THE IMPACT OF COMPASSION FATIGUE ON TEACHERS’ INTENTIONS TO REPORT SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE

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Rates of suspected and confirmed child abuse cases have escalated significantly in recent years (Children’s Bureau, 2017).

Child abuse often goes untreated because it is not reported (Fergusson, Horwood & Woodward, 2000).

It is imperative for abuse to be reported and children to be treated because of the unfortunate consequences for abused children.

- Lower IQ Scores (Rogeness, Amarung, Macedo, Harris, & Fisher, 1986).
- Depression and Psychopathology (Bemporad & Romano, 1992).
- PTSD (Widom, 1999).
- Substance Abuse (Cavaiola & Schiff, 1988)
- Cycle of Violence (Curtis, 1963)
Abuse Reporting

- Children do not always disclose their abusive situation (Fergusson, Horwood & Woodward, 2000).

- Parents or relatives are most commonly the perpetrators (Violence Prevention, 2017).

- Certain professionals are legally required to report suspected child abuse. (Children's Bureau, 2017).

- Teachers often fail to report suspected child abuse (Kenny, 2001; Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992)
Does Compassion Fatigue Predict Teachers’ Intentions to Report Child Abuse?
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- Compassion fatigue occurs when a professional internalizes the trauma of their suffering client. (Figley, 1995).
- Their capability and motivation to sympathize with and advocate for the suffering client is weakened (Figley, 1995).
- Experienced by helping professionals, such as teachers (Figley, 1995).
Hypothesis

Compassion fatigue \(\rightarrow\) Negative attitudes toward abuse reporting
Correlates of Compassion Fatigue

■ Secondary traumatic stress
  - Stress that some professionals feel when trying to help with an individual’s trauma (Figley, 1995).

■ Depersonalization
  - Unconsciously used by professionals as a psychological coping mechanism when the professional works with a traumatized individual (Dane, 2000).
  - Likely limits helping professionals from putting in significant and sincere work (Figley, 1995).
Mediation Hypothesis

Psychological detachment

Compassion fatigue

Negative attitudes toward abuse reporting
Correlates of Compassion Fatigue

- **Job Burnout**
  - When a demanding job leads someone to feelings of exhaustion, cynicism, and job inefficiency (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009).

- **Exhaustion**
  - Overwhelming work load diminishes a person’s emotional resources

- **Cynicism**
  - Professional disconnects from their work demands and clients

- **Job inefficiency**
  - Becoming unproductive at work
Mediation Hypothesis

Compassion fatigue

Psychological Detachment

Job efficacy cynicism

Negative attitudes toward abuse reporting
Correlates of Compassion Fatigue

- Knowledge regarding how to report child abuse and neglect emerges as a significant predictor of intentions to report suspected child abuse (Kenny, 2001; Kenny, 2004).

- Does compassion fatigue emerge as a predictor of diminished knowledge regarding child abuse reporting?
  - Unsupportive work environment does not provide training
  - Exhaustion, cynicism, inefficiency, and psychological detachment from one’s job (theorized components of compassion fatigue) may translate into diminished interest and motivation to learn
Mediation Hypothesis

- Psychological Detachment
- Compassion fatigue
- Job efficacy cynicism
- Knowledge of reporting abuse
- Negative attitudes toward abuse reporting
Sample and Methodology

- N = 299 participants (recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk)
  - 40% taught at the elementary school level
  - 24% at the middle school level
  - 24% at the high school level
  - 12% selected other, but specified their role as an educator
Methodology

- 13-item Compassion Fatigue Scale Revised (Chronbach’s alpha = .911; e.g., I have felt a sense of hopelessness associated with working with my students & I feel I am unsuccessful at separating work from my personal life)
- 4-item scale measuring teachers’ support for reporting suspected abuse (Chronbach’s alpha = .690; e.g., “Reporting child abuse is important for teachers”)
- 2 items measuring knowledge of child abuse reporting (Chronbach’s alpha = .616; e.g., “I am aware of my school’s procedures for child abuse reporting”)
- 5-item scale measuring job efficacy cynicism (Chronbach’s alpha = .855; e.g., “There is not much I can do as a teacher to help abused children”)
- 2-item scale measuring psychological detachment (Chronbach’s alpha = .642; e.g., “I try not to think about my students’ well-being”)
Methodology

- 4 brief summaries descriptions of hypothetical child abuse
  - Possible sexual abuse, (e.g. “Your five-year old students play with their stuffed animals during free time. One of the little girls in your class mimics adult-like sexual behaviors between the toys.”)
  - Possible Physical Abuse
  - Possible Emotional Abuse
  - Possible neglect

- Participants answered the following questions for each case:
  - I would be suspicious of abuse (Chronbach’s alpha = .625; strongly agree to strongly disagree)
  - I would make a report of abuse (Chronbach’s alpha = .686; strongly agree to strongly disagree)
Results

Compassion fatigue

Negative attitudes toward abuse reporting

$r = .255, p < .01$
Results

Compassion fatigue

- $r = .307, p < .01$
- $r = .438, p < .01$
- $r = -.172, p < .01$

Psychological Detachment

Job efficacy cynical

Knowledge of reporting abuse
Results

Suspicions of hypothetical abuse

Intentions to report hypothetical abuse

Compassion fatigue

$r = .037, p = .530$

$r = .078, p = .182$
Results

Direct Effect = -.03

Total Effect = .26***

Compassion fatigue

Psychological detachment
CIs [.0338, .1363]

Job efficacy
cynicism
CIs [.1306, .2750]

Knowledge of reporting abuse
CIs [.0046, .0481]

Negative attitudes toward abuse reporting

* p < .05,
** p < .01,
*** p < .001
Conclusions

■ Because national data shows that child abuse is on the rise, we need child advocates to report child mistreatment

■ We believe this study is an important contribution in explaining additional factors regarding why teachers’ often fail to report suspected child abuse

■ Due to the cross-sectional nature of this research, future research should empirically examine this research question using a longitudinal methodology.

■ There are important implications regarding the development of interventions designed to prevent compassion fatigue among teachers