

Training Triggers: A Narrative Analysis of Situations Perceived as Retraumatizing During MSW Training



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BACKGROUND

Despite movement toward integrating trauma and trauma-informed care into the clinical training curriculum in general and the social work curriculum in particular, scant research exists on retraumatization during training. We do know that many students have trauma histories and that some are reporting experiences of secondary traumatic stress, vicarious trauma, and retraumatization during training. Though it has been assumed these experiences are related to indirect exposure to traumatic content—such as client or student narratives that contain descriptions of violence and victimization—some evidence suggests there may be additional dynamics that contribute to these trauma responses (Carello & Butler, 2015).

AIMS

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze narratives gathered from MSW program students, course and field educators, and staff about situations during training that were perceived as retraumatizing in order to address the question, *What types of situations are perceived as retraumatizing during social work training?*

METHODS

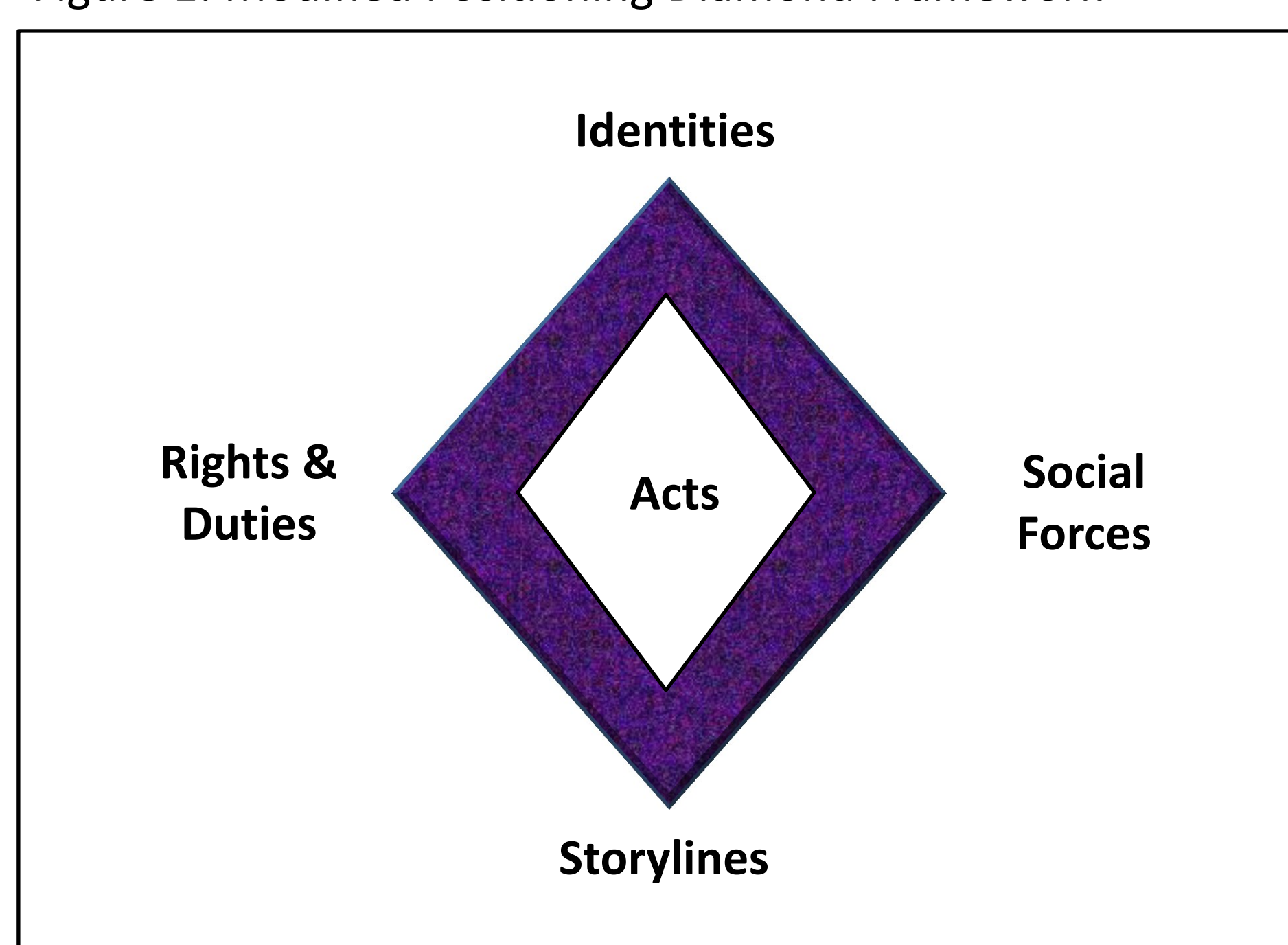
SAMPLE: A web-based qualitative survey was used to collect responses from students, faculty, and staff at a large MSW program in the northeastern USA. Participants who reported experiencing or witnessing an event during their time in the program they perceived as significantly distressing were invited to write a narrative by responding to open-ended critical incident debriefing questions. Sixty (32%) of the 186 participants reported having a significantly distressing experience, 43 of which (72%) provided a written narrative about it. See Table 1 below for a breakdown by program role.

Table 1: Reports of significantly distressing experience by role

| Role | Full Sample | | Narrative Subsample | |
|-------------------|-------------|--------|---------------------|--------|
| | Number | % | Number | % |
| MSW Students | 103 | 55.38 | 26 | 60.47 |
| Field Educators | 49 | 26.34 | 8 | 18.60 |
| Faculty | 14 | 7.53 | 3 | 6.97 |
| PhD Students | 12 | 6.45 | 5 | 11.63 |
| Staff | 5 | 2.69 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Prefer Not to Say | 3 | 1.61 | 1 | 2.33 |
| Total | 186 | 100.00 | 43 | 100.00 |

DATA ANALYSIS: After an initial round of open coding, structural analysis of written narratives was completed using a modified version of Labov's story components (Kim, 2016). Narratives were then analyzed using a modified version of Slocum-Bradley's (2009) Positioning Diamond framework (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Modified Positioning Diamond Framework



FINDINGS

Narrative and positioning analysis of narratives uncovered four types of significantly distressing situations that participants perceived as retraumatizing: *classic triggering* (21 narratives), *secondary injury* (5 narratives), *high-stakes mistakes* (2 narratives), and *compound injury* (9 narratives). Six narratives did not fit these categories as participants reported no trauma history or that the event or situation did not remind them of a past experience.

CLASSIC TRIGGERING: Narratives of this type relied upon *indexical extensions of meaning* (Davies and Harré, 1990) which draw upon past experience to interpret significance: e.g., recognizing what it means to feel powerless or victimized because one has experienced it before. In other words, mirroring past experiences. One's self competence or character was often doubted or questioned in narratives of this type. As one student observed:

"I was the victim of domestic abuse. This incident made me feel worthless, and under the control of someone who abuses their power and does not have my best interest in mind. Someone to fear retaliation if I did anything."

SECONDARY INJURY: Narratives of this type relied upon *typified extensions of meaning* which draw upon personal and cultural categories (e.g. teacher/student, worker/client) to interpret significance (Davies and Harré, 1990). For example, some narrators perceived that professionals who were supposed to care for them violated their rights or neglected their professional duties. Such experiences were seen as adding insult to injury or as a subsequent injury that was sometimes even more distressing than current or past injuries. In this category, narrators were more likely to question others' competence or character. One student narrated:

"I lost a parent while I was attending the MSW program. A professor...discussed this openly in front of the class my first day back following the loss. I was not asked my preference in regard to notifying my classmates of the loss and it was extremely difficult for me due to the fact the entire class was silent and treated me differently following the news....The most distressing part was that it was done by a professor in the program. It sent the wrong message about what field I was getting into."

HIGH-STAKES MISTAKES: May involve indexical and/or typified extensions of meaning about self or others. Narrator admitted or was accused of making a mistake that could or did result in high-stakes consequences. Narrator believed that blame was shifted, that the punishment did not fit the (alleged) crime, and/or that there was no opportunity to repair the mistake/injury. Both self and others' competence or character was doubted or questioned. One student described their experience thus:

"I sent a rather rude and thoughtless email, I will admit even inappropriate, to [someone in the program]...I was overwhelmed and stressed with school and my mother died suddenly at the beginning of the semester. I don't say this as an excuse, but it was out of character. [They] replied to me calling me racist. [They] literally said I was a disgusting racist and would not accept any explanation or apology. [The person] since has made my academic life hard...It made me question my own values. It altered my life and ruined my experience."

COMPOUND INJURY: When the significantly distressing experience involved more than one incident and more than one type of significance Both self and others' competence or character were questioned. One student wrote about several conflicts with one instructor over the course of a semester:

"First, the professor was unnecessarily hyper-critical and [their] grading was downright punitive. There is a difference between providing constructive criticism and punishing a student for not meeting ridiculous standards...It reminded me of my childhood. I was already going through stuff with my family when it happened...Also, it reminded me of all of the experiences I have had that taught me how unfair the world is, which made me angry that this professor thought [they] could school me on that."

DISCUSSION

- Significantly distressing experiences during MSW training negatively affected personal and professional identity development and also program reputation.
- Retraumatization more often resulted from direct conflict between educators and students rather than from indirect exposure through content or working with clients.
- Narrators avoided speaking up due to fear of repercussions or of not being taken seriously; those who did speak up were unsuccessful in repositioning themselves unless someone with higher status intervened.
- In narratives documenting growth, educators and students positioned each other as allies.
- Findings point to need for further research and development of trauma-informed educational principles, practices, and policies.

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