students are a particularly vulnerable group, because they lack training and knowledge, including awareness of their own anticipated responses to providing help. Moreover, they also lack clinical experience and familiarity with the ramifications of treatment and the helping relationship, and they have yet to internalize and establish the theoretical foundations they have acquired. They will not have a clear understanding of the meaning of secondary traumatization, nor will they have adequate coping strategies. Their ability to enjoy the advantages of a safe space is also limited, because they are constantly being judged and evaluated. In addition, the high level of anxiety resulting from exposure to the stressful events in the shared reality limits the students' sense of security. In general, these circumstances impair their ability to express empathy and support each other. Thus, students have been found to display a tendency for isolation, scapegoating, and interpersonal distance (Cunningham, 1999, 2004; Neumann and Gamble, 1995).

The present study examined student's reactions during a practical intervention training programme. This programme was designed to train students for intervention in a shared stressful traumatic situation. The shared reality in this case was the process of relocation, following the withdrawal of Israel from the Gaza Strip and Northern Samaria in the summer of 2005.

Relocation as a stressful and traumatic event

Relocation denotes transferring a population from a familiar to an unfamiliar environment—a process that entails a wide range of changes, including place of residence, workplace and social life, which impact on the mental and physical health of the individual (Ryff and Essex, 1992). Relocation is perceived by those who are uprooted as a traumatic event, which is generally accompanied by a lack of continuity, disruption of normal life, and a decline in quality of life (Marris, 1980). Research findings indicate that when relocation is imposed rather than chosen, it is usually perceived as a negative experience (Stokols *et al.*, 1983), which generates loss of confidence in one's abilities, insecurity about the future, frustration, sadness, loss of ideals, breakdown of support systems and social networks, family tension, loss of status, and decline in self-esteem (Brown and Perkins, 1992). Studies conducted in Israel after the evacuation of the Sinai in 1982 provide support for these findings (Dasberg and Sheffler, 1987; Toubiana *et al.*, 1988).

The situation examined in the present study began with an announcement by the Israeli government in 2004 that it would withdraw unilaterally from the Gaza Strip and Northern Samaria. This meant that over a period of three to six months, 8,000 people would be forced to leave their homes and relocate to other areas and communities. The disengagement plan not only sparked public, political and national controversy, but also had an impact at the personal and community levels. The plan was imposed on people who had lived in the region with the support of the government for up to three decades, and who had endured a constant existential threat.

It should also be noted that over the past four years, the southern region of Israel has been the target of Qassam rocket attacks, and numerous residents of that area feared that the planned disengagement would bring the border with the Palestinian Authority even closer to their homes, and place them at increasing risk. Many of the students who intervened in the relocation process lived in the southern region themselves, and also experienced anxiety and threat.

Method

The programme

The course was initiated in the social work department of an Israeli Community College, as part of an effort initiated by the Ministry of Education to help adolescents adjust to the forced relocation and overcome it. The course was offered as an elective to students at the faculty of social sciences who chose to participate in it.

The programme combined theoretical studies, practical training and field-work. In the planning process, we were aware of the difficulties and complexity of functioning in a shared traumatic reality. Thus, the programme aimed at

creating a containing and supportive environment that enabled participants to function as both helpers and students.

The academic part of the course consisted of seven sessions, each of which lasted four hours. Two hours of each session focused on 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 in the context of a supervision group, in which the students were able to process their feelings about the helping relationship and their own emotional responses to the shared reality (Bernard and Goodyear, 1998). Each session focused on a specific topic. For example, the first part of the first session was devoted to the phenomenology of stress and trauma, and the second part focused on establishing helping relationships with the adolescents. In the final session, the first part was devoted to the concept of post-traumatic growth, and the second part was devoted to a summary and termination of the programme.

The fieldwork was based on findings which show that adolescents experience a considerable level of distress in the wake of conditions of insecurity and relocation (Sagy and Antonovsky, 1986). It was therefore decided that social work students would be matched with adolescents in the regional school who were interested in a 'big brother/sister' programme. In other words, the college students were to function as a guiding figure and provide support to the teenagers. The psychologist at the school at which the project was conducted presented the information to all of the adolescents, and those who wished to participate were invited to do so. Adolescents and students were matched on the basis of characteristics such as gender. Moreover, an attempt was made to place students with adolescents who would be living near them after the relocation. The meetings between students and adolescents were to be held once a week for a period of about three months, as per the needs of the adolescent.

Although the course participants were not among the population being evacuated from their homes, they were deeply involved in the process for two reasons: their communities would be absorbing the evacuees, and they would be more vulnerable to terror attacks after the disengagement, because the border with the Palestinian Authority would be closer to their own homes. Furthermore, several of the students had been evacuated from Yamit in the Sinai as children in 1982, so that the current evacuation could potentially reactivate their own personal trauma. Against that background, the course participants were selected as a study and supervision group, as they simultaneously processed their feelings about the helping relationship and their emotional responses to working in a shared reality (Bernard and Goodyear, 1998; Inskipp and Proctor, 1993; Neretin, 2002).

Participants

Twenty undergraduate students (eighteen women and two men) from the faculty of social sciences at the community college in southern Israel near the

Gaza Strip participated in the course. All of them participated in the programme on a voluntary basis. Most of the participants (75 per cent) were completing their first year of studies, and 25 per cent were completing their second year. All the participants already had basic knowledge of psychology, sociology and helping relationships, as well as basic experience in fieldwork. Almost all of the students were Israeli Jews in their twenties, with one over thirty (Median = 24). All of them lived in the southern region of Israel; 35 per cent were from agricultural communities, and 65 per cent were from urban localities or villages. Most identified themselves as secular (75 per cent), and only a few identified themselves either as traditionally observant or as religious (25 per cent).

Procedure

Two semi-structured narratives were collected to obtain each participant's attitudes about the relocation process. One narrative was collected at the beginning of the course, and the second was collected at the end. Participants were first asked to tell their story in relation to the project, and then they were asked to write about their expectations of the project, their motives for participating in it, and their perceptions of the relocation process. In their second narrative, they were asked to respond to the same questions, as well as to reflect on and analyse their experience during the project.

The course lecturers documented and transcribed the lessons. To increase reliability, both of the researchers analysed the narratives and the course content, based on three main steps of content analysis: first, we read each entire text from beginning to end, in order to listen to the interviewees' voices; second, we identified units of meaning (Patton, 1990; Unrau and Coleman, 1997) in each of the personal narratives; and third, we collected the units and reduced them to five main themes, in a lengthy process of examining and re-examining the texts. As mentioned, the themes appearing in each narrative and in each transcribed lesson were documented separately. After documentation was completed, the researchers reached a consensus regarding over 90 per cent of the themes. In cases in which the researchers did not reach a consensus, it was decided to integrate the additional themes into new categories.

Findings

The five main themes identified in the findings are discussed below.

The nature of the helping relationship

Throughout the course, the students' initial concerns were of an instrumental nature, mainly dealing with how to formulate a contract and framework for the

relationship with the adolescents. These were followed by questions regarding the relationship itself: how to establish the relationship and how it differs from an ordinary bond between friends, whether to reach out to the teenagers, and how much to invest in the attempt to gain their co-operation. The students repeatedly voiced their distress, frustration, discouragement, confusion and anger at the difficulty they encountered in establishing the relationship. One student, for example, commented:

It is harder than the first time I picked up the phone and called a boy I liked . . . I am confused . . . I really don't know what to do . . . it was so hard for me to call a boy I don't know . . . and after hesitating a lot I called him during recess, but I felt that he didn't want to talk to me . . . (most of the students in the group nodded in agreement). I have no idea how you (the lecturer) think it's possible to establish contact 'in a proper way' by telephone. What is this, a date? It's supposed to be a professional relationship, isn't it?

As expected, several students reported that they may have failed to distinguish between their role as a professional helper and their friendship with the teenager. For example, they found themselves helping the family pack for the move, visited the family in their new location and helped the youngsters adjust to their new environment. This led to a deeper probing of the definition of professional intervention.

A unique aspect of the discussion and analysis of the helping relationship derived from the use of unconventional forms of professional contact in the project, such as telephone calls and internet communication. The students were concerned with how these modes of communication could be adapted for the purposes of establishing trust and making an initial contract:

What is a professional relationship anyway . . . at a coffee shop . . . when I'm sitting with him in the living room together with his parents? And it seems difficult at his house, the whole situation with boxes, the tension before the evacuation and everything else . . . I meet him (the teenager) on the lawn at his school, and he wants to play soccer . . . is that allowed? So how am I different from a friend? . . . and it all seems like it's not established enough . . . I don't know if this is a relationship? Is it right for me to run after him? (an embarrassed smile).

Another aspect of the discourse on the helping relationship concerned its assessment:

How can I tell if the relationship is positive and meaningful?

As could be expected at that stage of the students' personal and professional development, they needed proof that they were doing the right things, and wanted feedback from their peers in the study group and from the teaching staff.

Obviously, these are universal concerns that typify the stage of the students' personal and professional development. Hence, the project, like other initial experiences in the helping professions, gave the students an opportunity to discuss and examine basic issues of this sort.

Integrating theory and practice

Another issue raised by participants in the project concerned the connection between the theoretical material taught in the classroom and its practical application in their relationship with the teenagers. At first, the students focused efforts on two aspects: studying the theoretical material; and attempting to establish a helping relationship without asking themselves whether or not they were relying on theoretical knowledge, clinical skills or personal experience and intuition. This concern was reflected in statements such as:

Anyone can create a bond, you don't have to learn how to do it.

We live here, so we understand what the disengagement plan means.

As the project progressed, class discussions focused on bridging the gap between theory and practice. The students felt a growing need for theoretical foundations to help them conceptualize and comprehend the objectives and methods of intervention. One student, for example, reported on the adolescent girl she was working with. The girl had witnessed a terror attack, several years earlier, but had continued with her life as usual. The student questioned the girl's reticence and wondered whether she needed professional help.

In another case study presented by one of the students, the theoretical discussion included concepts such as acute and delayed reactions to trauma, as well as fundamentals of psychosocial diagnosis (possible diagnoses, whether the girl's withdrawal was a sign of depression, or whether her behaviour was a temporary response to her new environment).

The following is an excerpt from a dialogue in class:

I read the articles listed in the syllabus, and didn't understand the girl's situation. In her personal file, it was written that she didn't cry much at first, and that she had problems sleeping at night . . . that at school she functioned again . . . there are no special reports . . . In class, we talked about ASR, [Acute Stress Response] and I understand that she didn't react that way . . . I want to know if she suddenly recalled a past experience with a terror attack . . . instead of talking about the change resulting from the relocation, she talks about what happened in the past . . . I don't know what that distinction means . . .

Another student responded to that question with 'If she didn't react, maybe she was depressed?' and yet another student commented 'It's not a delayed trauma'.

This excerpt highlights the confusion and the difficulty involved in integrating practice in the field on the one hand, as reflected in the students' encounters with the adolescents, and the theoretical material taught in class on the other.

As expected, the participants had difficulty integrating theory and practice. They sought help in their attempt to assess the problems of the adolescents and their families, and occasionally in their attempts to analyse the problems of Israeli society as a whole. They also expressed frustration about their lack of familiarity with the theoretical material, and about the lack of congruence

between the theories and the specific circumstances of their work. These questions about the theories and their relevance to the students' own reality as counsellors typify their stage of personal and professional development.

Students' functioning in a changing and unpredictable environment

Throughout this period, the students faced uncertainty about issues such as when the process of relocation would begin, whether the college would be operating and whether the roads would be open. The students expressed these uncertainties in questions such as:

Will the college be open in the summer?

Will we be able to get here if the expected mass demonstrations against the disengagement take place?

We heard on the news that the whole area will be closed, and only people with transit permits will be able to go there (a direct question to the lecturer). Will the college be open? Will you know about it in advance . . . will the army . . . (or) the police let us through?

Furthermore, it was unclear what the families would be doing: whether they would be staying in the region, whether they would choose to leave before the disengagement process began, where they would be relocated, and so on. In some cases, the adolescents were not informed of the family's plans, even if a decision had been made:

Roni, the boy I'm in touch with, has no idea what will be next month, where his family will be moving . . . where he will be studying . . . I tried to plan future activities with him . . . but he doesn't know anything. At first I got irritated. I thought he isn't interesting in the relationship with me. Afterwards, I sat with his family and heard him asking his mother, 'where are we moving to?' She didn't answer him. All she said was, 'I hope we won't see that day'. How can we continue that way? I really don't know what to talk about with him, how to talk to him . . .

The participants' anxiety and apprehensions were reflected in behaviours such as restlessness, eating in class, leaving the room and anger at the course supervisors, which was articulated in accusations:

Why didn't you know it would be like this?

Why didn't you plan things better?

The external uncertainty intensified concern about the meaning of professional responsibility, ethical dilemmas and the concept of 'performing a function'. As the external uncertainty intensified, the students' sense of personal insecurity increased, and their lack of professional knowledge became more evident:

I sat opposite my client and didn't know what to do. I felt there is a gap between the theoretical material we were taught about traumatic crises and what is happening here. Nothing has been written about the disengagement . . . but as a citizen of Israel it was important to me to help them. (It was also important to me) because I thought that the country didn't have to use force against citizens . . . it was difficult to integrate professional thinking, to make a distinction

They did not always have a clear perspective of their role as help providers, because they were also affected by the situation as Israeli citizens and as participants in a shared reality. The situation of uncertainty impelled them to be more concerned with themselves as individuals and as counsellors than they were with the adolescents. This attitude was reflected in their desire for a close relationship of their own, as expressed in statements implying a need for the group and the staff, as well as in a request to be assured they would pass the course, even if they did not succeed in their helping task. They voiced remarks such as:

That was an excellent lecture.

I understand from the group that I'm not the only one who hasn't been able to establish a bond.

It's a good thing we had this meeting, because I really didn't know what to do or what was going on.

This topic occupied more class time than would normally have been allotted, as the uncertainty was not only professional, but also personal and national.

Working in a shared reality

The shared reality came into play in a number of ways. On the one hand, there was a strong desire for active involvement, expressed in responses ranging from 'We are part of the community' to statements that reflected a blurring of the boundaries between a professional relationship and friendship. On the other hand, there were attempts to ignore or avoid the stress and anxiety caused by the new reality.

As the date of evacuation drew closer, the presence of security forces in the area increased, the fear of social chaos throughout the country intensified and the participants exhibited greater personal apprehension. These processes elicited questions, such as who was helping whom, and what price did a social worker have to pay in order to provide help. Although such questions may be normative, we believe that the context in which they were posed, and particularly the intensity of concern with those issues, reflected the participants' role as students just starting out in their profession. The students expressed their fears and repeatedly emphasized that they, too, were exposed to very real danger, as reflected in the statement:

I'm afraid to cross the border and go to Gush Katif (in the northern Gaza Strip). Do I always have to meet with the teenagers in their homes?

Fears intensified as more Qassam rockets fell in and around the college, and especially after a student was killed. During that period, the students in the group became less involved in providing assistance to others, and needed help for themselves. The students' responses revealed concern for their own safety as well as for the safety of their peers. They also began sharing their feelings:

I didn't think I was scared, but I jump every time I hear a 'boom'.

Will we have to keep coming to meetings if there is shelling?

Some of them were haunted by memories of past experiences. For example, one student told the group that her family had moved to the southern area of the country during the first Lebanon war, when the northern region was being attacked with Katyusha rockets and said: 'Now they're following me here (the rockets)'.

Another aspect of the shared traumatic reality was reflected among students whose families had been evacuated from the Sinai twenty years earlier—an event they described with intense emotion and immediacy. They described the course and counselling work as:

An (unexpected) chance to process the trauma that my family experienced when they were evacuated from the Sinai.

One student's harsh emotions helped the group to understand the difference between moving and evacuation, which is a traumatic event that leaves its imprint for life:

I was young when they evacuated us from the Sinai . . . to this day, I have hardly felt that this is an issue in our house . . . now, I suddenly feel that everything has come to the surface . . . my mother cries all the time . . . I am trembling . . . It's difficult for me (tears in her eyes). My mother says they thought peace would come after the evacuation of the Sinai . . . Now that we are right on the border and getting hit with qassam rockets every day, we are really afraid . . . I can't sleep with the constant 'booms' . . . so I'm here . . . I'm trying to help others . . . because no one helped us.

In their final narratives, the students indicated that their decision to take part in the project was a way of coping with the anticipated danger of the disengagement plan:

Acting is better than being.

The border is going to be right here, but somehow I didn't want to think about it.

From an ideological and moral point of view, as an Israeli I couldn't sit on the sidelines and see how those people are going to suffer . . . Today I can say that personally, I couldn't sit back and suffer and cope with all of the fear and apprehension that I felt as a result of the process. I was really afraid there would be a war here . . . I know that my activities (involvement in the project)

prevented me from feeling all of the fear and doing something. (My involvement) even prevented me from coping with the impact of the fact that my own college and my own place of residence is exposed to danger. In retrospect, I can say that my volunteer involvement in the project protected me from thinking about what is in store for us, as Israelis and as residents of the region.

Interaction between political attitudes and professional work

The course, which dealt with the controversial issue of assisting people who were being evacuated as a result of the disengagement plan, aroused a variety of reactions ranging from sadness, pity and identification, to lack of understanding, anger and alienation. These reactions elicited the question:

How can a professional helping relationship be developed when the counsellor's social and political attitudes are either the same as or different from those of the client?

The students' political involvement was reflected in a desire to map their political attitudes. For example, in response to one student's statement 'I'm in favor of disengagement. I think the occupation weakens and hurts us', other students remarked 'I'm right-wing. I'm against disengagement' or 'Disengagement didn't mean anything to me . . . I've only started thinking about it because of the project'.

Moreover, the event was unfolding in real time, and the students had to constantly re-evaluate their attitudes. For instance, at the beginning of the project, some students had opposed the idea of encouraging settlers to willingly leave their homes rather than dragging them out by force. Later, those students became angry with settlers who clashed with the army and the security forces and, at that point, they found it hard to continue their relationship with the evacuees. Other students participated in anti-disengagement demonstrations and became more firmly opposed to the plan, identifying more closely with their clients and thereby potentially undermining the development of their professionalism. The tendency to relate to the political aspect of the relocation was particularly apparent, for example, in a meeting in which a resident of Gush Katif addressed the group of students. At that time, some students sought to recruit the speaker's support for the anti-disengagement campaign, and found it hard to accept the fact that she was preoccupied by personal and family problems. In that meeting, an animated discussion ensued on the unique complexity of the situation and on the relationship between political and professional attitudes—although most intervention courses stress direct intervention and avoid introducing political controversy into professional discourse. The questions raised in this context included:

Is the emphasis on political issues an attempt to avoid dealing with the population in distress? Is it right to involve students in an event that is so sensitive for our society? Do the students' political attitudes affect their

ability to understand, identify with, and diagnose the distress of adolescents and respond appropriately?

Most of the students reported that as a result of the project, they had a stronger sense of identification and involvement with Israel in general and the community in particular:

It can be assumed that if I hadn't participated in the project, I would not have become so closely connected with the disengagement and the major events that this country is going through. In retrospect, I can say that my participation in the project strengthened my sense of belonging to the community and to the country, and caused me to reconsider my personal attitudes. As I said, I support the withdrawal from Gaza, and prefer to live in a country that does not occupy territories . . . but my exposure to the children caused me to look at things more from a personal perspective and less from an ideological and political perspective. I became more connected to the complexity of the citizens of the country and felt part of it . . .

A major social event was especially meaningful, and enabled them to gain professional experience in a way that benefited their society.

Discussion and conclusion

The article deals with a study that explored the reactions of social work students intervening in a shared traumatic reality. Analysis of their reactions revealed five main themes: the nature of the helping relationship; integrating theory and practice; functioning in a changing and unpredictable environment; working in a shared reality; and political attitudes in the context of professional work. The discussion examines the extent to which each of these themes is uniquely related to the learning process experienced by students who shared the same traumatic reality.

The findings show that the dilemmas concerning the nature of the helping relationship and integrating theory and practice are part of the learning process experienced by all students. As part of the training process, social work students learn to distinguish between friendship and a professional relationship. They learn to focus on the problem at hand, to use appropriate forms of communication and to establish goals for intervention (Beder, 2000; Berlin and Marsh, 1993). In our programme, this task was more complicated. The students encountered role ambiguity, because they were unsure whether to provide help as an Israeli citizen, as a friend or as a student of social work. It is also possible that providing assistance to others served as an outlet for the students to cope with their own distress. Sometimes, the need to find an appropriate channel of communication with clients such as internet, SMS or phone calls highlighted the students' ambiguous and premature professional identity.

The second aspect in which our programme was found to be similar to regular training programmes for social work students was the gap between theoretical material studied in the classroom and actual practice in the field. Integration of

theory and practice is one of the developmental tasks required of all social work students (Boisen and Syers, 2004; Lam, 2004), and is usually accomplished by combining reflective learning with regular practical instruction and theoretical content (Boisen and Syers, 2004; Lam, 2004; Nuttman-Shwartz and Hantman, 2003). Notably, the students encountered difficulties in the present context because they lacked systematic knowledge about forced relocation. In the process of the training programme, they were given extensive theoretical background on stress, change, crisis and trauma, which allowed them to conceptualize the practical experience they had gained in fieldwork.

With regard to the third theme, the need to function under conditions of change and uncertainty was overwhelming. In the process of fieldwork, the students were required to take more responsibility for the helping relationship than they would have under normal circumstances. Hence, they did not have the benefit of a neutral setting that facilitates learning and enables them to develop professional relationships. Against that background, the programme provided the students with a containing environment, in order to help them cope with the situation of instability and uncertainty.

Practical training in real time and in a shared traumatic reality highlighted the complexity of the students' task, in which they had to exhibit flexibility and modify the intervention during the course of their fieldwork. Most of the students coped with these difficulties by creating special settings, as well as by visiting the adolescents at home and arranging private meetings. Thus, the students often showed high levels of personal involvement and identification. In fact, many of them experienced frustration when they had difficulty maintaining direct, consistent contact with their clients and tended to view technical problems in establishing contact with clients as rejection. Although these behaviours may typify students who are still learning about the helping relationship, the new situation encountered by the participants in this study and their responses to it highlight the need to develop strategies for intervention in changing and uncertain environments. These strategies should incorporate the use of alternative means for establishing and maintaining contact, as well as alternative techniques for providing professional help.

Another way of dealing with the situation of uncertainty was through the peer group, which became highly significant to the participants during this period. The importance of the peer group might be attributed to the fact that the students themselves were in the stage of late adolescence, when the influence of peer groups is especially strong (Brown and Orthner, 1990; Cunningham, 2004). We cannot ignore the possibility that the students' distress and need for help and support were affected by the response to the disengagement in Israeli society at large, and particularly by their own proximity to the border.

The fourth theme—working in a shared traumatic reality—was an even more extreme source of difficulty. This aspect was reflected in the students' fears and anxieties, which related to all areas of their lives: the generalized fear of civil war, living under the threat of shelling, and the awareness that the danger would escalate after the relocation, as the border moved closer to their own homes. Furthermore, the areas slated for evacuation were often under fire, and

the knowledge that the students were expected to visit the adolescents in those localities intensified the sense of danger. Because social work students do not usually encounter this kind of apprehension, the teaching staff faced a special challenge. In this case, the situation of shared reality strengthened the staff and the students were given an opportunity to process their feelings and apprehensions in the classroom. In addition, the training programme provided support by enabling students to contact faculty members by phone whenever necessary.

Regarding the last major theme raised by the participants—political participation—recent years have witnessed a growing awareness of the importance of incorporating political activity into social work training (Hamilton and Fauri, 2001). However, the shared traumatic reality highlights the dilemma of whether or not to differentiate between political attitudes and professional roles. Regarding the disengagement issue, each member of Israeli society, including the students, had a political opinion. On the whole, the position of the course participants differed from that of the settlers. Although this situation could have made it difficult for the students to establish and maintain a helping relationship, several of the students opposed the disengagement plan, or had friends and family members who would have to evacuate their homes. Thus, the national controversy was reflected in the classroom and often interfered with the lecturers' attempts to focus on the main goal of the programme. In light of that situation, the lecturers attempted to enable the students to develop a professional approach while engaging in meaningful social and personal involvement (Inskipp and Proctor, 1993).

Although the students worked with individuals, they viewed themselves as part of a wider community system. They discussed the relationship between political participation and professionalism with their colleagues, and grappled with this issue in the field. The ideological controversy reinforced basic professional values pertaining to human dignity and freedom, so that politically oriented intervention might have given the participants an opportunity to observe their political situation from different perspectives (Shamai, 1999). This result suggests that conflicts between the professional role of social workers and their political involvement (Weiss, 2005) can be bridged in such shared-reality situations.

The main contribution of the study is that it has enhanced understanding and knowledge about working in a shared traumatic reality. Although the study focused on the students' experience, these situations are of special relevance to social workers at all levels, including senior professionals, students, young professionals and supervisors. Because social workers at all levels are exposed to shared traumatic realities and need to function in those contexts, it is important to be aware of the effects that those situations have on the workers as professionals. Such situations, for example, often increase the workers' tendency to change boundaries and blur their professional identity, so that they behave differently from how they would have in regular professional relationships. Above all, the study highlights the importance of creating a helpful and containing environment.

The concept of shared reality might be considered an extreme example of PIE (person in environment) theory (Karls and Wandrei, 1994), which views

individuals in the context of their surroundings. This article emphasizes the implications of exposure to traumatic reality for all parts of the social system, including social workers. In that context, it examines the automatic link between the self, the citizen and the professional identities of every individual, and the importance of multilevel interventions and community collaboration.

Before concluding, some limitations of the study should be noted. First, the sample of participants was small and the case was related to a specific shared-reality situation. Hence, although the small number of participants provided a basis for descriptive measures and diagnostic analysis of themes, it was not sufficient for quantitative measurement. In addition, no systematic evaluation of the adolescents' satisfaction was carried out. This kind of evaluation might be used to validate and improve the quality of future interventions.

Another limitation concerns the researchers' position. Because we shared the same reality as the participants in the study, our ability to teach and analyse the data might have been affected. Furthermore, counter-transference might have prevented the students from working through difficult issues. For example, they may have perceived the staff as vulnerable and avoided dealing with their political attitudes or with their unique needs as helpers. This kind of counter-transference is common among group therapists in societies in conflict (Benson *et al.*, 2005; Nuttman-Shwartz and Shay, 2006).

It is important to stress that working in a shared traumatic reality raises ethical issues. Although our students had previous experience in helping relationships and participated in the project on a voluntary basis, the lecturers kept the students' vulnerability and needs in mind throughout the course. In addition, there was the risk that one of the students or adolescents might be hurt, which raises a dilemma of considerable relevance to all workers. In the current situation, this conflict was mitigated by making the instructors available to students outside of the classroom. Thus, the instructors provided support by phone if needed, and invested a lot of time in understanding the students' professional and personal needs. Students were offered on-call supervision, as described earlier, so that an attempt was made to create a containing and supportive environment.

In sum, the recent increase in traumatic events throughout the world, including acts of terror and natural disasters, highlights the need to train social work students to function in contexts of such shared traumatic reality. Notwithstanding the challenge of training students under conditions of threat and crisis, the findings shed light on the potential contribution of appropriate programmes to professionals and clients alike.

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