Title: Using art to illuminate social workers' stress

Introduction

The high level of stress and burnout in social work is endemic to the profession. Whilst contributory factors at the meso and macro level have been well articulated in both research and practice (Carpenter & Webb, 2012), less is known about self-defined individualised experiential factors impacting on both the stress and wellbeing of social workers in the workplace (Kinman & Grant, 2011). Indeed, the literature on social work stress is diverse and dispersed, and tends to focus on its negative aspects (Collins, 2008). This literature can be conceptualised within discrete areas which include elements such as cognition (Klink, van der Blonk, Schen & Dijik, 2001), emotion (Barlow & Hall, 2007), systemic (Carpenter & Webb, 2012), trauma (Cunningham, 2003), and coping (Richards, Campenne & Burke, 2010). The breadth and depth of literature however does not adequately describe how social workers define and narrate their own experience of stress, nor does it assist in the conceptualisation of how all of these elements connect.

In order to fill this gap in the literature, the method utilised in this paper aimed to provide a more interactive phenomenological and narrative description of how social workers conceptualise stressors, stress reactions and also coping. Most importantly, it aims to assess how the social workers defined their own issues through illustrating and narrating their personal experience, to complement existing conceptualisations. Whilst there is a wide range of terminology referred to in the literature to describe stressful states experienced by social workers, such as secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, burnout, efficacy, resilience and coping; the self-perceived and self-defined

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experiences of social workers and interactive process between stress and resilience is less apparent. This arts-based research, utilised methods to address this by using an arts-based activity which facilitated social workers' own visual, and then, verbal narratives. The expression of these enabled all three concepts of stress, resilience and coping to be explored through the generation of a single drawing or image, using a protocol developed by the first author (Huss, 2012).

Following a brief review of the relevant literature, we describe an enrichment activity undertaken with social workers whose stressors, stress, reactions and coping strategies were self-defined and then integrated by generating and exploring a personal single visual image. We discuss the themes that emerged from social workers' visual and verbal narratives to demonstrate how they analysed their own stressors, stress reactions and coping, and made connections between these.

Background

We provide a brief review of the key concepts underpinning the research, with reference to the literature, followed by a description of our rationale for selecting arts-based research. Whilst this study was conducted within Israel, the international literature recognises that sources of occupational stress in social work tend to be universal (Kaufman, Huss & Segal-Engelchin, 2012).

Phenomenology of social workers' occupational stress, coping and resilience

Stress can be associated with turnover in employment and poor organisational climate (Munro, 2011; Carpenter & Webb, 2012). Systemic issues such as lack of autonomy, role conflict, clashes of job demands and values, and a lack of ability to use professional knowledge, all provide additional sources of occupational stress for

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social workers (Munro, 2011). Structural inequalities combined with a harsh managerialist agenda which values technical performance and informational meritocracy over investment in quality within care relationships can also have an adverse impact on service users (Hafford-Letchfield, Lambley, Spolander & Cocker, 2014).

Stress may also manifest itself at emotional, psychological and physical levels for the individual. On an emotional level, trauma can arise from the complexity and enormity of issues social workers are confronted with (Bride, Robinson, Yegidis & Figley, 2004), and their witnessing of intractable and long term situations for service users. Constant exposure to traumatic content may be experienced as intrapersonal and invasive, and secondary trauma may include symptoms parallel with those being worked with who are directly exposed to trauma. A common stress reaction may involve 'compassion fatigue' (Adams, Figley & Boscarino, 2008), resulting from the combination of listening and empathising over time, to ongoing problems which appear resistant.

Another related concept is that of 'burnout'; manifesting in symptoms such as a lack of interest in the work, numbing of feelings and clinical depression. Burnout may give rise to a sense of detachment and avoidance behaviours used to protect the person (Figley, 1995).   Long term secondary trauma has been linked to physical illness, psychological or behavioral problems (Rubino, Luksyte, Perry & Volpone, 2009). Even short term exposure can provoke stress- related symptoms such as elevated blood pressure, anxiety and depressive symptoms in care professionals (Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002).

In relation to interpersonal stress, coping and resilience emerge from a complex interaction of physical, emotional, cognitive, social and imaginative streams. The latter has been relatively neglected in the literature. Strategies to reduce social workers stress or coping in its different manifestations may include integrating occupational health and safety, health promotion, psychosocial intervention and reflective supervision (Klink et al, 2001; Morrison, 2007). In the organisational context, social workers themselves can build resilience through collective activities such as collective bargaining, developing supportive alliances around key concerns, self or peer advocacy, different models of supervision, and through engagement in enriching personal networks and activities that support their work-life balance.

Paramount within discourses about stress is the concept that social workers need to develop resilience in order to cope or bounce back from exposure to significant psychological or environmental adversity inherent to their role (Grant and Kinman, 2011). Resilience is a complex and multi-faceted construct. It refers to refer to the capacity for navigating change in demanding and often unstable, highly pressured environments, without experiencing untoward negative effects and developing resources to counteract them. Individuals are expected to be proactive in accessing opportunities and resources in their wider network, and to adapt to internal and external stressors in resourceful ways (Klohen, 1996, p1068). Becoming or being 'resilient' is said to offer protective factors that enhance the ability to manage stress.

However, the ways in which social workers become resilient, the recourses that they find most helpful, and the connection of these to professional support, are not as well researched (Carpenter, Webb & Bostock, 2012). A cross-sectional study conducted in the United States by Boyas and Wind (2010) examined the relationship between the

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social capital generated through the workplace on job-stress and burnout. In broad terms, social capital is recognised as an asset embedded in quality interactions in social relationships and networks, which in turn provide potentially rich resources for support (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999).

Exploring stress and coping in social work

Social workers are a group of professionals strongly socialised towards social theories and approaches that are task focused or highly rational. Despite emphasis on the use of critical reflection in practice, which provides an opportunity to integrate theory, practice and values with personal experience, any imbalance between these push and pull factors can impact on how social workers access their own tacit knowledge, blind theories, or inner experience (Kaufman, Huss & Segal-Engelchin, 2012). Social workers rely on a valuable source of knowledge created from their experience, by doing and in action (Narhi, 2001).

Researching social workers inner experience may be complicated if in tension with traditional theoretical orientations underpinning social work, and how social work 'works'. Turning to arts-based methods and the imaginary stream is therefore one approach, which can be drawn upon for its potential to access the experience and knowledge of social workers working in highly structured environments. Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) writing about indigenous practice in cross-cultural contexts, observed that that tacit knowledge is often symbolic, narrative, and visual, rather than based on abstract verbal concepts.   By drawing on these ideas and Dybicz work (2012) it has been suggested that service users tend to create symbolic narratives of their lives, constructing central themes and organizational metaphors, which integrate both stressors and strengths. Whilst the use of narrative and metaphor is a human process,

it is of interest to explore how the influences of theory and rationality might deter social workers from similarly tuning in on their inner experiences.

Combatting stress in social work

Understanding the different external and internal stress factors described above, is important to finding and implementing effective interventions to combat occupational stress in social work environments. Social work supervision for example, provides a valuable resource for averting and combating stress, and comprises a complex and highly personal matrix of influences. Carpenter, Webb and Bostock (2012) review of empirical research on social work supervision found little evidence on the contribution of supervisees when engaging or interacting with the supervision framework, and from a person-in-environment perspective. Mena and Bailey (2008) found that in situations where workers lacked rapport with their supervisors, their stress was likely to be associated with emotional exhaustion, feelings of depersonalization, and losing track of their personal needs. The elements of stress that permeate into subjective experience but emerge from the social context of social workers, therefore merits further investigation.

Using arts-based research for phenomenology of social work experience of stress and coping

Historically, phenomenology has evolved in social work research to explore the conscious lived experience of phenomena (Pascal, 2010), which in this study, were stress, stress reactions and the coping of social workers through the vehicle of arts-based research. Warren and Paton (2014) examined how art 'works' in social work and suggested that it has potential for 'getting stuff out'; 'inhabiting others' worlds'; and 'breaking habits of seeing/knowing' (p190). This can allow or enable the

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exteriorisation of difficult feelings and thoughts, particularly where certain experiences or traumas do not lend themselves to easy verbalisation. This phenomenological level has also been combined with a social – ecological level in arts based research, by describing its subject in relation to background (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006; Harper, 2002; Herth, 1998; Holliday, 2002; Mair & Kierans, 2007). Freire and Macedo (1987) for example, assert that utlising the arts enables personal interpretation, and the engagement of the imagination in relation to social reality.

Arts-based research may also provide a means of accessing practice knowledge within complex social realities. O'Sullivan (2005) explored the use of pictures as a metaphor for social work knowledge, and suggests that social workers have to incorporate diverse and flooding levels of information into a single gestalt (a view of natural systems and their properties as a whole rather than a collection of parts). This enables social workers with practice wisdom to value pictures of situations that have internal coherence (p223). Indeed, social workers are often exposed to embodied experience that demand the use of all of their senses, and these may include disturbing or distressing visual images. Visual imagery therefore provides an accessible source for the retrieval and also interpretation of these experiences and can enable continuous re-interpretation (Huss, 2012). The use of visual imagery provides a mechanism for making this inner, hereto, invisible or neglected experience and theory more visible and implicit for the social worker (Narhi, 2000), particularly through an analysis of content. Arts-based methods are cited as being at the intersection of subjective and objective or psychological, personal and social states typical of social work, and can provide an integrative tool (Huss, 2012).

In conclusion, the use of the arts in social work has been suggested as a method for exploring resilience, problem solving and coping strategies, thus providing a new and

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potentially creative perspective for working with familiar problems. A compelling conclusion from a range of studies is that individuals and their communities naturally demonstrate their resilience through the arts, even under the most bizarre and brutal conditions. Notwithstanding the evidence as to why this works, needs strengthening (Leonard, Hafford-Letchfield & Couchman, 2016; Ospina-Kammerer & Dixon, 2001). We now go on to explain our approach to using arts-based methods to explore social workers stress, stress reactions and coping, by drawing on phenomenological approaches which facilitated both visual and verbal narratives.

Study design and methods

Field of research:

This research took place in a university in Israel using a structured approach as previously described by Huss (2012; 2014).

Research protocol:

This art-based research project comprised of three stages: it drew on relevant art-based research literature (Eisner, 1991; Emmerson & Smith, 2000; Foster 2012). The aim of this methodology was to capture a holistic rendering of person-within context, by exploring the visual and verbal narratives of social workers generated from their production of a single image. This examination of social workers' stress was analysed with reference to their overall circles of support and means of coping. This included their relationships with service users, in the workplace, and their overall perception of the status of social work in society.

In the first stage, participating social workers were invited to draw a situation, which has been, or is causing them stress at work. They were then asked to record a short

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explanatory narrative by writing this on the back of the image. They also shared this content in the group. The leaders of the discussion focused attention on the compositional and symbolic elements of the drawing, asking the participants to explain their drawing in relation to the subject of work-stress. Plain paper and oil pastels were used for creating lines and filling in areas in colour. These support accessibility for those with relatively little drawing technique, and/or experience of art materials and enable participants to feel competent should they wish to use this method in their own practice. The aim of this drawing stage was to enable the individual social worker to define the stressor for themselves, and to contextualise it as subject (figure), within a social reality (background).

In the second stage, each social worker was invited to access their stress reaction to the situation as described in stage one, as it appeared in the symbolic, metaphorical and compositional elements of the image, such as the color, placement, size, symbols, shading, and overall composition. This was also documented in writing on the back of the image, and then verbally shared as a description to the group. One example was; "the composition is chaotic and flooded with elements - this is how I feel because of the overload at work". The aim of this stage was to help the social workers separate the stressor and the context of the stress that appears in the symbols and content level of the image, from the stress situation that often appears in the way that the image is drawn.

In the final, third stage, the participants were invited to identify potential sources of coping and resilience for dealing with the stressor and the stress reactions, and to include these recourses into the image through adding, changing, re-drawing or re-conceptualising the image's contents or boundaries. This was again recorded in writing and then shared verbally within the group.

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The session then ended with participants debriefing, firstly to identify any risk factors that may have arisen during the process for example re-traumatisation and secondly to debrief on the value of the method overall and by giving consideration as to how they might utilise this method in their future everyday practice.

Data Sources

The protocol described below was undertaken with four groups of 20 experienced social workers (a total of 80). The social workers were employed in a range of statutory welfare services and NGO's from the locality. They had at least two years' experience in the field. The arts-based activity was provided as enrichment in the context of a dedicated workshop, lasting approximately one hour for each group. The participants were recruited through local publicity or through participants taking existing courses at the university. The groups consisted of all women except for two men, and their ages ranged between 25-45 years.

The three sources of data arising from the processes described above were subjected to analyses. These sources comprised:

1. Eighty images of the participants, photographed-before and after they added their coping and recourses for stress (160 images).

2. Eighty individual narratives of the process and meaning of the images by the participants. These were both written on the back of the image, and spoken within the group sharing process.

3. Four hours of transcribed and recorded group meetings associated with the generation of images and the process (including 2 above).

Analytical strategy

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To recap, the data generated a three stage process with a set of images of stressors, stress reactions and coping, expressed on a single A5 page, and a set of explanations of each of these drawings by the participants. This data was integrated at a phenomenological level for a) how the social worker experienced her/his own stresses, and b) at a social level, for insight into how these stressors interacted within ecological relationships between service users-workplace-profession where they occurred. This integration of subjective experience within different circles of social context, formed the rational for arts-based research as described earlier in the literature review.

The narratives were triggered by the images, as they were the participant's own explanation of their visual image: The image 'excavated' the experience and elaborated the visuals in terms of form and content. This was then explained by the participant, in relation to the image. Thus, the data comprised both image and the narratives together, and gave them both equal emphases (Betinsky, 1995; Hubberman & Miles, 2002; Knowles & Cole, 2008). This arts-based method differed from projective arts tests that use a dynamic projective meta-theory as a base for analysing images (Burns, 1988; Huss, 2012; 2014). The sentences describing the images that the participants wrote and verbally shared and the contents of their images were analysed together by the researchers. Firstly their narratives comprised a short written description which was then elaborated verbally in the group at both stages two and three. The latter was contemporaneously noted by one of the researchers. The words and phrases used by the social workers were brought together with these notes to look for any common use words, metaphors and emerging themes.

The second analyses: Because the sample of images was large enough, we were able to count the most frequently occurring and least occurring compositional elements,

symbols, and contents, so as to create a description of the most and least central stressors and coping methods as represented in the images.

The third analyses aimed to theoretically explore the interactive relationship between the three sets of themes, stressors, stress reactions and coping, in the context of the literature in this arena (Eisenhardt, 2002).

Validity and trustworthiness: It is important to understand that arts-based research has internal validity in that the dual level of firstly drawing the content, and then explaining it, created a space for an individual to self-define, but also to self- interpret their own content. This created a type of triangulation of the interpretive voice of the participants that enhanced validity (Emmerson & Smith, 2000; Huss, 2012). The thematic analyses were agreed by both authors, one with a background in arts-based research and one with knowledge of social work human resource management.

Ethical issues: Ethical approval was provided by Ben Gurion University, Israel ethics committee. Participation was entirely voluntary and participants gave informed consent for the visual and verbal data and for the facilitator's notes to be used for analyses. The social workers' responded to the opportunity for engaging with a no-cost personal enrichment activity which addressed social workers' stress in exchange for data capture. All identifying features of the art or personal statements were removed and substituted with a mnemonic (Hubberman & Miles, 2002). There were risks anticipated for social workers when engaging in revisiting or exploring stress situations. Some ground rules were established to create a supportive environment and participants were invited to contact the researchers after the session if they needed any signposting to support services. None took up this offer.

Findings

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We present the findings from the data analyses under the three stages of enquiry identified in the research protocol. These are presented in the order that they were gathered by using the headings of stressors, stress reactions, and coping accordingly.

Stage 1: Exploring stressors

Analyses of situations generating stress for participants fell into two key central themes. Firstly the social workers described an intensive lack of support from services (in fifty images). Going from the most to least frequently mentioned themes, they included: lack of protection and attention from management, lack of support at work, a focus on mechanised approaches to work, a focus on diverse and polarised jobs, with no time to do them, the lack of protection from services, (i.e. having to enter dangerous areas alone), the lack of financial support for the work, the stress of conflicting values or understandings of the service users problem between themselves and their management.

The second interconnected theme articulated the difficulty for social workers being able to meaningfully connect to service users given the lack of support. This was more of a challenge where there was a lack of supervision (thirty images). These reasons cited (from most to least frequently mentioned); a perceived lack of skills to reach the service user, the lack of support from their organisations' infrastructure in reaching the service user, conflicts between the social worker and the organisation in terms of defining service user need and approach to their problems, excessive focus on assessment formats, recordings and technical issues resulting in little time for social workers to form relationships or establish rapport.

The following examples of descriptions for their initial drawings illustrate these two interconnected themes:

"I drew my managers' door as closed, and up a few steps, because her door is always closed and I can't climb those steps, she puts such a distance between us". (social worker, group 1).

"I drew the wall between me and my clients in prison - but also between me and my social work service. It is so hard to reach the clients, but it is also so hard to reach the social work profession. I have a different perspective from the social work committee in which I represent the prisoners, and my agency isn't supporting me, I feel very alone - in fact, when I look at it, I notice that I am between walls, I am in prison myself" (social worker, group 2).

Extreme polarised positions were also illustrated where services, social workers and service users were seen as unable to work together due to oppositional forces being present, for example, one drew these as three separate islands, with the service being the smallest in size and furthest away, representing the least source of support.

**"*I have these moments of meaningful work with the clients, that I drew as lights, where they feel understood, or receive more attention that they ever did - but my framework doesn't see these moments and isn't interested in them, only in forms and amounts so that they can continue to manage financially – which I understand is a real problem, but what I do is not appreciated and is invisible – that's why I drew the moments of light such a pale yellow"* (social worker group 2).

Participants vividly described the feeling of 'overflowing' such as in the depiction of an overfull cup, to represent their large workload. Their compositions reflected piles of paper in large images with themselves as smaller, insignificant images:

"I drew a continuous boring stream of work, the colors are not interesting or strong, nothing interesting is happening, on the page - no changes - just constant slog- so that I have become cut off from my work, I am somewhere under the piles of paper." (social worker, group 3).

Examples from the images generated included a service user with prickles; vast empty spaces between the helper and service user; and outstretched hands which did not meet.

"The picture has very little ground, and a lot of emptiness, that is how I felt after my clients suicide, drained and empty - and there was no one to talk to." (social worker, group 4).

From these narratives, the workplace was one of the most intensive sources of stress. The lack of support emerging was described as a parallel process passing from management to social workers and from social workers to service users. Interestingly, the lack of support from management was experienced as more important than lack of remuneration in the profession.

Stage 2: Exploring stress reactions

As explained above, in the second stage a differentiation between stressor and stress reaction was created, and the social workers were invited to explore their emotions and reactions to the stress that they saw in the content, symbols and compositions of their art work. These included: feelings of helplessness and ineffectiveness (seen in 30 drawings); feelings associated with lower self-worth (20 drawings); lack of efficacy and associated depression (20 drawings), and grandiose or manic type of reactions (10 drawings).

Graphic examples of these elements included steep hills, crossroads supersized or dominant shapes such as question marks, and conversely tiny helpless social workers, or social workers under black clouds, invisible, or lost in flooded and chaotic compositions.

In the verbal group discussions, participating social workers described these as follows:

"I drew rainbows above my head, I want to change the world, to create a new reality, but I find that I can't think of anything new anything different, they remain rainbows - I don't like what is being done but I can't think of a better way to do it.". (social worker, group 1).

"I lack the ability to move- you can see that I don't have feet the character is cut off from his hands – he can't do anything" (social worker, group 1).

"I don't have facial features, I am invisible" (social worker, group 4)

"I feel that my energy is dissipating all over the place, as shown in the spirals of colors - I am working wildly but it's a mess with no direction" (social worker, group 4).

Exploring and explaining stress reactions

Bandura (1995) asserted that self-efficacy is more than a self-perception of competency. It is an individual's assessments of his or her confidence in their ability to execute specific skills in a particular set of circumstances, and thereby achieve a successful outcome. The above elements seemed to represent a sense of lack of efficacy as well as a general internalisation and self-blame for lack of support. In dynamic terms, we identified an internalisation of stress, leading to low self-esteem

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and ensuing depression or to manic splits between power and depression (Selva, 2006). From a cognitive standpoint, negative thoughts may be the worst way of dealing with stress, as they do not facilitate effective solutions.

Because the majority of the participants were women, and social work is a predominantly female profession, then this internalisation of stress and self-blame can be analysed through feminist theories. Gilligan's ethics of care (1982), for example describes the tendency of women to attribute lack of ability to provide care to others as a personal failure (see also Saulnier, 1999). In addition, although social workers in Israel are trained in systemic and structural analyses of societal problems, rather than in the individual's failings, the social workers did not analyse their situations systemically, even where their images pointed clearly to a lack of support in the system. Instead they tended to blame themselves for not being strong enough. Their stress reactions shifted between a sense of having control and omnipotence, to despair and helplessness, similar to other caretaking roles of women (Saulnier, 1999). Both reactions had a negative effect on self-esteem and internalisation of problems, rather than stimulating anger at the lack of external support from the system in which they were working.

Stage 3: Defining one's recourses to stress and coping

The final stage of the protocol led participants to exploring their recourses for coping with the stress situation and stress reaction through adding, erasing, or otherwise changing the content or composition of their drawing. The most used to least used recourses involved; making a personal effort to feel powerful and more positive (40); reframing the situation so as to find a new solution (20); initiating connections to others (15); and challenging the system to provide more resources (5). The graphic

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examples involved social workers using shifts in color such as the use of brighter colours to try and shift to more positive emotions such as yellows, orange and other rainbow colours, stronger lines and shapes to excavate internal feelings of strength.

"I added yellow rays around me to give me power" (social worker, group 1)

"I added a strong base so I don't lose my balance" (social worker, group 3).

**"*I added a rainbow to my tears – because I sometimes feel that I have done some small thing that is very meaningful to the clients, that I have opened an area of contact or hope- and it's very satisfying"* (social worker, group 3).

Only ten participants suggested reaching out to other social workers for support.

**"*I created connections between all of the people with different colors, a network that can hold us together"* (social worker, group 1).

**"*I added a new person from outside of the spiral who can reach in and pull us out - because we are stuck in the spiral"* (social worker, group 2).

Even more surprising, given the social workers training in systemic and social change, only five out of the eighty social workers suggested recourses that attempted to challenge or change the system.

"I made the cup bigger around me bigger, so I wouldn't overflow anymore, and I added friends to the cup, and I added a pipe for the water to drain, which is my supervision, I need to demand that we find more time for supervision" (social worker, group 1).

**"*I added steps to climb up to the manager's office, and I made myself bigger, so I can climb the steps into her office and sort it out"* (social worker, group 3).

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As shown above in our analyses of the stress reactions, in continuation of the stress reactions above, the largest theme captured assumptions of social workers about their perceived lack of personal internal strength, rather than the lack of skills or of external support. Any shifting to positive emotions and attitudes during this phase tended not to be anchored in any securing of informational, support, or as a result of identifying needs for systemic changes. Rather, they stated intentions to become more personally positive. This approach decontextualized the solution from the problems, thus causing stress.

Limitations of the study

There were limitations to this study. Firstly, it was exploratory and conducted with a self-selected motivated group that may not be representative of social workers experiencing stress. Secondly, there were no follow up activities to explore the subsequent changes in the social workers approach to coping, and the sustainability of such an approach. Thirdly, we have not specifically explored any cultural context for social worker in Israel which may or may not differ from other contexts internationally in terms of the socio-economic and political environment. Studies using arts-based methods in social work education for example have revealed similar issues and themes in relation to structural and personal restraints on practice, despite differences in context and structure of the organisations reviewed (Leonard et al, 2016).

Integrative discussion and conclusion

The analyses of the above three stages of stress situations, emotional reactions to stress and ways of coping with the stress were captured as an interactive whole. This indicated that the workplace can be one of the most intensive sources of stress for

social workers, which in turn impacted their experience and perhaps quality of interaction with service users.

Like many situations evidenced in the international literature, social workers in Israel identified the cumulative failure of organisations to recognize the harsh realities and impact of unprecedented financial challenges combined with ongoing managerialism on social work practice (Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2014). The lack of moral fluency in social work organisational settings noted in the literature were reflected in the inconsistency between personal and professional values and the harsher organizational context described (see Boyas & Wind, 2010). Social workers felt unable to navigate between these conflicting values positions, thus exacerbating stress in its different forms. Participants moreover named lack of support in the system as the key trigger for feeling unable themselves to support service users.

Secondly, in stage two when identifying stress reactions, the findings showed a shift to blaming oneself for lack of strength, optimism or efficacy, rather than looking to the system for solutions. This process of self-blaming, illustrated a predominant style of coping as being located in the need to change the self rather than changing the system. This is perhaps not surprising since stress is first identified in terms of its impact on the self and during stress reactions, it can be challenging to analyse this systematically when focused on coping with stress itself.

This pattern between stress and coping, suggests a parallel process of feeling abandoned in the interactions between social workers and services, and service users and social workers. Both are potentially oppressed and disempowered groups within society. There was evidence of a spiral that the social worker enters; where they

perceive that their problems result from a lack of their own personal skills rather than the lack of external support for their work.

Thirdly, the overall picture emerging from the visual and verbal narrative is one which tends to lead to a further lowering of self-esteem, depression and isolation. Again, the solution becomes one which is to " pull oneself together' or to reframe a more positive mood, rather than to address systemic problems contributing or causing stress. The recourses used by social workers were to shift to a more optimistic outlook and to empower the self. These strategies were more often decontextualised from systemic challenges but more likely to be expected to emerge from within the individual. Some participants utilised learned skills such as reframing, holding on to optimism for service users, use of reflection, knowledge, and shifts in perspective. Very few turned to the activation of social support from their networks and supervisors. In summary, support is more readily defined as coming from within rather than from without.

Overall, in drawing these three themes together we tentatively suggest a pattern that whilst social workers identified a lack of social work professional support as their most pressing problem, they expect to adjust to this, and became upset if they are not able to adjust. This finding strengthens the literature on the tendency of social workers to utilise micro rather than macro thinking in their work, even when they are trained to an overt commitment to social justice and knowledge of structural and systemic inequalities (Garrett, 2016). They instead tend to utilise psychological theories that decontextualise the self and these interpretations are dominant in their experience of stress, rather than those which look to analyse the sources of authority and power impacting on their stress. These findings are consistent with the literature on the

predominance of micro orientations within social work, even when students are taught systemic and social change perspectives (Kaufman et al, 2011).

Concerns have already been highlighted in the literature about resilience being defined as a personal construct. Garrett (2016) contested some of the uncritical literature on resilience and suggests that the term is rhetorical, framed by neo-liberal policy that minimises other 'societal and political milieu' impacting on social work (p10). He calls for a reworking and reappraisal of approaches to social workers' coping strategies that recognises their sense of agency, and values collaborative ways of working within the realities of the macro societal structures currently impacting on practice. In this study, only ten of the eighty participants turned to social recourses for coping. In the context of the systems rigid hierarchy, social work systems may orient them to individualised coping as a way to prevent group power that can also be subversive to the system (Kaufman et al, 2011).

One of the aims of the study was to test and review the application of an arts-based method that enhanced our ability to see how these interactive elements (stressors, stress reactions and coping) can be explored through a single image, and whether this method helps to understand how these can be constructed by each other. This enhances our understanding of a stress-based or coping-based model in the literature and seeks to understand these elements as a whole and which are taking place within a specific social context (Figley, 2002). In this case, the use of a single image to define the problem, the reaction to the problem and also the solution, helped to deconstruct the participants stress narrative, and to create a connection between the structural causes of the lack of support with the social workers' experienced reality where there were psychological symptoms of depression and low self-esteem. Another advantage of using the arts was that participants expressed their problem with their system or

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those holding power in a symbolic form, without directly confronting them. For social workers dependent on these systems, it may be hard to express criticism directly, especially as they are described by them as being extremely rigid, uncommunicative and hierarchical. This further illustrates the potential of art-based data to make explicit the experience of disempowered groups (Leonard et al, 2016).

The contribution was to illustrate potential advantages of arts-based methods as outlined in the literature (Huss, 2014; Kaufman et al, 2011). Sinding et al (2014) suggest that a particular virtue of using art-based interventions is in how it avoids or overcomes problems with communication 'as usual' (p191). Generating an image facilitated the capture of connections between its subject (the social worker) and background (her/his workplace) in new ways, and created a distance from terms that may have become calcified. This suggests that imagery can also offer an arts-based research tool and alternative methodology that fits with critical social work practice.

There are implications for using arts in professional education or by being used to enhance other forms of emotional, professional and social support within the workplace that have not been developed in this paper, but which could constitute further research (see also Leonard et al, 2016). This will then put the different elements that contribute to social work stress and affect their coping strategies more clearly in the picture.

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