

Stepping Outside the Triangle



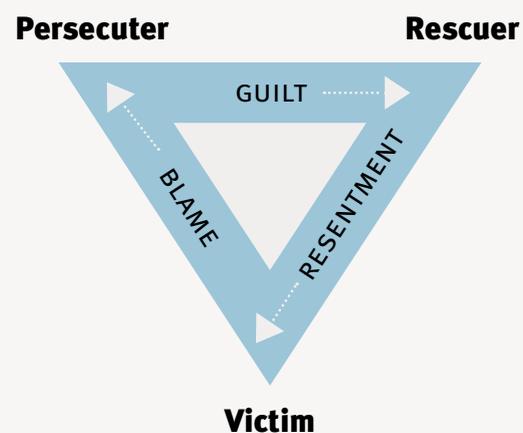
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Working reflectively with refugees and asylum seekers.

Social workers are uniquely placed within the refugee and asylum seekers sector in a variety of roles as caseworkers, trauma counsellors, and in community development. The social justice context in which we work can inspire and engage us in our practices. However the complex and dynamic nature of trauma work can also bring a number of professional and personal challenges.

Much has been written about the potential for burnout and vicarious trauma while working with vulnerable populations, where organisations are frequently resource-stretched and at the behest of changes in government policy and community attitudes. As a clinical supervisor for the Red Cross and a counsellor at the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture and Trauma, I am particularly interested in exploring the interface between social worker and client as a means to reduce the potential for vicarious trauma, encourage self-care and invite effective social work practice. This article has arisen from fruitful discussions with Red Cross caseworkers in both individual and group supervision sessions.

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The Treatment Triangle

The Drama Triangle is a model developed by Dr Stephen Karpman, out of Dr Eric Berne's 1950s Transactional Analysis. It explores the interplay of roles between one or more people in mutual exchange. When applied to a clinical setting, the Drama Triangle is commonly referred to as the Treatment Triangle.

Knowledge of the Treatment Triangle assists mental health social workers to identify transference in their professional relationship with clients and highlight potential boundary crossings. The Treatment Triangle invites reflection when working with clients with complex needs and a greater awareness of the potential impact of trauma work on oneself.

If we consider a traditional story plot, there is usually a victim (Snow White), a rescuer (prince charming) and a persecutor (evil step-mother). In our professional practice, we may locate ourselves in any one of these roles at different times.

Rescuer

The social justice conviction which motivates social workers to provide services that support and empower clients may, at times of stress, turn into client rescue. Whilst social workers mostly attempt to provide an equivalent level of care for all clients, as per their individual needs, some people inevitably touch us more personally.

Some clients may present with particularly distressing stories or may, consciously or unconsciously, remind us of someone close to us, triggering a response of increased support and intervention. Social workers may also find it difficult to stay emotionally present, with feelings of inadequacy when working with stories of human-rights abuses. They could even end up trying to fill a growing sense of helplessness with activity as it can be easier to feel useful by focusing on tasks rather than facing personal helplessness. This can include scheduling additional client sessions, contacting clients between sessions, accompanying clients more often to appointments, and/or offering additional advocacy. Professional boundaries may be breached due to these.

Rescuing differs from supportive practice, as the rescuer takes full responsibility for addressing client issues without awareness of transference issues, or their personal investment in helping.

While the majority of refugee and asylum seeker clients require at least some level of support to aid settlement and address trauma issues, many also maintain a level of resilience and resourcefulness born of the refugee experience.

Many have managed a journey to Australia in extreme conditions and have found the means to meet many of these needs. Excessive helping can deny clients the ability to make their own choices or navigate their own way through new circumstances. It can discourage client consultation, self-determination and empowerment.

Victim

Inevitably, workers taking on a rescuer role may experience resentment or lack of appreciation. This may be triggered for several reasons. These can include, but not be limited to, when clients: miss multiple appointments, refuse housing that has been difficult to secure, don't follow up on external referrals, do not engage well in counselling, complain about the service or make a complaint about ourselves.

When frustrations build from our unmet expectations of the client, we may begin to see ourselves as 'victims'. This could be caused by a feeling of having wasted our time or being taken for granted – especially if we had other pressing client issues or administrative deadlines. The small rejections of assistance or complaints may feel particularly frustrating and unfair.

As well as experiencing victimhood, social workers may also feel like victims of the system, due to working within a changing social-political context and within organisational constraints. Becoming overwhelmed from an increased workload, along with hearing traumatised client stories, may result in a reduced sense of personal efficacy, motivation, vulnerability, inadequacy or powerlessness.

Persecutor

When an experience of victimhood is prolonged, social workers may become angry and begin to blame or punish their clients. Persecution can occur in subtle ways through the withdrawal of care-taking. We may become less available, refer clients back to drop-in intake services, reduce appointments or cease our work with the client altogether. We may become less invested in client needs and less active in the provision of advocacy or support.

In the persecutor role, social workers often deny the impact of our own power on the client and discount the powerlessness of clients who have been traumatised, faced dangerous refugee journeys, prolonged detention and insecure settlement.

Inevitably, social workers reconnect with client powerlessness and their potential for suffering. We are reminded of our original motivation for entering the sector, which is often out of our concern for the political and personal rights of refugee and asylum seeker clients.

Stepping outside the triangle

Effective practice requires us to step outside the cycle of the triangle and supervision can be particularly helpful for this. Taking a bird's eye view encourages awareness and invites self-responsibility for our actions and attitudes. For example, identifying one's propensity for rescuing, recognising personal secondary gains and questioning whether one has become over or under involved with client issues.

Recognising the personal impact of working with traumatised clients is a starting point for addressing the experience of victimhood. A sense of personal power can be realised through greater focus on: work practices within our control, attempts at advocacy within organisational boundaries, reminding ourselves of the reason for doing this work, involvement in staff support activities and through self-care measures such as work/life balance, and connection to colleagues and community.

Social workers in casework roles are encouraged to consider the importance of being the first point of contact for many traumatised clients. Being perceived by clients as reliable, consistent and caring is as important as being effectively task-focused, as it can help rebuild trust. The value of fostering these personal qualities often goes unrecognised by stressed out workers.

Conclusion

Being able to recognise the potential for falling into the roles of rescuer, victim or persecutor, when working with traumatised clients, is a reminder of the power of the inter-relationship between worker and client. Self-reflective practice helps us maintain personal and professional boundaries, acknowledge client strengths and stay tuned to our self-care needs; all of which ensure effective practice, best client outcomes and greater work satisfaction. **R**