

Volume 8, n 1, 2020

Clinical Psychology

Working with children who are victims of abuse: emotions and representations of professionals in residential children's communities

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Abstract

Professionals who work in residential children's communities face many difficulties and, when the hosted children have a history of abuse and maltreatment, the risk of vicarious traumatization and professional burn-out, which has a negative effect on the professional's work and well-being as well as on the effectiveness at work, is very high.

This qualitative study aims to explore, via the content analysis of text recorded in some Photolangage® groups, the representations of social workers and educators in residential children's communities on the theme of work management of physical and sexual abuse victims. The participants were 37 social workers from 6 residential communities for 0-6 years old child in the region of Palermo (Italy).

The analysis of the discourse revealed four main themes: "emotional responses", "difficulty in coping with emotions related to abuse", "relationship with the institutional network" and "work methods/strategies", which seem to guide and inform the social workers in our daily relationship with children. These results, which are in line with clinical observations, indicate the importance of supporting, through tools such as supervision and analysis of professional practices, professionals who work with maltreated and abused children, the only way to protect their well-being and the "therapeutic role" in the care and protection of children which they fulfil.

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Keywords:

Social Work; Child Protection; Emotions; Abuse; Photolangage.

Received: 11 December 2019

Accepted: 2 April 2020

Published: 20 April 2020

Citation: Guarnaccia, C., Giunta, S., Rasho, A.R., Ferraro, A. M., Giannone, F. (2020). Working with children who are victims of abuse: emotions and representations of professionals in residential children's communities. *Mediterranean Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 8(1). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.6092/2282-1619/mjcp-2344>

1. Introduction

The main core of the social work professions has been the helping relationship, in particular, the assistance to peoples and categories recognised as vulnerable. The central focus of these

professions, consisting in identifying the factors at the origin of this vulnerability and in formulating goals which can guide peoples towards objectives and along trajectories of well-being in despite of their vulnerabilities (Johnson & Yanca, 1992). The desire to help people motivates many social workers' choice of career, but this desire and this relationship can be extremely invasive and disruptive for the professional (Singer, Cummings, Moody, & Benuto, 2019; Tartakovsky, 2016). When this happens, the worker, the organisation and the users suffer.

The emotional effects of work related to the management of traumatic situations have often been examined in terms of burnout (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009) and professional exhaustion, which is mainly defined as an imbalance between the demands which are made on the worker (responsibilities, workload, organisational values, and others) and the resources which they can draw on in their relationships with the users and the organisation. In the case of social work, the imbalance between workload and the results observed, organisational restrictions and relationship with users plus increased responsibilities in the face of limited resources can be sources of extreme frustration (Anderson, 2000; Cherniss, 2016).

One of the professional sectors in which the risk of suffering by professionals is higher is child protection (Cabiati, Raineri, & Folgheraiter, 2020; Travis, Lizano, & Mor Barak, 2016). Child protection social work is acknowledged as a very stressful occupation, with high turnover and poor retention of staff, working conditions are also influenced by the resources that professionals have to manage their feelings and representations and the difficulties they face in managing the emotional demands linked to their work (McFadden, Campbell, & Taylor, 2015).

In this study we are going to focus in particular on professionals who work with maltreated and abused children in residential children's communities. Work with victims of abuse and maltreatment makes a heavy emotional demand on professionals, who can experience indirect consequences from the child's trauma (Cunningham, 2003; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Professionals involved in the ongoing management of the suffering of children in care can be negatively impacted by the emotions of the young people they are helping, a risk which can become an obstacle and hinder the normal delivery of the care, protection and foster work for which social workers and educators and other professionals are responsible (Barberis, 2001; Bastianoni & Taurino, 2009; Brunori & Raggi, 2007; Cabiati, Raineri, & Folgheraiter, 2020; Drouard, 2005; Foti, 2003).

However, the concept of burnout does not take into account certain specificities of work with victims of trauma and is not completely satisfactory for the professionals who are interested in

this field. We can apply to this context the concepts of vicarious traumatization defined as “the change which happens to the therapist (or other caregivers), following an empathetic involvement with the traumatising experiences of clients and their after-effects” (Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995, p. 558). When working with clients exposed to violence and traumatization, the helping professional must be aware of the impact of this interaction on their personal and professional well-being. This concept, as well as those of secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue (Gottfried & Bride, 2018) results from observations of symptoms (like anxiety, depression, avoidance, dissociation and others) that can be found amongst social workers that intervene in emergency situations, in the care of victims, but also among the family members of trauma victims (Davies, Seymour, & Read, 2001; Gaudreault, 2004).

This work is based on the idea that it is necessary to “take care of the caregivers” (Halevi & Idisis, 2018; Lama, 2009) and therefore aims to acknowledge, in a specific context such residential communities for children victims of sexual abuse, the feelings of professionals and their strategies and methods for limiting the risk of vicarious traumatization. The literature is particularly rich in themes related to the residential care of minors (see, among others, Butler & McPherson, 2007; James, 2011; Lee, 2008; Lee & Mc Millen, 2007) and the dangers of burnout amongst social workers and educators (Boyas, Wind, & Kang, 2012; Holloway & Wallinga, 1990; Siebert, Siebert, & Taylor-McLaughlin, 2007). However, the majority of studies use quantitative methods and questionnaires or grids to evaluate the organizational climate of the residential home and the burnout level of the social workers and educators. The need for an “in depth” study to highlight difficulties and effective intervention methods, and for a study which can become a basis for the training and supervision of social workers is one of the reasons why we chose to conduct a qualitative study. At the same time, the difficulty found in the literature with respect to the possibility to record and share with others the difficulties related to the working context led us to choose for our study a group tool based on mediation and to carry out our research through use of the Photolangage® system as detailed in the “methods” paragraph below. In particular, our study aims to (1) explore the emotions of social workers in their everyday relationships with children who are victims of abuse and/or maltreatment; (2) understand how this professionals works on their own feelings and what strategies they use to “manage” emotions in therapeutic relationships; (3) detect the social and professional representations which social workers and educators have of their work, of their professional identity and of the institutional network involved with their work.

2. Methods

2.1. Details of the Photolangage® method

An awareness of the difficulties encountered in relation to “burning” themes such as abuse, led us to choose the Photolangage® method (Photolangage® is a registered trademark) as material to support the group process. The concept was created in 1965 in Lyon by Alain Baptiste and Claire Belisle who, when working with a group of teenagers, proposed the use of photographs to facilitate the expression of the group’s thoughts. The method is based on the concept of therapeutic mediation, which involves the use of an object, in this case black-and-white and colour photographs, as a medium which enables the subject to express the complexity of their mental life in words and to transcend the limitations of the associative process (Vacheret, 2002). In a Photolangage® group, the participants are asked, based on a specific question, to choose one or several photographs in order to express their thoughts, emotions and ideas in a group situation. The mediating object, which is a “malleable object” (Roussillon, 1991) acts as an intermediary between the individuals, the group leader and the group and the synergy between the characteristics of the object and those of the mediator (Vacheret & Joubert, 2008) help to improve group work and access to different forms of thought which are less accessible by a single individual, in work which moves “from the image to the word” through different symbolization processes (Bessell, Deese, & Medina, 2007; Kaës, 1993; Vacheret, 2000).

Also, this mediation very quickly revealed potentialities with other audiences in different contexts for gradually integrate projects of psychological care towards the most vulnerable subjects such as adolescents with psychological problems (Emonoz, 2019; Lo Piccolo, 2017, 2019) or deviant behaviours (Genevois, 2018), families (Veuillet-Combier, 2018), chronic painful patients (Becque, Gignières, & Bella, 2018) and others.

For this work, the group sessions were led by a clinical psychologist trained in the use of the Photolangage® with two participating observers as provided for in the method. The group sessions took place over 90 minutes in the facilities of each residential children’s home and the method included the use of 30 photographs, both in black-and-white and colour, which had been chosen from the two photo-books (called “dossiers”): “Des choix personnels aux choix professionnels” (From personal choices to professional choices) (Belisle & Baptiste, 1991) and “Corps, communication et violence à l’adolescence” (Body, communication and violence in adolescence) (Belisle, 2008).

The question given to the group stated: “Think about our working daily with maltreated and abused children who are cared for in our residential community and choose a photograph to help you speak about it”.

2.2 Participants

The study was conducted in 6 residential children’s communities in the region of Palermo in Italy. The professional teams voluntarily agreed to take part in the research and all participants signed the informed consent form, which guaranteed anonymity and respect for the ethical and deontological principles of the research, after the main researcher leading the groups provided information on the objectives and the context of the research. The communities initially involved were 12, but only 6 joined the request for collaboration, all the communities were chosen according to a similarity criterion, with respect to the missions carried out (protection of children in danger with respect to social and family situations at risk) and the age group of accepted minors (0-6 years).

Overall, 37 people took part in the research, 4 men and 33 women, aged between 24 and 54 years ($M=33.72$, $SD= 7.03$). The 6 teams were composed on average of 10 professional divided between the different roles (mainly educators but also psychologists and social service assistants), and all had worked in the same residential home for a fairly long time, only 6 professionals (16.21%) have less than two years of work experience, 15 people (40.5%) has between 2 and 5 years of experience, for another 15 people (40.54%) the experience is between 6 and 10 years and, last, 1 individuals (2.71%) has between 11 and 15 years of experience. The workload, calculated in weekly hours, is on average 33.5 hours with a fluctuation ranging from a minimum of 8 hours (average weekly load of a community psychologist) and a maximum of 40 hours (for educators). All teams regularly took part in practices analysis groups and, in two cases, clinical supervision was implemented to monitor the team itself .

At the time of research, the communities host an average of 7 minors. The cases of abuse or suspected abuse currently present in the communities are on average 2 minors (1.64), in the last two years an average of 4 minors (3.89) abused or with suspicion have been received in the facilities under examination, with a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 9 victims.

2.3 Data analysis methods

The data collected was subjected to a discourse analysis which attempted to explain the theme under investigation (the emotional impact of abuse cases on social workers and educators), based on a study of the discourse of the subjects in the group (Doise, Clemence, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1992; Salazar Orvig & Grossen, 2004). This methodological choice takes account of the

problems linked to the analysis of the material collected as, in each group, the subjects draw on a heterogenous set of emotions, knowledge and values on which they are prepared to negotiate with the other members of the group.

The contents produced by the group become, according to an empirical-inductive method, containers of thought and representations that indicate universes of meaning. Each discourse is therefore considered as an expression not only of an opinion but also of an individual representation socially constructed by the individual and by the group (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). This methodological choice is not intended to be exclusive but rather integrative in a perspective of evolving work and has allowed us a first exploration of the available data adapted to their size, which may evolve in future research (as well illustrated by Starks & Brown in their 2007 article).

The aim of the discourse analysis was to detect units of meaning (thematic indicators) in the texts. In our research protocol, each recorded session having been transcribed verbatim according to the guidelines proposed by Mergenthaler and colleagues (1999) and, after, analysed by two independent researchers who have codified in a series of themes and sub-themes that have allowed to classify all the contents of all groups. Once the identification of the thematic indicators was completed, these were regrouped into macro-categories in a consensus meeting between the researchers leaving us with a unique corpus of thematic indicators and a list of the macro-categories they were grouped into.

Carrying out an analysis of discursive materials about an object not only allows us to analyse the contents and their organization, but also the sharing of these contents and their translation through a common lexicon in groups and institutions (Salès-Wuillemin, 2005).

3. Results

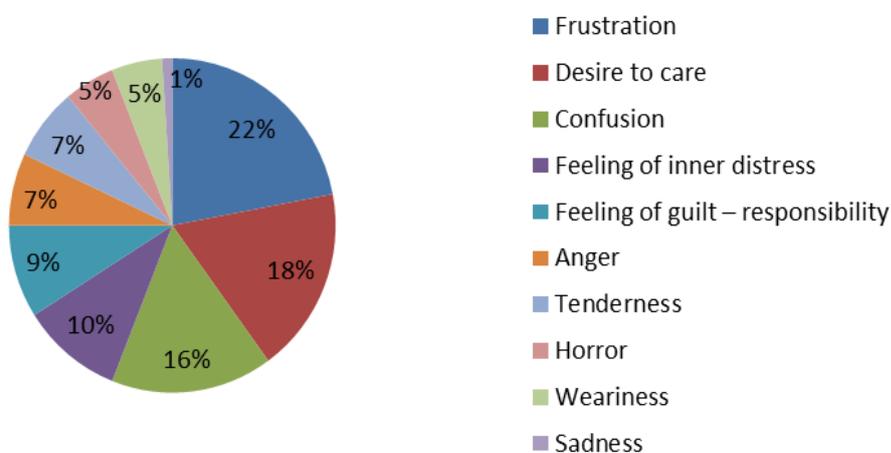
The discourse analysis allowed us to detect 4 thematic macro-categories in the groups' narratives. The main thematic indicators in each category are listed with particular attention paid not only to those which report a high percentage (sign of a fairly diffuse and uniform representation in the group) but also those which, even if less represented with regard to frequency, are indicators of a "emergent thought" which may prove positive in the development of the group itself.

3.1 Emotional responses

The first category records the thematic indicators which concern the emotions which social workers and educators describe as being foremost in work with abused minors (Figure 1). This part of the discourse shown that in their work, social workers and educators, experience the

desire to provide a safe environment for maltreated minors but that often they suffer the consequences of this and reveal high levels of emotional distress. They speak of frustration faced with the feeling of not being able to provide adequate support for the minors, of being incapable of helping and not being able to make contact with the emotional world of the other, of being powerless faced with the minors' revelations, and of their distress. The feeling of powerlessness also emerges faced with institutions which are incapable of providing effective care, which act slowly despite the need for immediate action, or which seem to operate without shared planning and in an arbitrary manner.

Figure 1. Frequencies of sub-themes in the category “Emotional responses”



Social workers and educators mention great confusion linked to the reality of the abuse, a complex reality, made up of complex stories and experiences, in which it is difficult to untangle the knots in order to find meaning and to be able to intervene. A reality which bombards the social care with chaotic questions to which it is difficult to find answers. The reality of the abuse, the revelations, and the stories, arouse feelings of inner distress amongst the social workers, indefinable feelings which often cause conflict, conflict between their own emotions and what they have to do to fulfil their support and management roles.

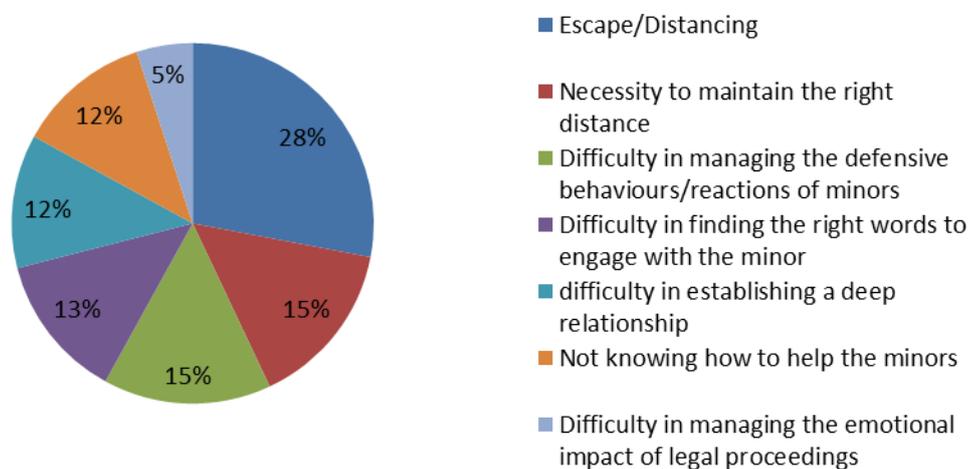
The perception of not being able to adequately carry out these missions is often a source of guilt and anger, which is also associated with the perception of the injustices suffered by the minors at the hands of institutions which, on the contrary, should protect them, provoking new traumas.

3.2 The difficulty of coping with and managing emotions linked to abuse

This category defines the feeling of powerlessness experienced by social workers and educators who consider that they are unsuccessful in their daily task in the relationship to minors (Figure 2).

Social workers recognise that they often find themselves without any resources in the management of complex situations and that use to defensive distancing becomes a form of personal protection for professionals involved in a helping relationship. The difficulty in managing the emotional burden of abuse victims leads them to want to isolate, to dismiss thoughts of the event, and distance themselves emotionally, in order to protect from the emotions that overwhelm them. At the same time, social workers experience a certain awareness of this reaction and also reflect on the risks which excessive detachment can pose for the child. So, the difficulty consists in knowing how to maintain the right amount of emotional distance to protect themselves and to protect the child.

Figure 2. Frequencies of sub-themes in the category “Difficulty of coping with and managing emotions linked to abuse”



Another difficulty identified is that of keeping the educator/child, parent/child roles separate, of maintaining the right distance, a difficulty exacerbated by sharing moments of everyday life and by lifelong bonds which endure and which often lead to them feeling and behaving as though the child was their own. The social workers recognise that they have difficulty in managing the child’s angry and aggressive behaviour, even though they are aware that these actions are indicators of distress and that they are reactions to the events they have suffered. The social worker, aware of the complexity of the subject and the emotional fragility of the child, is overwhelmed with questions as to what is the right thing to say, what words to use, and how they should behave faced with the child’s reactions.

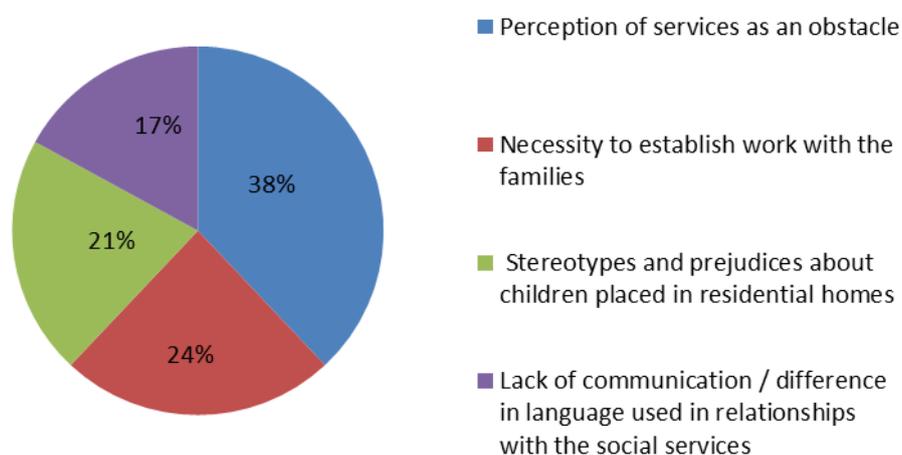
Finally, when working with maltreated children, the participants in our research confirmed that they experience emotional difficulties in supporting minors throughout the justice procedures, from the revelation of the abuse to the complaint, from confronting the aggressors, who are often parents, or relatives, to the judicial decision. The professional, who supports the child during the legal process, is overwhelmed with questions, feels distant from the needs of the

other and fears that they do not understand and are not able to manage their experiences and reactions in the interest of the other, the minor.

3.3 Relationships with the network, the institutions and services

This is the category which summarises the social workers and educators' perceptions of the different services and professionals who collaborate with the community (Figure 3). What emerges is a negative context of the service network, the need for collaboration is recognised as essential but the actual work is often difficult, and services become an obstacle rather than a support.

Figure 3. Frequencies of sub-themes in the category “Relationships with the network, the institutions and services”



The social workers describe a network of services which hinder and limit their work with the children, a network trapped by bureaucratic processes, often incapable of making decisions and supplying concrete solutions, which involves a heavier workload for the social workers and educators, as they have to compensate for the absence of the services by carrying out tasks which are outside their remit. Social workers perceive institutions as a limitation, in particular because of the remoteness and the perceived arbitrariness of decisions made by the courts and the social services. Judges and social assistants have the power to make decisions which are important for children's lives but are described as being little or not at all keen to get to know the users and their real needs. Social workers also criticise them for not using the knowledge, plans and avenues of intervention formulated and implemented in their work.

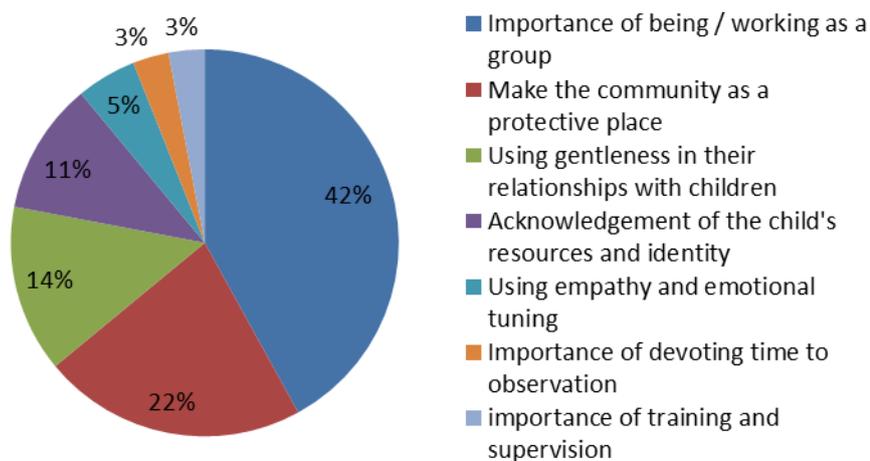
Another central point in this network is that of the relationship with the families of hosted children. The professionals come up against the reality of an abusing, chaotic and pathological family, and parent-child bonds which, although pathogenic, are often still crucially important for the child. The social care providers show that they are aware of the necessity not to sever or

destroy these bonds, but to become familiar with them, channel them, and even to attempt to reconstruct them, and when conditions are suitable, to work with the parents.

3.4 Working methods and strategies

This category aims to detail all the practical methods (therefore techniques and strategies) which the social workers and educators have developed in their experience of work and which they use to better fulfil their role with minors who are victims of abuse (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Frequencies of sub-themes in the category “Working methods and strategies”



The group is therefore perceived as a working space which allows them to communicate, collaborate, and compare different ideas and opinions in order to find shared solutions; it becomes a space for induction in multiple roles and skills, essential for sharing responsibilities and workload. Amongst the tools which the group can equip itself with in order to better cope with the complexity of the situations encountered, the social workers describe supervision as a space which allows them to stop and reflect on their own emotional states with the assistance of an external figure, whilst being aware that complexity and emotional intensity often leads to avoidance and pushing the painful events out of their mind. They also identify in-service training and in particular training in group dynamics as a useful strategy for improving working and group relationships.

4. Discussion

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore, through an analysis of the discourse of educators and social workers, the emotional impact and the mental burden that they live in daily contact with abused children. The results allowed us to discover how social workers represent emotions, professional skills and working methods in residential communities for children who have been victims of abuse. In line with the literature, social workers and educators who work with maltreated children experience a distress which is linked both to the suffering of their

charges but also to the difficulty of fulfilling a reparative role in the complex context of a residential children's home (Cabiati, Raineri, & Folgheraiter, 2020; Cunningham, 2003; Halevi & Idisis, 2018).

Photolangage® and mediation through photography allowed social workers and educators to discuss in the group the distress perceived in our work with children, this was summarised in the category "difficulty in coping with the emotions linked to abuse", as well as to identify the positive emotions and satisfaction provided by work devoted to the protection and care of the well-being of children in residential care. The importance of the relationship is recognised in several thematic indicators which highlight the centrality of the child and the relationship itself as the most important vehicle through which each educator accomplishes their work. The context of the residential children's home was represented as a place of encounter and mutual exchange between different subjectivities, where empathy and emotional tuning are among the main professional qualities identified by the participants in our study.

Our results highlight the importance of group work, and of the sharing of times and places for reflection such as those represented by supervision. The group is represented as a resource for professional identity which supports the educator faced with the fragility of minors. However, group work and cooperation are limited to internal relationships in residential communities as highlighted by the negative representation of the institutional network, a network which is indifferent and often deaf to the appeals of the social workers and educators who are left to face their work alone, without skill sharing leading to successful and effective projects.

At a more symbolic level, moving from narration to emotion (and to the action which that leads to in some cases) the study appears to ask serious questions about the suffering of social workers and educators and the difficulty of facing the pain of others on a daily basis without adequate institutional support (Bastianoni & Taurino, 2009).

All this refers back to the necessity to activate supervision plans and group training plans, the foundations of the social workers and educators' professionalism and which they themselves indicate are essential for effective work which reflects the "therapeutic role" of the residential children's home, as evoked by the words of an educator participating in the groups: "during supervision, a balance is established...our strong points can be highlighted and not only our difficulties, and this becomes essential afterwards... when we return to the home with the children... it's a place where ideas are born, along with collaboration ... there is a shift in thought which becomes effective action". However, these strategies occupy little space in the discourse of social workers and educators, they are limited to certain groups participating in the research, and seem to be less present than methods focused on the minor and on the care

context, which clearly reveals the social workers' difficulty, despite a recognition of the difficulties and of the emotional impact of their work, in constructing a space for supervision and the protection of their well-being.

The extent of the results of our study is clearly exposed to many limitations, methodological and applicative, due largely to the small sample size that does not allow, due to its number and the selection criterion on a single territory. The data that have been collected are not intended to be representative, however, the qualitative method that has been used and the analysis "in depth" of the issues, allows to account for some relevant aspects to be questioned for all professionals.

Several studies have long shown the effectiveness of residential care and its usefulness, both clinical and social, (Chance, Dickson, Bennett & Stone, 2010; Preyde et al., 2011; Souverein, Van der Helm, & Stams, 2013; Strijbosch et al., 2015) issues related to the well-being of caregivers seem, in a continuous management of emergency situations, to take a back seat and not receive sufficient attention. Future studies will have to be conducted to investigate not only the type of response of social workers to the risk of secondary trauma to which they are exposed, but also the quality and effectiveness of the tools, both individual and collective, that institutions propose to deal with this malaise.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Dr. S. Di Dia for having participated in the management of the groups and all the participants for having agreed to entrust us with their lives.

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DOI: 10.6092/2282-1619/mjcp-2344

Appendix 1

The images represent some of the photographs used as a stimulus during groups and chosen more frequently by social workers and educators to express their thoughts and emotions.

The photographs are part of the Photolangage dossier:

Belisle, C. Baptiste A. (1991) *Des choix personnels aux choix professionnels (From personal to professional choices)*. Paris : Les éditions d'organisation.

Belisle, C. (2008) *Corps, communication et violence à l'adolescence" (Body, communication and violence in adolescence)*. Paris : Chronique Sociale



