WORKING WITH VICTIMS: BEING EMPATHIC HELPERS.
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•ABSTRACT: Responding to victims empathically requires integrating two apparently opposite realities: seeing the victimized person as vulnerable and innocent while recognizing that person as influential and culpable. When this integration is too painful, helper disidentifies from and project on the victim, becoming either Disaffected Other or Emphatic Sympathiser and further contributing to the client's victimization. To be Empathic Helper we need supportive communities in which we explore our painful feelings around vulnerability and culpability so that we can maintain our identification with our victimized clients and lead them to a full understanding of themselves and their experience.

The majority of clients with whom we work as social workers are in one sense or another "victims". Some of these persons are easily identified as victims facing an acute crisis as a result of some emergency, a crime, or politically-inspired oppression. Others, however, who may be striving to cope with long-term deprivation, may not be as easily identified as victims, and may in fact resent being referred to as victims. In part, this resentment may be due to a common tendency in society either to blame or to overprotect the victim, a tendency which obscures - both the complexity of the person's situation and the richness of her or his full personhood. However, if we separate for the moment social attitudes towards victims from the definition of a "victim" one who is subject to deprivation, unnecessary suffering, or oppression-then we are more likely to reach agreement that most of our clients are indeed victims of biological, psychological, and social forces.

Not only our clients are victims; too often, we social workers have been victimized ourselves. What has been found true for clinical and counseling psychologists

(Pope and Feldman-Summers, 1992), that a large proportion have themselves been subject to some form of abuse, is probably also the case for social workers. Therefore, since we are often the crucial Link between our clients and the larger society, we need to have worked through some of our own painful issues towards victims and victimization before trying to help our clients. Otherwise, we may find ourselves-despite all of our good and even noble intentions functioning as unwitting agents in further victimizing our clients, the very people we intend to help.

Thus, we are interested in how helpers respond to victims. Working closely with victims universally and inevitably arouses feelings of helplessness, guilt and responsibility within us. This is true not only for social workers but also for others who work with victims. Fullerton, McCarroll and Wright (1992), for example, studied the responses of fire fighters following the performance of rescue work and found identification with the victims, feelings of helplessness and guilt, and fear of the unknown among the typical responses. Our response to the arousal of such painful feelings will determine our ability to work effectively with clients. Workers who are able to accept and contain their own painful feelings without denying or suppressing them become "Empathic Helpers," able to identify intimately with the emotions that the victim is experiencing and able to maintain a clear sense of self while reacting empathically to their clients' sense of vulnerability, guilt, and rage. However, not all workers are able to maintain a strong sense of self while identifying with the victim's pain, for this identification arouses the helper's own counter transference issues and a helper who has not worked through these issues is Likely to become frightened or overwhelmed in the presence of the victim's intense emotions. As Catherall (1991) states, only workers who have acknowledged and accepted all sides of themselves are capable of acknowledging and accepting all sides of the victim/client.

Helpers who have not worked through their own sense of helplessness, guilt, and rage are likely to disidentify and project these feelings in an attempt to defend themselves against the pain that has been aroused within them. These workers become either "Disaffected Others" or "Emphatic Sympathizers" as they create a psychological distance between themselves and the victim, a distance, which limits their identification with the victim and emphasizes the differences between themselves and their clients. Such workers continue to deliver services to their clients, but they have lost the empathy or the full and healthy identification that forms the healing connection between the social worker and the client. Although counter transference issues specific to working with victims have been discussed in the context of specific forms of victimization (McElroy and McElroy, 1991), we

believe that working with any and all victims raises some basic counter transference issues that are common to all of us through our own experiences of victimization.

In this article, after describing Empathic Helpers, Disaffected Others, and Emphatic Sympathizers, we examine the different psychological processes that a worker undergoes to become one of these three types of respondents to victims. (Each of us is likely to be all of these types at one point or another, while some of us are more likely to be Empathic Helpers, and others more likely to be Disaffected Others or Emphatic Sympathizers.) Also, we discuss the questions around our vulnerability, innocence, influence and culpability that are raised by victimization. Finally, we offer suggestions as to how workers can prevent the processes that lead them to become Disaffected Others or Emphatic. Sympathizers so that they may maintain a healthy identification with the victim and become most often the Empathic Helpers that they intended to be when they entered the social work profession.

An Empathic Helper is a helper who "meets" a victim squarely and authentically, who stays with the intense feelings of the victim, whatever they may be, without needing to stop or to alleviate these feelings prematurely, and who enables the victim to grapple with and come to terns with all the influences that are creating these intense (sometimes repressed) feelings.

A Disaffected Other is a helper who, after an initial period of caring and sympathy for the victim, begins to regard this victim with aversion. Many public welfare Workers who begin their careers with idealism and optimism become hardened and bitter under the onslaught of poor working conditions, intense feelings, and a sense of failure as they realize how little they can do in the face of the overwhelming problems that the clients must deal with on a daily basis. Social workers are not by any means the only group of people who become Disaffected Others. Many teachers in inner city schools become exasperated with their students after putting great effort into their teaching and being met with hostility or indifference. Ordinary citizens may become Disaffected Others in respect to rioters in the ghettos or unionists on strike. Often, these Disaffected Others initially felt some concern about such rioters or strikers, but the violence or inconvenience associated with their causes frequently has made these citizens feel uneasy or angry and so they have separated themselves from the "trouble makers" and become Disaffected Others. Disaffected Others are often perceived as "jaded" or incompassionate people who either ignore the victims' plight or blame the victims for their problems.

An Emphatic Sympathizer is a helper who, like an overprotective parent, takes up the cause of the victim and makes it his or her own. By becoming overly involved in "the cause", the Emphatic Sympathizer often neglects or obscures the individuality of the victim and the uniqueness of his or her experience. By stressing the power of the social situation and minimizing the humanity of the victim, the Emphatic Sympathizer often makes of the victim just one more example to support the validity of the sympathizer's crusade. In contrast to the Disaffected Other, who believes that the victim is importantly responsible for his or her situation, the Emphatic Sympathizer sees the victim as mostly victim, a vulnerable person pretty much devoid of responsibility or agency in his or her life. Many advocates for victims like the mentally ill or the physically disabled become Emphatic Sympathizers by speaking for the victims rather than helping these persons to find and express their own power.

We believe that the process involved in determining which of these three classes of response will become dominant is a rather simple one. It consists of three basic steps: First, the helper identifies with the victim. Second, the helper must then deal with the feelings that are aroused by this identification, feelings that are powerful and painful. Third, the helper either manages to contain these painful feelings while maintaining an identification and becomes an Empathic Helper, or the helper becomes overwhelmed by his or her feelings, disidentifies with the victim, and protects upon the victim in order to divest self of unwelcome, stirred-up feelings. As a result of this disidentification and protection, the helper-who entered the relationship with the conscious intention of being an Empathic Helper-becomes either a Disaffected Other or an Emphatic Sympathizer.

It is important to note that the first two steps of the process are the same for all workers and that the third step of the process reflects the helper's reaction to his or her own intrapsychic pain not a rational decision to stay with or leave the victim. At this point in the process, the helper's own pain overshadows his or her relationship with the victim and, for the helper, the fate of the client becomes secondary to his or her own struggle to survive this pain. For those who intend to work in the helping professions, the ability to manage one's own pain and anger in the face of the client's victimization seems particularly important since studies have indicated that social workers are highly vulnerable to burnout (Daley, 1979; Freucienberger, 1977; Himle and Lavaratne, 1990). We believe that much of the affect associated with burnout-boredom, detachment decline in motivation, and apathy (Chemiss, 1978)-is the result of the workers' attempts to protect themselves from the pain that they have experienced after their initial

identification with the victim. Although some workers may habitually disidentify and protect onto clients, all workers are susceptible to the pressure to do so when working wlth a case that feels especially painful

At this point, we ask ourselves, what in particular causes the psychological distress that leads workers to disidentify with victims? We believe that fundamental questions about control, vulnerability and blame are at the heart of the matter. The fact that questions about these issues are universally raised by victims is well documented in the literature (see, for example, Finkelhor and Browne, 1985; Lanoff-Bulman and Frieze, 1983; Miller and Porter, 1983; Seagull and Seagull, 1991). A common theme in these writings is how victimization forces the victim into an awareness of his or her vulnerability in the world. This raises intense and intolerable feelings of helplessness, which victims often at-tempt to dispel through self-blame. Such self-blame gives victims back a sense of control, which inevitably is accompanied by feelings of guilt and doubts about their innocence. As workers we, too, become aware both of our own and of our clients' lack of complete control over the events in our lives, and such an awareness raises strong and difficult feelings of helplessness within us. We often try to rid ourselves of this sense of helplessness through either blaming the victim or attempting to seize control of the situation, attempts which may alleviate our psychological distress but which intensify the distress of the victim.

In our capacity as social workers and as people concerned with living our own lives, we are continually confronted with questions about our power and responsibility, questions whose importance is critically heightened when we identify with our victimized clients. First, we ask to what extent do we experience our lives as subject to powerful forces impinging upon us beyond our control and to what extent are we agents of our lives. The answer to this question speaks to our being both vulnerable and influential in each encounter that we live. Second, we ask about our responsibility, our accountability to ourselves and to others, for the actions we take in the making of our lives. The answer to this question informs our innocence and our culpability in the episodes that go to make up our lives. Thus, we see here a dialectic of vulnerability and innocence, on the one hand, and influence and culpability, on the other. In every event that constitutes our living, we are to varying degrees simultaneously vulnerable. innocent, influential, and culpable. As best we can, we construct our lives to maximize our innocence and influence while minimizing our vulnerability and culpability. Yet every event and every decision in our lives and in our work in some way forces us to consider anew the possibility and the reality that exercising our influence opens the door to being culpable of doing harm. Similarly, when we recognize our

innocence in the unfolding of an event or the making of a decision, we must also acknowledge our own vulnerability.

Victimization, whether our own or that of others with whom we identify, heightens our awareness of our participation in this dialectical process. Victimization makes us intensely aware of our vulnerability and causes us to question our innocence so that our simple view of ourselves as both influential and innocent is destroyed. Did we, for instance, place ourselves in jeopardy by the actions we took? If we did, then our influence is related to our vulnerability, and we are culpable in some degree, no longer so completely innocent. Our sense of balance has been shattered. We may try to re-assert our innocence but have nagging doubts about the amount and type of influence we have exerted, and our guilty feelings may be a consequence of such doubts.

In the many moments that constitute our lives, we experience varying degrees of influence, vulnerability, culpability and innocence. In those moments when our influence is minimal, we are exceptionally vulnerable and innocent. In other moments w hen our influence is great we also risk a high degree of culpability. The process of victimization is complex and often constitutes multiple moments of our lives, sometimes ranging from long before the victimizing act to many years after the act. The degree of influence, vulnerability, culpability and innocence in the victimized persons may vary greatly during this time. Dealing with and recovering from victimization requires a new understanding of being in the world, an understanding that incorporates, over time, each and every aspect of the dialectic: vulnerability, innocence, influence, and culpability.

Another way of seeing this dialectic is that we need to be open to being affected from our own depths and from others in our world; and we need also to do something with what is affecting us. We are both instruments (of our unconscious and of others) and agents in the unfolding of our lives. Both are necessary for us to realize our nature in communion with others. Without being open to being affected by such forces, we become dissociated within ourselves and isolated from others. Without being agents, we become only empty tools of unconscious and social forces. No person lives without openness and without some form of executive Powers.

This dialectic, this tension between vulnerability and innocence on the one hand and influence and culpability on the other, and our ability to experience it in its entirety, significantly affects our capacity to identify with victims in our work. Persons who are being victimized alternately experience themselves in different

places within this dialectic, as for example, the battered woman who portrays herself overtly as innocent and vulnerable and yet also feels guilty and as if she is responsible for doing something wrong. Our responsibility in working with her is to see in some realistic fashion both her innocence and her culpability, her vulnerability and her influence in her relations with her partner. When we see one side without the other, we are very likely acting either as a Disaffected Other or an Emphatic Sympathizer, and, therefore, failing to meet the victim in her entirety as a person.

Although our responsibility, as helpers is to experience the full complexity of the victim's painful situation, it is often difficult to remain conscious of the fact that the battered woman who appears before us has been influential and culpable as well as vulnerable and innocent in her relationship with her batterer. In the presence of her suffering, our own painful feelings will be aroused and unless we have learned to tolerate the ambivalence of being both vulnerable and influential and innocent and culpable in relation to our own experiences of victimization, then we will not be able to remain with the victim in her highly conflictual state. To fully identify with her, we need to recognize and accept her feelings of helplessness, aggression, innocence, and guilt. However, unless we have already come to with these feelings within ourselves, we will be unable to identify ,\'ith the victim and will project by placing an exaggerated importance onto some of her feelings while minimizing the existence of other feelings.

Aside from the internal pressure that workers feel to deny painful feelings and to disidentify with the victim, there is also a societal pres- sure to disidentify with or to distance ourselves from the victim. Because victims are often seen as the weak or vulnerable members of our society, those who work with victims are in danger of being fused with them in the eyes of the public and becoming discredited, less influential members of society. Public welfare workers, political activists, and community organizers often experience a loss of social status because they have a close association with the poor or oppressed members of society. In an attempt to maintain their status while working with victims, many workers create a distance between themselves and the victims by becoming a Disaffected Other and treating the victims with disdain or by becoming an Emphatic Sympathizer and treating the victims with pity. (Professionalism may be a cover for these positions. Whether a worker becomes an Emphatic Sympathizer or a Disaffected Other depends on how the worker sees himself or herself in relation to the larger society as well as on how the worker deals with the vulnerable/innocent-influential/culpable dialectic within himself or herself.

Our analysis thus far enables us to specify how the projections of the Disaffected Other and t}:e Emphatic Sympathizer are latched onto the client/victim; what the projections do for the helper with respect to her or his inner life and what the projections do for the helper in respect to the larger world, the projections differ for the Disaffected Other and the Emphatic Sympathizer, we take up each separately in its turn.

With respect to the victim, the Disaffected Other projects by: 1) emphasizing the culpability of the victim, focusing on whatever influence the victim has exerted in the episode connected with the victimization; and 2) obscuring the innocence of the victim by directing attention away from the vulnerability of that person. Thus, the Disaffected Other follows patterns familiarly known as "blaming the victim" Ryan, 1976), Consider the following:
- •Of the rape victim: She "asked for it" by dressing sexily, being in that place. drinking too much, etc.
  Of Anita Hill: She must be lying about being sexually harassed by Clarence Thomas because she called upon him for influence at a later time.
  Of the battered wife: She stays with him despite his beating her.
  Of the public welfare client: What is he doing with color TV?

In these and similar instances, the Disaffected Other attends to influential components of the victim's behavior which are not intrinsically related to what has brought about the victimization.

What does such projection upon the victim do for the Disaffected Other? On the one hand, it bolsters his or her sense of influence in the events of life without accompanying guilt. Unlike the victim, the helper can believe that he or she controls what happens to him or her. On the other hand, the Disaffected Other avoids the feelings of vulnerability and helplessness that have been aroused by contact with the victim. {Sometimes the helplessness is aroused via the projective identifications of the victim, sometimes merely by the normal identification of the worker with the client.) By directing attention away from the vulnerability of the victim, the Disaffected Other also relieves self of the feelings associated with vulnerability.

With respect to the larger world, the Disaffected Other fuses with social forces and social norms that suggest we are in control of our lives and our destiny and that diminish our attention to our common need for depending on others in our human vulnerability. The distortion of the dialectic of vulnerable/innocent

influential/culpable is manifested in all three of these domains: the victim is considered to be more influential and culpable than he or she in fact merits; the Disaffected Other is in control and invulnerable; and the larger world can rely upon the resources of individuals without having to provide for our needs in our neediness.

For the Emphatic Sympathizer the projection functions differently. With respect to the victim, the Emphatic Sympathizer underscores the vulnerability and exaggerates the innocence of the victim. This is the overprotectiveness of the helper with his or her client. The Emphatic Sympathizer stands between the victim and the victimizer as well as the larger world, proclaiming to the victim that he or she is entirely innocent and that the forces, which victimize him or her are entirely culpable. At the same time, the Emphatic Sympathizer obscures the culpability of the victim by directing attention away from the influential exertions of the victim in the circumstances that went awry.

Emphatic Sympathizers tend to see themselves as victims of the sexism, racism, or political oppression of the dominant culture, They feel impotent and angry in the face of powerful forces which, they believe, they must try to change despite feeling weak. To counteract this sense of helplessness, they become professional helpers, establishing relationships with their clients in which they feel an exaggerated sense of influence without guilt. They become the "rescuers" of helpless victims, feeling capable and powerful as they fix other people's lives. However, in order to feel this exaggerated sense of influence, they project their own sense of vulnerability onto the victim so that within the helping relationship, the client contains all the vulnerability and the worker contains all the influence.

Oftentimes, the client colludes with the worker to create and maintain the unequal relationship because the client, too, is initially more comfortable in seeing himself or herself as completely innocent and is willing to relinquish a sense of influence in order to be seen as the 'all good" victim. So long as the client colludes with the Emphatic Sympathizer, the client is trapped in a helpless, victimized role. The worker, who has the power, may seem to be using this power in a magnanimous way, but the client remains a passive, ineffective person, whose life's circumstances are dependent on the influence of others. This relationship also perpetuates the Emphatic Sympathizer's victimization in the larger society, since the distorted sense of power that the worker receives from this client-worker relationship helps the worker to avoid his or her own sense of frustration in relation to the larger society.

Concomitantly, Emphatic Sympathizers tend to exaggerate the influence and especially the culpability of social forces and social norms. Steele (1990) has shower how leaders of the African-American community have acted as Emphatic Sympathizers by focusing on the racism of the larger society to justify all limitations exhibited by African-Americans. This focus on society's racism frees them from the risks of effort and influence such as exerting themselves in school or applying for challenging lobs with the possibility of failing. Innocence is power, he claims, and has been used too much in recent years to the detriment of the community. Although we agree with Steele that civil rights leaders in recent years have tended to be what we call Emphatic Sympathizers, we do not subscribe to his implied individualism. Those who focus solely on what the isolated Individual can do exaggerate the influential/culpable aspect of the dialectic, thereby becoming Disaffected Others. At the same time, that they are indicting the larger society in its culpability vis-a-vis victims. Emphatic Sympathizers are separating themselves from such inhumanity-which gives a tone of righteous indignation to their efforts. We can suspect that they are projecting some of their own guilt onto the larger society, which may be why they so often alienate those whom they wish to mobilize to their cause.

Because projection is the key process that limits Disaffected Others and Emphatic Svmpathizers from becoming Empathic Helpers, it is vitally important for us to learn how to lessen the compulsion to project our uncomfortable feelings, which are aroused in the face of victimization and to learn how to undo those projections, which we may have already placed upon the victim. Considerable attention has been paid to the description and diagnosis of the projecting activities of clients (see, for example, Kernberg, 1987; Meissner, 1986; Ogden, 1979), and the same guidelines commonly associated with working with clients' projections can be drawn Upon when working with our own projections,

The first thing to remember is that people project when they find it too difficult to entertain certain thoughts or feelings such as helplessness, fury or intense guilt in their conscious awareness. Two suggestions come forward when we address this fact, One, placing a heavier load on the worker by challenging him or demanding more from her will act to promote or solidify rather than to prevent or undo a projection. Projection comes from "too much already" and does not give way to more being called for, Two, that which is unbearable for the individual alone is often made more tolerable when shared or felt in safe communion with others. Some kind of holding environment is important for the prevention or reversal of projecting processes. Adequate support for intense experiences is critical, especially when victimization is the focus of attention.

In order to maintain an empathic identification with the victim, we social workers need our own supportive communities or holding environments in which we can freely express and work through feelings of helplessness and rage without fear of being reprimanded or rejected. We need communities which will encourage us to explore the compulsion to blame or to overprotect the victim and which will ultimately help us to re-experience in a reparative way our own painful experiences of victimization, experiences which make it difficult for us to accept ourselves as vulnerable, innocent, influential and culpable beings in the world Instead of reacting to a worker's projections with rational arguments, moralistic imperatives, anger or emotional withdrawal, members of this community can maintain supportive contact with the worker while enabling the worker to talk about the experience that the worker is using as a ground for his or her projection. Because projections are always based on something real, the worker may need to re-experience the painful emotions associated with this experience. However, this time, within the supportive environment, the worker may allow himself or herself to let go of defenses, have the full experience of pain, and learn that both the self and others can survive periods of suffering. By consciously experiencing the pain of victlmization, the worker is relieving the self of the need to deny the pain or to disidentify and project it onto the client when these difficult feelings are aroused in response to the client's story. A worker who feels supported and accepted and who knows he or she can survive trying emotional experiences is less likely to become overwhelmed while identifying with a client and, therefore, less likely to become either a Disaffected Other or Emphatic Sympathizer.

This supportive community may function not only to comfort but also to challenge, in a loving way, a worker's distorted view of the vulnerable /innocent-influential/culpable dialectic in respect to both the self and clients. Because we are constantly tempted to respond to the events of our everyday lives and our interactions with victims by exaggerating some aspects of the dialectic and because our ability to be Empathic Helpers rests on our ability to maintain a balanced view of this dialectic, it is important that such supportive communities be an ongoing, integral part of social work practice and not just a springboard for the novice worker.

Just as we ask the victims with whom we work to examine how they may have in some w ay contributed to their situation, we must ask: ourselves how we may have colluded with our agencies or with the larger society in creating the isolating, non-supportive environments in which so many of us work. Before we can work effectively with victims, we need to address our own experiences-both past and

present-of victimization and to use our influence to mobilize those resources within ourselves, our agencies and society which can aid in the creation of supportive communities for social workers.

Reowning our projections and consciously acknowledging our dissatisfaction with the non-supportive environments in which we live and work is a crucial first step in creating a community of Empathic Helpers. Once we are no longer preoccupied with blaming or overprotecting others in an attempt w avoid our own painful realities, we are no longer encumbered with distorted realities and are free to establish authentic, grounded relationships with others. If we can remain grounded while in an unpleasant reality, then others who share our dissatisfaction can loin us, and together we can exert our collective influence to create more humane relationships with one another in our workplaces and in our communities.

We are all, at times, victims; none of us can escape this fate. However, we are not only victims, Our work, as social workers, is to accept the inevitability of some victimization in the world along with the pain associated with such victimization, while encouraging ourselves and others to examine our experiences for clues as to how we may have contributed to our victimization. Until we can be with ourselves in our pain, we cannot be with others in their pain. However, none of us can handle our suffering alone. We sometimes need others to empathize and to contain some of our pain until we are ready to integrate these powerful feelings into our awareness. Empathic Helpers need a community of other Empathic Helpers; without this supportive base, it is too easy for workers to become isolated and overwhelmed and to disidentify and project in an attempt to protect themselves from these feelings. Although these projections may temporarily relieve the Disaffected Other or Emphatic Sympathizer from feelings of helplessness and rage, they do so at the expense of the client, the worker, and the society at large. These projections function both to victimize the client again, this time in relation to the worker, and to perpetuate the victimization of the worker in relation to the larger society. And as long as the client and the worker deny either their influence or their vulnerability, they cannot realistically assess their innocence or culpability and, therefore, cannot successfully challenge a society that victimizes others.