

Clients as initiators of a joint study

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Usually the initiation to explore social phenomenon or social intervention is initiated by those who have financial or professional interest in it and not by those who are the source for acquiring the data needed for the exploration. The goal of the proposed presentation is to describe a unique experience that was initiated by a woman, who was a client of the department of social services in Haifa, during the social protest of summer 2011 in Israel. The woman approached me after one of my lectures that were given as part of the social protest; and in her reflection she claimed that poverty is a collective trauma. Since neither one of theories or studies regarding poverty does not define it as a collective trauma, I suggested a joint action research to aiming to inquire into the phenomenon of poverty in order to find out whether it can be defined as a collective trauma. The study group included ten women living in poverty and long term clients of the departments of social services. The joint study lasted for a year and a half, in which I met with the group every second week for two hours. All the meetings were transcribed by a third year social work student. The joint learning included three main stages: 1) Life stories of the participants: In this stage each one of the participants told her life story focusing on traumatic events, stressors, strength and ways of coping. In the process of telling the stories I was operating as a practitioner and researcher. As a practitioner I was empathic, supportive, and empowering. As a researcher I directed the group to look at similarities and differences between the stories, and to find out whether aspects of collective trauma characterized these stories; 2) An open and unstructured stage: During this stage each one of the member could bring difficulties with which she wanted to share with the group. As in the first stage I was operating as a researcher and practitioner. As a researcher I guided the group to look of the repetitive behavior, thought and feelings that characterized the life in poverty. At this stage the group became also a source of support to its members, and 3) Summarizing stage: In this stage the members were asked to bring up their conclusions regarding the question whether poverty is a collective trauma and to point on issues that came up in the group and can validate their conclusions. In this stage it was also decided how the process of the joint research will be documented. One of my main conclusions was that without operating as a practitioner using my social work skills I would not be able to engage the women and explore the phenomenon of poverty as a collective trauma; and without being a researcher I might be blamed for not being helpful enough... which is part of the collective trauma of poverty.