EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS IN FIELD EDUCATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW

Natasha Mariette [1] and Rita Dhungel Phd [2]

Abstract

Social workers work with clients who are distressed, have unmet needs, or have complicated psychosocial issues (substance abuse, homelessness, a health-care crisis, intimate partner violence, etc.). The purpose of this critical analysis is to critically evaluate what is known about social work students' experiences with violence in field education. This critical review synthesizes the existing literature on the experiences of violent social work students during their fieldwork. The study's objectives are to: 1) what sorts of violence do social work students encounter during field education? 2) what training and education are required to respond to violence experienced by social work students in field education? To achieve the goals of this review, we critically examined seven relevant works through a postmodern feminism lens. We identified three major themes: social work as a gendered profession, diverse types of violence in field education settings, and a lack of violence prevention and safety training. A critical study, such as participatory action research with social work students in field education, as well as community-based research with field educators and supervisors, is advised. Furthermore, social work students must receive occupational health and safety training so that they can prepare for and respond to violence in their field studies. This study verifies social work's classification as a gendered profession.

Keywords : Social Work, Violence, post modern feminism, participatory action research

1.1   Introduction

Western social work is a profession that began with roots in England in the 19th century during the industrial revolution (Pierson, 2022). Female (often religious) volunteers served those experiencing poverty (Pierson, 2022). According to Jennissen and colleagues (2011) social work in Canada can be traced to local citizens responding to the needs of the community, particularly European immigrants. With industrialization came changes to the family structure resulting in the creation of child support agencies such as the Society for the Protection of Women and Children in Toronto in 1881 (Jennissen et al., 2011). Social work originally was connected to charities and religious institutions (Jennissen et al., 2011). As social work evolved into an academic profession, social workers are now found in a variety of settings including health care, correctional facilities, child welfare, and community agencies (Canadian Association of Social Work [CASW], n.d.). According to CASW (n.d.), in 2018 there were approximately 52,823 social workers in Canada.

Social workers serve clients who are experiencing distress, unmet needs, and complex psychosocial concerns (substance use, homelessness, health care crisis, intimate partner violence, etc.) (Lee et al., 2021). Populations being served often view social workers as gatekeepers to services and benefits clients are trying to access (Lee et al., 2021) or as representatives of unwanted authorities instead of helpers (Choi & Choi, 2015; Spencer & Munch, 2003). Services are often provided outside of an office setting such as client homes, shelters, correctional facilities, or hospitals (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2022).

Social workers experience a higher rate of violence in the workplace than most other professions (Lee et al., 2021; NASW, 2022; Newhill, 1996). Social work is considered to be a gendered profession with the majority of social workers identifying as female (Jones et al., 2018; Norris, 1990; Zufferey, 2009). Social work is a profession made up of mostly females (Moylan & Wood, 2016). According to Statistics Canada (2022), in 2016 8,670 of social workers were male and 49,195 were female. There are no known statistics on LGBTQ2S+ social workers. The high rate of females in the social work profession makes violence against social workers, and social work students, not only a professional issue but a gendered one

1.   Doctoral student at the School of Social Work, University of the Fraser Valley, Canada
2.   Assistant Professor with the School of Social Work at the Faculty of Health Education and Community Studies,
      University of the Fraser Valley, Canada, email: rita.dhungel@ufv.ca

as well (Fawcett, 2023; Moylan & Wood, 2016). Females most often occupy front line social work positions while males are more often promoted to managerial positions where they are less exposed to direct or indirect violence (Zufferey, 2009). Research on social workers' experiences of violence, including types and prevalence, identify that violence is underreported (Kropf, 1993; Shier et al., 2021; Sicora et al., 2022). Underreporting can be due to fear of retaliation, normalizing experiences of violence, the socialization of the profession, or thinking the incident was not severe enough to report (Tully et al., 1993; Shier et al., 2021; Sicora et al., 2022; Tzafrir et al., 2015; Van Soest & Bryan, 1995).

Social work in Canada requires the completion of an accredited educational program (CASW, n.d.). There are 43 accredited social work programs in Canada offering bachelor, master's, and PhD level social work degrees (Canadian Association for Social Work Education [CASWE-ACFTS], n.d.). Students completing a bachelor of social work (BSW) program are required to complete a minimum of 700 field education practicum hours (CASWE, 2021). Students completing a Master of Social Work (MSW) program and who have completed the BSW are required to complete either a field education practicum or a thesis. MSW students without a BSW must complete a field education practicum of at least 450 hours (CASWE, 2021).

Field education is a core component of social work education in Canada (CASWE, 2021). It allows for students to integrate theory with practice in a supervised setting, developing skills crucial to the social work profession (CASWE, 2021). Completing the required field education is necessary for the completion of a social work education program. A failure in field education can delay or prevent graduation from a social work program (Tully et al., 1993). Little is known about social work students' experiences of violence within field education settings as well as ways in which social work students are prepared for the potential of violence within the profession (Tully et al., 1993). Therefore this review is conducted to bridge the gaps in scholarly activities and create knowledge by synthesizing existing literature on violence expereinced by social work students in field education. This critical review used the definition of violence offered by The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (2024). It is described as any act of abuse, threat, intimidation, harassment, or attack on another person, including physical, verbal, written, and sexual harassment and violence.

Research Question and Research Objectives

The purpose of this critical analysis is to critically evaluate what is known about social work students' experiences with violence in field education. This critical review synthesizes the existing literature on the experiences of violent social work students during their fieldwork.

The objectives of this review are as follows:

1) What types of violence do social work students experience during field education?

2) What training and education are needed to respond to violence expereinced by social work students in field education ?

The Hypothetical testing question is:

1) Is social work considered a gendered profession?

1.2   Research Methodology

To meet the objectives, a critical literature review was completed using Medline via EBSCOhost, Psycinfo, PubMed, Social Work Abstracts, CINAHL, and Google Scholar databases. An initial search was done to determine the most effective search terms to use. The final Boolean search terms used were (social work student OR social work education) AND (field OR internship OR practicum) AND (violence OR aggression OR hostility OR violent OR anger OR aggressive behavior). Due to the paucity of research on social work student experiences of violence no date or region limitations were used. The search resulted in 13,792 results. However, most search results were irrelevant, not referencing social work as a profession never mind social work students' experiences in field education. Two articles were deemed as meeting the search criteria but could not be retrieved. One result was eliminated as it was a conference presentation abstract. Six articles in full were retrieved. The reference lists of the six articles were reviewed to locate any additional relevant articles. Five additional articles were recognized as relevant to this literature review but only one could be retrieved. Using a thematic lens they artciles were analysed.We do not claim that this is a systematic review; rather, it is a critical analysis of the literature.

Theoretical Framework

This review analysed literature through a postmodern feminist lens. There are many types and definitions of feminism (third wave feminism, Black feminism, postfeminism, etc.) and feminism can mean different things to different people (Boyle, 2019; Fawcett, 2023). Postmodern feminism emerged in the late 20th century as a third wave feminism.It distinguishes itself by rejecting standard feminist ideals and embracing postmodern philosophy.Postmodern feminism rejects the idea of gender as a naturalized reality and instead views gender as a social construction (Fawcett, 2023). It dismisses an essentialist understanding of feminism and recognizes that the experiences of women vary depending on intersecting factors such as culture, spirituality, age, and nationality (Fawcett, 2023). Postmodern feminism was an important lens to apply to this review as social workers are not a

singular group. Individuals entering social work come from diverse backgrounds and have varying worldviews they bring to the profession).

1.3 Results

All seven of the resulting articles are based in the United States of America (USA) (Criss, 2013; Dunkel et al., 2000; Lee, 2005; Moylan & Wood, 2016; Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; Star, 1984; Tully et al., 1993). Five articles were research studies (Criss, 2013; Lee, 2005; Moylan & Wood, 2016; Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; while one was a literature review (Star, 1984) and one was a literature review resulting in a risk reduction model (Dunkel et al., 2000). The three findings from the seven resulting articles are arranged thematically, and they include: (a) social work as a gendered profession; (b) types of violence in field education settings; and (c) lack of education on violence prevention and safety.

1.3.1 Social Work as a Gendered Profession

Five of the seven articles resulting from this literature search completed research that included BSW and/or MSW field education students (Criss, 2010; Lee, 2005; Moylan & Wood, 2016; Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; Tully et al., 1993). Each of these studies identified a far larger percentage of female respondents than males. Criss (2013) had 88.2% female respondents and 11.4% male respondents. Lee (2005) had 83.4% female respondents and 16.6% male respondents. The study by Moylan and Wood (2016) included 90.6% female respondents. Reeser and Wertkin (2001) had 72% female respondents. Respondents for the study by Tully et al. (1993) were 57% female. These statistics confirm what is already known of the social work profession which is that the majority of social work students and professionals are female (Fawcett, 2023). The study conducted by Moylan and Wood (2016) was the only study that referred to LGBTQ2S+ populations, identifying LBGTQ2S+ (Moylan & Wood, 2016 refer to LGBT) populations experienced more sexist hostility than sexual harassment.

1.3.2 Types of Violence in Field Education Settings

The studies identified a lack of consistent understanding of what constitutes violence (Lee, 2005; Tully et al.1993). Howevere, seven articles identified that violence is experienced by BSW and MSW students within field education settings and they include bullying and harrassment, verbal abuse, , physical assaults, threats and damage to personal and professional property (Criss, 2010; Dunkel et al., 2000; Lee, 2005; Moylan & Wood, 2016; Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; Tully et al., 1993). One study reported social work students experienced bullying and harassment in field placement (Lee, 2005). Six articles identified verbal abuse was expereinced by social work students in field placement (Criss, 2013; Lee, 2005; Moyland & Wood, 2016; Reese & Wertkin, 2001; State,

1984; Tully et al., 1993) andone study reported sexual harassment was experienced by social work students in field education (Moylan & Wood, 2016). Similary, three studies reported that social work students experienced physical assaults (Criss, 2013; Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; Tully et al., 1993), and experienced of threats was reported by three studies (threat of lawsuit, threat of physical harm) (Lee, 2005; Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; Tully et al., 1993). One study reported that social work studenets furt damage to personal and professional property (Criss, 2013).

1.3.3 Lack of Education on violence prevention and safety

The seven resulting articles identified that safety training, such as how to recognize triggers, violence prevention, and how to respond to violence, was not an integral part of their social work education (Criss, 2013; Dunket et al., 2000; Lee, 2005; Moyland & Wood, 2016; Reese & Wertkin, 2001; Star, 1984; Tully et al., 1993). Violence in field education can affect a student's ability to complete their studies (Dunkel et al., 2000; Lee, 2005; Moylan & Wood, 2016; Star, 1984; Reeser & Wertkin, 2001). Three studies reported that inadequately preparing students prior to field education and prior to entering the field of social work can affect sustainability in the profession of social work (Dunkel et al., 2000; Moylan & Wood, 2016; Tully et al., 1993). Three studies identified that underreporting of incidents are common in the field of social work as well as within field education (Dunkel et al., 2000; Lee, 2005; Moylan & Wood, 2016). Underreporting can be caused by fear of how one will be perceived by peers and by their supervisor (Dunkel et al., 2000; Moylan & Wood, 2016; Tully et al, 1993), resistance to perceiving themselves as victims (Dunkel et al., 2000), and the modelling of working social workers. If a students' field supervisor does not report or respond to violence incidents, the student is then socialized to accept this as a requirement of the profession (Dunkel et al., 2000; Moylan & Wood, 2016). Dunkel and colleagues (2000) recommend a risk reduction model for social work education programs which involves the development of school policy and procedures, classroom instruction for students, training for field work instructors, and field faculty consultation to agencies to understand the agency safety programs. All seven literature identified that the common theme is for specialized content be included in social work curriculum (Criss, 2013; Dunkel et al., 2000; Lee, 2005; Moylan & Wood, 2016; Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; Star, 1984; Tully et al., 1993).

1.3.4 Implications

Violence in the workplace is increasing. Experiences of violence can lead to anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kagan, 2021; NASW, n.d.; Sicora et al., 2022). The seven studies identified by this review

illustrated the dearth of research in this area. There is a lack of research on student social workers' experiences of violence in field education but more than that, there is a lack of diverse voices. There is a lack of data on LGBTQ2S+ populations, Indigenous perspectives, and how racism and discrimination contribute to this issue. An intersectional feminist approach to research is needed in order to investigate social work students' experiences of violence in field education settings, as well as the ways in which these students are prepared (Criss, 2010; Moylan & Wood, 2016). Students need practical skills for preventing and responding to violence within the social work profession (Moylan & Wood, 2016; Star, 1984). Only 12% of programs had formal written policies on student safety (Reeser & Wertkin, 2001). Therefore, "Research must be pursued to provide the basis for the development of professional social work education curricula and agency training programs to address the issue from preventive and remedial perspectives" (Newhill, 1995, p.6).The implications and recommendations of this literature review are best summarized by Tully et al. (1993):

Much more research needs to be conducted in this field if we as social work educators are to face the issue of violence in the field. To date, no studies have demonstrated what has been done to combat the increase in violence in the field. Sadly, this fact may reflect that little or nothing currently is being done either in social work agencies or in schools of social work to confront violence (p.198).

This quote from Tully et al. is from 1993 and yet the state of research on students' experiences of violence in field education remains almost non-existent. Violence in the social work field is not going away (Criss, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to carry out a participatory action research study with social work students who are in field placement in order to critically understand the violence that they encounter during their field education and to inform occupational policies and programs that address the violence experienced by social work students. Understanding how frequently violence is experienced by social work field education students, as well as the most typical situations in which it occurs and how it affects their mental and psychological wellbeing is also important. It is further advised to do a community-based study with field educators to find out how they handle the violence that social work students encounter while completing their field education.

The social work profession experiences on going incidents of violence. Therefore, it is imperative that social work students are prepared (Tully et al., 1993). Conflict management and safety skills are an integral part of preventing violence. However, not all acts of violence are predictable or avoidable. If not properly prepared or supported, violence in field education settings can negatively affect a student's ability to complete the program or willingness to enter the social work field. Social work education problems need to implement formal methods of tracking violence in field education as well as integrate safety training into social work education curriculum. This includes de-escalation techniques, crisis intervention, conflict management, violence prevention, and debriefing and reporting strategies.

1.4   Conclusion/Discussion

Violence towards social workers is an ongoing issue that continues to be under researched. The scant literature available on student social workers' experiences of violence sillustrates there is little to no inclusion of safety and violence prevention and responses to violence in social work education curriculums. "Looking inward to the experiences of new student social workers in field settings is critical to ensuring safety and workplace satisfaction in the profession in the future" (Moyland & Wood, 2016, p.416). Social work education is meant to prepare students to enter a career in social work. Neglecting to include safety training and violence prevention within social work curriculum sends students into field education, and into social work as a profession, without key skills.

Feminism cannot be and should not be a women-only movement (Hooks, 2015).

"...all of us, women and men, have been socialized from birth to accept sexist thought and action" (hooks, 2015, xii). Students studying social work are indoctrinated to believe that violence against women is normal in the field, just as society has come to tolerate it. Violence against social workers is accepted when it is accompanied with violence against women. Allowing this educational gap in social work to persist means that social workers will continue to be indoctrinated to expect and tolerate violence.This critical review confirmed that social work is considered a gendered profession (Criss, 2010; Lee, 2005; Moylan & Wood, 2016; Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; Tully et al., 1993).

References

Canadian Association for Social Work Education. (n.d.). About Us.

https://caswe-acfts.ca/about-us/

Canadian Association for Social Work Education. (2021). CASWE-ACFTS Educational

Policies and Accreditation Standards.

https://caswe-acfts.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/EPAS-2021-1.pdf

Canadian Association of Social Workers. (n.d.). What is Social Work?

https://www.casw-acts.ca/en/what-social-work

Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety (2024). Violence and harassment in workplace. https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/violence/violence.html#section-1-hdr

Criss, P. (2010). Effects of Client Violence on Social Work Students: A National Study.

Journal of Social Work Education, 46(3), 371–390.

https://doi-org.proxy.ufv.ca:2443/10.5175/JSWE.2010.200900038

Didham, S., Dromgole, L., Csiernik, R., Karley, M. L., & Hurley, D. (2011). Trauma

exposure and the social work practicum. Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 31(5),

523-537. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2011.615261

DiGiulio, J. F. (2001). The power of collaboration: Developing a safety training program for

student interns. The Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work, 7(1), 69-77.

https://doi.org/10.18084/1084-7219.7.1.69

hooks, b., & Taylor & Francis eBooks EBA. (2015;2014;). Feminism is for everybody:

Passionate politics ([Second].;2;New; ed.). Routledge.

https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743189

Jennissen, T., Lundy, C., Coherent Digital (Firm), & Canadian Electronic Library (Firm).

(2011;2010;). One hundred years of social work: A history of the profession in

english canada 1900-2000 (1st ed.). Ottawa, Canada.

Jones, M., Mlcek, S. H. E., Healy, J. P., & Bridges, D. (2019). Gender dynamics in social

work practice and education: A critical literature review. Australian Social Work,

72(1),   62-74.   https://doi.org/10.1080/031240 7X.2018.1524919

Kropf, N., Price, J. & Tully, C. (1993). Is Field a Hard Hat Area? A Study of Violence in

Field Placements. Journal of Social Work Education, 29, 191–199.

Lee, S. V. (2009). A Descriptive Study on the Prevalence of Field Placement Bullying of

Graduate and Undergraduate Social Work Students.

Moylan, C. A., & Wood, L. (2016). Sexual Harassment in Social Work Field

Placements: Prevalence and Characteristics. Affilia, 31(4), 405-417.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109916644643

National Association of Social Work. (2022). Issue Brief: Protecting Social Workers and

Health Professionals form Workplace Violence Act (S.4412/H.R. 8492).

https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=KC9ZuSiXjkk%3d&portali

d=0

Newhill, C. E. (1995). Client violence towards social workers: A practice and policy concern

for the 1990's. Social Work, 40, 631-636.

Newhill, C. E. (1996). Prevalence and risk factors for client violence towards social workers.

Families in Society, 77(8), 488-495.

Pierson, J. H. (2022;2021;). A new history of social work: Values and practice in the struggle

for social justice (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429024276

Reeser, L. C., &Wertkin, R. A. (2001). Safety training in social work education: A national

survey. Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 21(1-2), 95-113.

https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v21n01_07

Shier, M. L., Turpin, A., Nicholas, D. B., & Graham, J. R. (2021). Social service worker

experiences with direct and indirect violence when engaged with service users. The

British Journal of Social Work, 51(4), 1238-1258.

https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab035

Sicora, A., Nothdurfter, U., Rosina, B., &Sanfelici, M. (2022). Service user violence against

social workers in Italy: Prevalence and characteristics of the phenomenon. Journal of

Social Work, 22(1), 255–274.

https://doi-org.proxy.ufv.ca:2443/10.1177/146801732110 09188

Spencer P.C, & Munch S. (2003). Client violence toward social workers: the role of

management in community mental health programs. Social Work, 48(4), 532–544.

https://doi-org.proxy.ufv.ca:2443/10.1093/sw/48.4.532

Star, B. (1984). Patient Violence/Therapist safety. Social

Work (New York), 29(3), 225-230.

https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/29.3.225

Statistics Canada. (2022). Women working in paid care occupations.

https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2022001/article/00001-eng.htm

Tully, C. C., Kropf, N. P. & Price, J. L. (1993). Is field a hard hat area? A study of

violence in field placements. Journal of Social Work Education, 29, 191-199.

Tzafrir, S. S., Enosh, G., & Gur, A. (2015). Client aggression and the disenchantment

process among israeli social workers: Realizing the gap. Qualitative Social Work :

QSW : Research and Practice, 14(1), 65-85.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325013509827

Vilceanu, R. (2018). MSW students' knowledge, skill, and the application of de-escalating

techniques to reduce violent situations in the work-place.

Zufferey, C. (2009). Making gender visible: Social work responses to homelessness. Affilia,

24(4),   382-393.   https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109909343559