Stress, trauma and critical incidents: The challenge for social work education

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Abstract

The article considers implications of research in regard to support systems for workers who have experienced traumatic events and critical incidents. The evidence is aligned with educators’ practice experience that students on placement, new graduates and experienced workers alike, all locate significant stressors and challenges to their resiliency within the systemic and structural organisational contexts of the workplace. This emphasis upon job context as opposed to job content raises key challenges for social work educators. The article addresses issues that arise in the preparation for the management of stress and incidents and considers some tools and models that educators might employ in the pre-practice environment. The article is based upon a presentation given at the Social Work Education symposium in Auckland in January 2006.

‘It’s not the clients who are scary’: Introducing the importance of context

The environmental and organisational context in which social workers practise is a powerful determinant of the quality of their experience. Faced with critical incidents and cumulative stressors in the workplace (factors that for many social workers form a significant part of their job content) the maintenance of resilience and coping strategies is fundamentally intertwined within the preparation for, and the responses to, such events. Doctoral research into the impact of critical incidents and traumatic events in the mental health workplace suggested the necessity for adequate preparation of students and beginning practitioners in the ecological realities of the work experience (Adamson, 2005b). Many participants in the study reported that it was the organisational response (or lack of appropriate response) that determined a more negative outcome, rather than the content of an incident or client situation. A key argument of the research was that specific incidents always occur within pre-existing contexts, many of which are imbued with high levels of cumulative stress, which compound the impact of an incident. Key findings from the research are extrapolated and added to experience gained from consultation with experienced social work practitioners and supervisors. It explores some of the necessary preparation for practice that can be developed within social work education.

The argument that job context is as powerful a determinant of the experience of well being as is job content has been advanced in many settings. Within the Aotearoa New
Zealand context, for instance, it has been explored within the New Zealand Police (Hud-
dleston, 2002) and Child Youth and Family Services (CYF) (Department of Child, Youth and
Family Services, 2004) as well as in numerous studies overseas (for instance, Alexander and

Evidence for the argument comes not only from research but also from the accumulated
testimonies of social work students reporting on their placement experiences, a quotation
from one being embedded in the heading above. The article is also informed by the experi-
ences of social work supervisors engaged in Massey’s Postgraduate Diploma in Professional
 Supervision, supervisors employed either within CYF or in non-government agencies in
the area of child protection and family support. These experienced practitioners have given
significant practice credibility to the argument that for them, the sources of stress within
their workplaces are strongly embedded within issues such as:

• resourcing;
• inter-agency cooperation;
• relationships within and between offices, workers and managers;
• the diverse allegiances among parent and child, family need and community safety; and
• cultural concepts and obligations.

Recognition of this ecologically-based processing of experience suggests that on a theoretical
level, the use of psychological and psychiatric conceptual understanding such as the construc-
tion of Posttraumatic and Acute Stress Disorders (APA 1980; 1994) are perhaps necessary
but not sufficient knowledge bases from which to prepare for, and respond to, the experi-
ence of acute and cumulative stress within social work. Environmental influences suggest a
partnership between social work agencies and education providers that is robustly designed
to provide a developmental approach to coping with stress, trauma and critical incidents.
(Such influences can include pre-placement and pre-employment awareness of risk and
coping strategies, a sound knowledge of stress responses on both personal and theoretical
levels, and an organisation-specific knowledge of support services and processes).

What follows is a discussion concerning the need to construct a systematic and eco-
ically informed framework, or matrix of understanding, that:

• recognises the responsibility of the individual in the management of stress and incidents:
• the assumption of responsibility by each employer to provide and maintain adequate
  support systems, and
• the activation of a partnership between schools of social work and the social work pro-
  viders that will work towards the transfer of knowledge and continuity for learning and
  professional development.

Developing an ecological matrix

The use of an ecological framework to comprehend and interpret trauma experience has
been argued elsewhere (Adamson, 2005a). The knowledge base for this evolves out of human
development (for example, Belsky, 1980; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and social work principles of
ontological, micro, meso, exo and macro levels of experience. It provides a largely systems-
based understanding of the interrelationships and influences between the systems in which
we are all located, enhanced by a constructivist recognition of the importance of meaning
derived from one’s own unique location and perspective. Informed also by the developmental
or stage issues concerning recovery from trauma and acute stress (Herman, 1997), the matrix also considers the lifespan of the experience of stress, trauma and critical incidents in the workplace, along the dimensions of prevention and preparation, response, and follow-up and support. This article focuses upon the issues that arise in prevention and preparation, as these imply an active partnership between social work schools and employers.

**Table one.** An ecological matrix for stress, trauma and critical incidents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ontological</th>
<th>Issues in prevention and preparation</th>
<th>Issues in response</th>
<th>Issues in recovery and follow-up</th>
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<td>Micro</td>
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<td>Macro</td>
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Such a framework provides recognition that, as individuals, we carry our own ontological experiences (personality and past experience) into current social work practice. We are uniquely located within microsystems such as family, church, social work class or agency, all of which are interconnected by strong or weak, positive or negative bonds in the meso-system, and influenced by exo-level structural and systemic factors that are determined in turn by cultural, gender and attitudinal dynamics. These macro-dynamics themselves are intimately involved in the creation of ontological experience. It is the interrelationship of these ecological factors that, it is argued, have an important bearing on the preparation for social work practice under conditions of stress.

The following discussion focuses upon the issues that arise for educators in the preparation of students for the complexities of practice, and follows the ecological matrix in a discussion from ontological through to macro level issues. Potential action points and tools for educators are highlighted at the end of each section.

**Ontological issues in the preparation of students for practice**

Issues of personality and past experience form the ‘guts’ of much social work teaching, providing opportunities for integrating motivation, patterns of behaviour, and a unique combination of strengths and vulnerabilities with the academic content of papers (Keen and O’Donoghue, 2005). Key issues that arise here are questions of the students’ own awareness of their families and cultures of origin; the awareness and articulation of, and recovery from, previous stressful experience; the students’ own interpersonal skills level; how students perceive their locus of control (Rotter, 1992) and appraise stress; and the thorny issue of selection.

Students entering social work education bring their own identities with them. The acquisition of self-awareness in relation to others, whilst a life-long journey, becomes a focal point for the exploration of values, difference and interpersonal communication within a social work degree (Nash, 1993). It provides fertile ground upon which to base exploration of personal strengths, relational patterns and areas for future development. It raises challenges for the role of the educator in heightening awareness, naming issues, and places
a spotlight on the degree to which pastoral care and career advice are part of our role as educators. Such exploration can span issues of identity – ko au? – from the cultural to the experientially personal.

Such exploration of personal identity often forms the basis for the consideration of motivation to enter the social work profession. Anecdotal evidence and the pastoral care of students that arises within the role of educator suggest that, for many, there are strong links between personal and familial circumstances and the imperative towards social justice and healing that may determine choice of career. Whilst this drive may be no greater than for many people-oriented professions, it does suggest potential areas where a student may have both strengths and vulnerabilities, and where emotional shortcuts between their own histories and the issues facing clients may be forged. The rationale for employing tools with which to explore these issues in a classroom setting lies within the evidence that the articulation of connections between personal experience and theoretical constructs within a safe action-reflection process can work towards ‘stress inoculation’ and a reduction in the activation of personal triggers (Napier and Fook, 2000).

The major theoretical thrust of this article suggests that the responsibility of the organisational environment is of paramount importance in negotiating a social worker’s experience of extreme stress. This argument is, however, made within the context of a relational contract between person and environment, a partnership evidenced, for instance, within the current legislative framework of the Health and Safety in Employment Act (1992) and its 2002 amendments. To this end, one of the key issues for educators is the degree to which student interpersonal skills levels can be enhanced. The rationale for this is that worker exposure to interpersonal conflict, a person’s ability to perceive relational patterns and currents, and their ability to advocate positively within situations bearing multiple agendas, all provide a potential for resilience in the face of stress and critical incidents in the workplace. Occupational safety guidelines published by the Department of Labour pertinently suggest that people-focused occupations such as social work are intrinsically stressful occupations (www.osh.dol.govt.nz). As such, educators have a responsibility to focus skills education upon developing resourcefulness and resilience in interpersonal situations, such as in groups and in supervision.

In any partnership, the issue of ‘locus of control’ occurs, where those contributing to the relationship determine the level of perceived responsibility that they or others have for maximising learning, and for creating and resolving tensions. Backed by considerable research activity in the area of self-efficacy, learned helplessness and mindfulness, it is suggested that those with an internal locus of control have a more solid foundation for handling stressful situations and conflict, and have a more meaningful understanding of negotiation and the possibility of recovery (for instance, McCombs and Marzano, 1995). From an ecological perspective, there is a strong rationale for the power of the learning environment to enhance the development of internalised control, through the teaching of interpersonal skills and strategies.

Should, then, we select students? It is clear from the issues above that some people may be perceived to enter social work education with a more clearly identifiable set of skills and aptitudes than others, and for some, there is potentially a less comfortable ‘goodness of fit’ between the student and the profession. Field agencies and employers rightfully consider
that a key role of social work education is to engage in active selection of students, a factor currently influenced by the ‘fit and proper’ requirements of registration (SWRB, 2004). The issue is perhaps not of whether to select, but of when and how. Attrition rates within social work classes suggest that many students self-select, opting into other careers or deciding that social work study is not for them. Some schools pre-select, others have formal processes at set stages during the three or four years of the degree. Other selection processes are less formal, subsumed under pastoral care and career advice that from a strengths perspective, work with students to take charge of their own decision-making processes about professional suitability. From a professional development perspective, there appears to be wisdom in having named processes in which discussion of this ‘goodness of fit’ can occur, where students and staff can address issues of motivation, integration of past experience, and where issues of the management of environmental and personal stressors can be named.

**Table two.** Ontological action points.

- Ko au? Who am I? These existential questions need to be asked, as students traverse the formal curriculum of self and society. From an ecological perspective, they encompass both cultural and family identities, and exercises focusing upon this can facilitate a student’s location within their social work class and within society.
- Research and classroom activity that explores students’ initial motivation for social work practice: This can be introduced at the beginning of a social work degree and revisited for action and reflection at significant learning points such as placement preparation and review.
- Interpersonal skills development: There is a strong argument for the introduction of training in interpersonal skills right from the start of the degree, and for this to be contextualised through ‘naming’ the realities of social work practice. Such skills development need not happen solely in the laboratory setting, as group exercises and unplanned discussions and classroom conflict can be utilised as learning opportunities.
- Locus of control: Specific classroom strategies for naming and developing an internal locus of control can empower students to perceive themselves as active agents within social work environments.
- Student selection: ‘Signpost’ moments for selection during social work programmes can serve to name the issues raised in the above areas.

**Micro-level issues in the preparation of students for practice**

Microsystem elements of coping with stress and trauma in social work focus upon the immediate environments (the classroom and the agency) in which the student is placed. These include issues of orientation and induction; processes that work towards the development of professional identity and an understanding of social work roles and tasks; the experience of group and interpersonal dynamics; and the existence of processes that name and mitigate cumulative stress.

Knowing one’s way around the new environment is a key systemic contribution to understanding the nature of events and interactions. Welcomes and familiarisation processes are not rocket science and are entrenched in basic cultural civilities. Within social work degrees, however, the familiarisation does not stop at the introduction to papers, programmes and the campus; it needs to include elements of introduction to the nature of the social work profession. The rationale for orientation to both structural and systemic elements of the social work situation (buildings, teams, processes and concepts) comes clearly from the evidence that a significant proportion of occupational stress comes not from specific events but from
the environmental conditions that create ambiguities, tensions and conflict. Furthermore, these contextual pitfalls can undermine resilience in the event of critical incidents.

Further layers of student resilience can be laid down through the acculturation process of acquiring a social work identity. The supervision practice model of Brown and Bourne (1996) is suggested as a framework that can also be applied within the teaching environment, through the identification of separate areas of social work activity that through experience can be integrated into a cohesive whole. This process can be modelled by the regular use of practice examples within the classroom setting, providing ‘reality bytes’ of not only fields of practice contexts but also of current social work issues and tensions.

Brown and Bourne (1996) suggest that the development of professional identity is a developmental process that begins in separated domains and works towards the integration of knowledge through experience. Stress, crisis and trauma can severely distort the growth and maintenance of this integrated whole, by separating past from present and future, by distorting or severing relationships and sources of support, and by enforcing greater attention to ontological survival at the expense of connectivity. The existence of processes that name, respond to, and promote the resolution of, classroom conflict, can strengthen social work identity and the student skill base. Examples of this in the classroom setting are groupwork activities where conflict and discord are actively addressed and models of resolution are modelled (such as the Critical Reflection Training proposed by Fook, 2004); individual follow-up and pastoral support that models supervision processes; and paper-based learning within the curriculum concerning the effects of stress and trauma, couched within ecological constructions of strengths and resilience.

**Table three. Micro-level action points.**

- Orientation to social work realities can be manifested through generic teaching about social work identities but also through well-constructed orientation and supervision within agency settings. This can be a staged process throughout the years of the degree and is aimed at developing informed resilience.
- Critical reflection on critical incidents can be used as educational tools that capitalise upon the dynamics of group and individual flashpoints.
- Strengths and resilience content of curriculum is taught from an ecological perspective that recognises the interaction of person and environment.
- Curriculum audits for stress, crisis and trauma content are an indication of the ‘knowledge is power’ principle of strengthening resilience through the development of analytical and reflective practice.
- Individual supervision, follow-up and pastoral support model social work support processes in practice, through the introduction of processes of naming and appropriate response to challenges students may face.

**Meso-level issues in the preparation of students for practice**

Social work education is an applied field and as such is concerned with the acquisition of knowledge in one location and its transfer into practice settings. Intimately embedded in this process are the integration of the personal and the professional; theory and practice; and the relational flow of communication between those involved in the educational process. Meso-level issues are, therefore, of considerable importance in the preparation of students for
practice and are reflected in the relationships between elements of the curriculum, between schools and their institutions, and between schools and agencies.

Social work curricula manifestly vary from site to site, but possess commonalities that may include knowledge from practice, social policy, psychology and human development, sociology, te Ao Maori, economics and the law. How these diverse elements are staged and woven together relies not only on the programming of timetable and staffing, but on the relational aspects of communication, common awareness of degree goals, and on the existence of review and auditing mechanisms that create cohesiveness and consistency.

Students belong not only in schools of social work but within the wider educational institution. The integration of their learning and the development of resilience through self-advocacy and negotiation skills will be enhanced by strong meso-level links between school and support services such as library, learning support, disability services and health and counselling. An example of this may be as simple as the arranging of library orientation tours and database training, or the alerting of student counselling services if there are significant flashpoints within the curriculum or classroom.

Clearly, much of the emphasis in social work education is placed upon the transfer of theoretical knowledge into practice settings, through fieldwork placement. This can be enhanced through the early introduction of agency-based practitioners into the classroom, and by the development of an extensive portfolio of agencies in which fieldwork can occur. These elements are underpinned by the necessity of good working relationships between the schools and the agencies in their vicinity. Examples of these processes include: participation of agencies and supervisors in educational delivery, programme advisory groups and pre-placement workshops; educational opportunities for practitioners in the form of seminars, workshops and library access; and the maintenance of positive communication between schools and agencies whilst placements are occurring, through visits, reporting systems, and speedy problem resolution processes. All of these processes are aimed at systematically embedding resilience through connectivity and context.

Table four. Meso-level action points.

- Intra-school auditing of curriculum for flow and consistency.
- School-institution relationships that facilitate student uptake of support services.
- School-agency cooperation through the introduction of agency-based social workers into classroom settings to explore the realities of social work identity and roles.
- School-agency communication is developed and maintained prior to and during student fieldwork.

Exo-level issues in the preparation of students for practice

Exo-level factors play an indirect but very significant role in the ability of students to comprehend and respond to stress, trauma and critical incidents. The key to this is in the understanding that whilst the impact of stress may be individually experienced, its origin and resolution may occur in the collective characteristics of the wider environment. To this end, the inclusion of te Tiriti o Waitangi, social policy analysis and evaluation, organisational and management theory, research methods and the law can be justified as tools to
aid student sense-making. Just as colonisation processes can be espoused as explanations for the erosion of family and community resilience, organisational theory can assist student comprehension of organisational tensions and inter-agency relationships.

Structural factors are important, too, in the maintenance of student wellbeing in schools and agencies. Fieldwork processes already require police checks, for example, as a protective measure not only for clients but also for agencies, schools and the individual student. From a stress and trauma perspective, it can be argued that students have a right to know about legal liability issues, the existence of crisis and support services, and the availability of financial and other welfare support that will contribute to resilience.

Table five. Exo-level action points.

- Curriculum inclusion of ‘bigger picture’ subjects.
- Articulation of legal liability, financial and welfare support, including critical incident support.

Macro-level issues in the preparation of students for practice

The values and attitudes that surround social work education lie at the core of the experience of stress and trauma, as it is through the fundamental identity factors of culture, belief, attitudes and location that experience is processed. It is probably self-evident to state that our cultural location will have an intimate relationship with how we interpret and respond to environmental stressors. Gender roles and socialisation will interface with biology to produce a range of stress responses, as will the meaning-making processes of spiritual expression and formal religious tradition. Schools of social work largely address these well – after all, culture, gender and class have formed the (un)holy trinity of many social work debates over the history of social work.

In relation to stress and trauma, the focus shifts a notch to consider how these core identifiers assist or mask students’ abilities to prepare for practice. One key dimension is to question to what degree these factors facilitate an ecological ‘person in environment’ appreciation of stress and trauma. A recent educational experience illustrates this. In a lecture on frameworks of health, a government strategy document was cited that listed sexual orientation as a factor that determined health outcome (Ministry of Health, 2005). Students, initially interpreted this as a matter of infectious disease, i.e. HIV/Aids, a clear illustration of individualisation of causation. Class discussion regarding the impact of minority group status upon alcohol, tobacco and other drug use, stress through stigma and discrimination, and risk factors of self-harm and suicide, allowed for an expansion of understanding of the impact of macro-level factors into exo-, meso-, micro- and ontological levels.

Important, too, is the realisation that macro-level features are in turn impacted upon by other ecological levels. Application of trauma knowledge to explain how individual traumatic experience can create long-term and generational patterns of behaviour which can in turn be identified within the macro-level as attitudes to the child, to the use of violence, and the status of cultural knowledge and belief systems, is crucial to students’ awareness of social and cultural expressions of stress and trauma.
Table six. Macro-level action points.

- Curriculum content not only addresses macro-level factors but also applies these to stress and trauma knowledge throughout ecological levels.
- An ecological framework is employed to carry the transtheoretical knowledge that encourages a ‘person in environment’ awareness.

Conclusion

On a political and human rights level, an ecological framework is necessary to ensure that knowledge of stress, trauma and critical incidents assists students in preparation for practice. A heightened awareness of risk and response, whilst not able to predict or control the occurrence of incidents, may contribute competent appraisal, knowledge of systems and a strengthened level of resilience to a student’s future professional practice. Any teaching of stress and trauma knowledge, and any systems and structures set up to facilitate the processing of experience, must therefore make the person to environment connection, or risk the individualisation of experience. Research evidence suggests that we individualise the impact of stress and trauma at our peril.

References


