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Vicarious Trauma in Law Students: Role of Gender, Personality, and Social Support

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Abstract

Law student trainees are exposed to trauma-related work which puts them at higher risk of being adversely affected by it. Since they are not directly related to the event, their distress goes unnoticed. The repetitive account of traumatic instances leads to traumatization of their own which is referred to as vicarious traumatization. The purpose of this paper was to delve into the degree to which the role of gender, personality, and social support impact law student's vulnerability to vicarious trauma. For the current research, exploratory design was utilized. All one hundred and twenty participants were selected using purposive sampling. Self-report measures were employed to investigate social support, personality traits, and vicarious trauma in sixty male and sixty female law students. The results revealed that female law students and those law students who are high on Neuroticism and low on Extraversion are more vulnerable to experiencing vicarious trauma. Implications for trainees and educators are discussed and suggestions are provided for future research.

Keywords: Law Students, Gender, Personality, Social Support, Vicarious Trauma.

Introduction

Very often the hallowed walls of justice witness allegations, which are horrific in nature- rape of children, assault, murder, manslaughter, child exploitation, etc. Therefore, law professionals across a broad range of areas experience a kaleidoscope of gruesome and traumatic exposure while providing legal assistance to their clients, thus, putting them at risk of being emotionally, physically, and intellectually affected (Cohen & Collens, 2013). Any direct or indirect exposure to traumatic events can have adversarial consequences and

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cause an overwhelming sense of threat to physical as well as psychological security (Murray & Royer, 2004; Scott, et al., 2013). In scientific literature, vicarious trauma reflects the painful psychological effects that emerge as a result of engaging with client's traumatic material and eventually, integrating the traumatic material into one's cognitive schemas, leading to disruption of beliefs about trust, safety, control, esteem and intimacy (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). While providing legal assistance to clients, lawyers are exposed to traumatic material and subsequently react to this exposure (Vrklevski & Franklin, 2008; Lerias & Byrne, 2003). According to the Brain and Mind Research Institute (2009), 35% of law students show skyrocketing levels of psychological distress. This level of distress is 20% higher than the general population and 17% higher than that experienced by medical students. Despite such evidence, there are no known studies to date, that indicate the prevalence of vicarious trauma among law student trainees who work with clients affected by trauma.

Due to lack of exposure to advanced training, and very often, unavailability of adequate knowledge regarding vicarious trauma, trainees who are exposed to such horrific accounts of trauma survivors, or perpetrators of trauma, may not be prepared to effectively work through with such clients. Therefore, the results of this study are a step forward to fill a gap in graduate training programs as it reveals implications to design and modify training programs, practicum, and internship settings. If law student trainees are unable to navigate and work through their own vicarious trauma, the effective legal counseling of clients with traumatic cases will be put at stake. Identifying potential risk factors related to vicarious trauma for the legal field will help trainees become aware of their vulnerabilities and prevent themselves from the ill-effects of vicarious trauma. The aim of this article is to build on the literature by examining the role of gender, personality, and social support in the development of vicarious trauma among law students based on findings and salient variables from previous studies mentioned below.

Vicarious Trauma

One of the earliest studies that serve as a vital source of evidence for the development of vicarious trauma in professionals is the self-constructivist theory by McCann and Pearlman (1990). According to McCann and Pearlman (1990), cognitive schemas play a vital role as they are central to the individual and help in determining who will develop and who will be protected from the impact of trauma. They likewise asserted that vicarious trauma results from proximity, engagement and, incorporation of other's trauma into our core schemas, but will occur only if the individual is unable to integrate the client's traumatic information. The schemas of power and control are disrupted due to repetitive accounts of how their clients are betrayed and made to feel miserable and unsafe in the face of trauma.

According to Pearlman and Saakvitne (1995), professionals experience some difficulty due to the nature of trauma-related work, not all develop vicarious trauma. This points out the role of different specific variables serving as mediators and moderators in the development of vicarious trauma (Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995). Studies that have focused on variables that moderate vicarious trauma include-gender (Lerias & Byrne, 2003), age (Ghahramanlou & Brodbeck, 2000), personal trauma history (Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995; Michalopoulos & Aparicio, 2012) amount of

exposure to traumatized clients (Schauben & Frazier, 1995) and personality types (Woodward et al., 2005; Maguire & Byrne, 2016). Studies that have explored the role of mediating variables include access to supervision and training (Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995; Chrestman, 1995), and social support (Schauben & Frazier, 1995; Lerias and Byrne, 2003; Michalopoulos & Aparicio, 2012). This study explores some of these variables since the overall data pertaining to these variables is sparse and inconsistent.

Individuals involved in the legal arena are encouraged to remain emotionally detached from the cases they handle since it permits them to exercise dispassionate judgment and deliver independent advice to clients. Since they are not automatons, this detachment pattern might result in an increased risk of developing vicarious trauma symptomatology (Murray & Royer, 2004). The symptoms of vicarious trauma resemble that of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as it causes significant distress and impairment in day-to-day functioning. The most crucial factors that contribute to PTSD symptoms are indirect exposure and proximity (May & Wisco, 2016). These symptoms fall into three categories: internalizing symptoms which include somatic symptoms, sleep difficulties, anxiety, depression, and stress; externalizing which includes anger, intolerance, and hostility and; unique trauma which includes PTSD diagnosis, hyper-vigilance, guilt flashbacks, nightmares, etc. (Jaffe et al., 2003). In the course of providing assistance to clients, law students have been reporting elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. (Shete & Garkal, 2016). The levels of alcoholism, substance abuse, and the acceleration in the number of suicides in law institutions point to a flaw in the way legal education is being conducted. The legal institutions regularly claim lives as indicated by recent instances that have taken place in Pune and New Delhi colleges. Professionals dealing with trauma-related work are vulnerable to mental health issues like vicarious trauma and these are merely stark reminders of the manifestation of the problem (Parker, 2014; Rashid, 2015; Salaria, 2016).

Gender and Vicarious trauma

The pattern of ignoring gender in studies of vicarious trauma can be traced back to the study by Pearlman & Mac Ian (1995), which ascertained therapists' personal trauma history and caseload of traumatized clients as contributing factors to vicarious trauma. Although, this study included gender as the antecedent variable, it did not specify the gender distribution in the sample. Additionally, various studies on vicarious trauma among professionals are either, single-sex studies or studies that include subjects of both genders without comparing them (Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995).

Some studies also suggest higher female lawyers' susceptibility to developing higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and other such symptoms as compared to male counterparts (Kelk et al., 2009; Lustig et al., 2009; Shete and Garkal, 2016). Continuing on the same lines, studies among trial judges in the USA showed that women judges have poor coping skills and experienced higher levels of stress in comparison to men. This also led to deteriorated work performance among women judges (Bremer 2003; Flores et al., 2007). A study by Muchemi (2017) indicated that both male and female judicial officers are more likely to experience psychological distress due to traumatizing cases but the effect may be higher among females.

On the other hand, various studies show no significant differences between genders. A study by Adams and Riggs (2008), examined the predictors of vicarious trauma among trainees doing their internship in clinical psychology and counseling among trauma victims, found no gender differences. Another study examined both, female and male social workers who engaged in direct intervention with trauma victims and the findings reveal no gender differences (Adams et al., 2007). Therefore, the research to date shows mixed findings but with higher female susceptibility. This study makes an attempt to claim whether there are gender differences in the development of vicarious trauma.

Social support and vicarious trauma

Although some jobs are inherently stressful, negative outcomes are not inevitable. According to Ozbay et al., (2007) social support is an important factor since it moderates hereditary and environmental vulnerabilities and furthermore, averts stress by conferring resilience towards it. Social support is a significant predictor of recovery and better adjustment after experiencing a traumatic event (Dai et al., 2016). According to McCann and Pearlman (1990), close relations with friends, family, and significant others act as a mediator and prevent disruption of self-schemas that are bound to occur as a result of chronic exposure to client's traumatic information. Subsequently, Lerias and Byrne (2003) asserted that social support acts as a mediator and plays an essential role while dealing with stress after traumatic exposure.

Scientific evidence supports that high level of perceived social support acts as a protective factor against physical and mental health problems, including a negative relationship with depression (Santini et al., 2015), providing a shield against anxiety (Roohafza et al., 2014), and lower risk for developing cardiovascular diseases and various other physical maladies (Compare et al., 2013). Further, a meta-analysis revealed that both work support and other support networks were inversely related to vicarious trauma among professionals working with trauma victims (Hensel et al., 2015). Continuing on the same lines, Dunkley & Whelan (2006), found that professionals who report having good support systems, particularly with colleagues and supervisors, were more resilient to vicarious trauma. On the other hand, individuals practicing law as a profession, are more susceptible to vicarious trauma since they are not allowed to disclose any details outside the courtroom and due to a lack of formal trauma training (Maguire & Byrne, 2016).

Personality and vicarious trauma

There are a variety of factors that affect vicarious trauma, but some factors have received special attention. To date, the literature has confirmed the presence of vicarious trauma but subsequently, it has been highlighted that not everyone who is vicariously exposed to a traumatic event develops symptoms (Lerias & Byrne, 2003). There are specific variables whose presence may make the person more prone to experiencing vicarious traumatization. This has been elucidated by McCann and Pearlman (1990) by emphasizing that specific areas of disruption will differ for individuals depending on which area is more or less salient for them as a reflection of their unique life experiences. Some factors that have been investigated as predictors of post trauma include: the nature of the traumatic event, specific factors pre and post the traumatic event, cognitive and biological variables (Bomyea et al., 2012).

Costa and McCrae's five-factor model of personality is a broad-gauged classification of higher order trait characteristics. This model has 5 components consisting of neuroticism (N), extraversion (E), openness (O), agreeableness (A), and conscientiousness (C) (Costa & McCrae, 1992). All five traits result in significant variance in scores when searching for positive or negative outcomes following a traumatic event (Jaksic et al., 2012).

A positive relationship has been demonstrated between extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness and positive post-trauma perceptions when it is mediated by appropriate coping styles (An et al., 2017). Also, it appears that agreeable individuals are less likely to perceive negative changes as a result of experiencing a traumatic event. Neuroticism is the most pervasive dimension of personality as it leads to higher relative risk for post-trauma outcome. Studies have reported a relationship between high scores on the psychological dimension of neuroticism and the development of negative trauma reactions and PTSD (Breslau & Schultz, 2012). Overall, the personality characteristics of the professionals also influence resilience or vulnerability to vicarious trauma.

Objective of the Study

This study seeks to investigate the role of gender, personality traits, and social support leading to the development of vicarious trauma.

Hypotheses

To study the role of vicarious trauma in law students, the following has been hypothesized:

- H1: Both groups (females and males) experience vicarious trauma, but that female would have higher vicarious trauma levels in comparison to males.
- H2: Law students high on extraversion, agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness will have lesser vicarious trauma levels.
- H3: Law students who score high on neuroticism will show higher vicarious trauma levels.
- H4: Law students with high perceived social support will show lesser vicarious trauma levels.
- H5: Gender, personality, and social support will predict vicarious trauma levels.

Method

Participants

The current study is an exploration of the correlates of vicarious trauma among a total of one hundred and twenty law student trainees. All the participants were selected using purposive sampling. The sample included males and females aged 20-25 years, who have dealt primarily with traumatized clients or perpetrators of trauma with a minimum experience of 4 internships. They were recruited from 4th and 5th year law schools in Bengaluru. Furthermore, law trainees who had exposure to prior trauma training were excluded from this study.

Procedure

The participants were recruited from law schools in Bengaluru using purposive sampling. All participants were seated in a quiet and comfortable environment, where informed consent was obtained and they were provided with all the instructions. The Vicarious Trauma Scale developed by Vrkleviski & Franklin, Big Five Inventory, and Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support was self-administered by all the participants. Also, non-identifying demographic variables were obtained. A total of 144 individuals volunteered to participate in the study (71 females, 73 males), but 12 participants (8 males, 4 females) failed to complete the questionnaires in its entirety and were subsequently excluded from the study, with a further 5 individuals excluded for not meeting the study criteria for having witnessed cases of traumatized population. Another 7 were excluded for extreme and middle category response bias. Accordingly, a total of 120 participants are included in the study. All the responses in this study were anonymous and participation was voluntary.

Tools

Demographic Datasheet

The socio-demographic factors were obtained from the participants by a list of a few questions about the individual. The questions include age, gender, level of educational achievement, geographical origin, specialization of internship, etc.

Vicarious Trauma Scale

The amount of vicarious trauma was assessed using the Vicarious Trauma Scale, developed by Vrkleviski & Franklin in 2008. It is an eight-item self-administered scale with 7 point Likert responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The items measure participants' experience of symptoms related to exposure to clients' traumatic material. This scale has been used among male and female law solicitors. The measure has demonstrated good reliability in the original sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$). In this study, the scores on each of the item are taken together and summed to obtain the total scores which were grouped into three categories: low (7–27), moderate (28–42), and high (43–56) in terms of vicarious trauma reported by the participants (Vrkleviski & Franklin, 2008).

Big Five Inventory (BFI)

In this study, the personality traits of the participants were measured using the BFI by John et al., 1991. The BFI is a self-administered scale with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The five factors comprising the constructs of the BFI are openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. The neuroticism, extraversion, and openness personality inventory (NEO-PI-R) is a comprehensive assessment of the BFI which shows high convergence and internal reliability with BFI (mean $\alpha=0.83$). An exploratory investigation to verify the psychometric properties of the measurement model revealed $E=.90$, $N=.89$, $O=.93$, $A=.90$, and $C=.87$ indicating high construct and convergent validity (Nordin, 2012). For scoring purpose, a few items were reverse-scored and then the respective items under each dimension were summed and grouped into two groups for each dimension based on a

median split of the sample i.e. low extraversion (8-25) & high extraversion (26-40), low agreeableness (9-32) & high agreeableness (33-45), low conscientiousness (9-30) & high conscientiousness (31-45), low neuroticism (8-25) & high neuroticism (26-40) and low openness (10-37) & high openness (38-50).

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

The study utilized the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support developed by Zimet et al., (1998), for assessing perceived social support. It is a 12 item self-administered scale to measure and assess the perceived level of social support from 3 vital sources on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1(very strongly disagree) to 7(very strongly agree). The subscales measure social support from friends, family, and significant others. This scale has been used widely with clinical samples, students, and adolescents (Zimet et al, 1988). The scale has a good overall and sub-scale reliability respectively (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$; Significant other subscale $\alpha = .91$; family subscale $\alpha = .87$; friends subscale $\alpha = .85$) along with good validity. For the scoring purpose, score on each item was summed and grouped into three categories i.e. low perceived support (12-35), medium perceived support (36-60), and high perceived support (61-84) (Zimet et al., 1998).

Validation

Since the questionnaires have not been used in the Indian context, face validation of the questionnaire was done by two experts in the field. The changes proposed, were incorporated and verified by them. For establishing the validity of the collected data, the technique of data audit was used. The process involved providing an audit trail to the experts in the field who then closely examined the process of the research study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics Version 22. The scores on personality traits, social support, and vicarious trauma were checked for normality using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Since it was not normally distributed, nonparametric statistics were employed. Further, the scores of males were compared to the scores of females using the Mann-Whitney U test. This was followed by correlation analysis between gender and vicarious trauma; personality traits and vicarious trauma and social support and vicarious trauma. Finally, regression analysis was conducted to assess whether gender, personality traits, and social support are predictors of vicarious trauma.

Ethical Considerations

Approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics committee, which was followed by written informed consent from all the participants. The informed consent provided the participants with privacy and confidentiality. If a student felt that any question evoked a distressing experience, s/he could terminate the study immediately and an appropriate referral to address any concerns was provided. The study does not intend to psychologically harm the participants.

Results

Characteristics of the Sample

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information.

Variable	Total (120)
Gender	
Male	50%
Female	50%
Age	
20-21	15.9%
22-23	76.4%
24-25	7.5%
Geographical Origin	
Rural	9.1%
Urban	90.1%
Relationship Status	
Single	77.7%
In a relationship	21.5%
Currently living with	
Alone	27.3%
Family	47.9%
Friends	18.2%
Hostel	5.8%
Specialization of internship	
Criminal Law	31.4%
Non-Criminal Law	27.2%
Criminal and Non-Criminal	40.5%
Current year of degree	
4 th	40.5%
5 th	58.7%
Whom have you dealt with	
Offenders	21.5%
Victims	50.4%
Both	27.2%
Have clients experiences traumatized you	
Yes	45.5%
No	53.7%
Have you undergone any trauma training	
Yes	0%
No	100%
Have you been exposed to traumatic cases	
Yes	100%
No	0%

The demographic details of the sample are given in Table 1. The groups were compared on demographic variables using Mann-Whitney U Test. Across the sample there are no significant differences in geographical origin; ($U = 509.00$; $p = .410$), relationship status; ($U = 991.500$; $p = .089$), year of degree(experience) ($U = 1490$; $p = .301$). Kruskal Wallis test further demonstrated no significant differences in age; ($\chi^2(2) = 3.118$; $p = .210$), currently living with ($\chi^2(3) = 1.167$; $p = .761$), whom they have worked with; ($\chi^2(2) = .412$; $p = .814$). There were no significant differences in experiencing vicarious trauma by those working with victims or offenders and those working in criminal, noncriminal and varied internship specializations respectively: ($\chi^2(2) = .412$; $p = .814$); ($\chi^2(2) = .235$; $p = .889$). The results showed the experience of vicarious trauma was higher in 4th year (mean rank = 63.80) than 5th year (mean rank = 58.23), ($U = 613.00$, $z = -2.611$, $p = .00$). Additionally, results indicated that 46% ($n = 55$) of the total sample ($N = 120$) endorsed having been traumatized by client's experiences after being exposed to traumatic cases. (Table 1) All participants experienced varying degrees of vicarious trauma and were categorized into three groups i.e. high, moderate and low (Vrklevski & Franklin, 2008) with 19(15.7%), 79(65.3%) and 22(18.2%) in each group respectively (Table 1). This study shows inconsistency with past literature since the level of vicarious trauma across criminal law, noncriminal law and individuals who specialized in both did not show a significant difference.

Vicarious Trauma across Group

Table 2. Mann Whitney U Test to Compare the Scores on Vicarious Trauma Scale in males and females.

	Group	N	Mann Whitney U	Asymp Sig
VTS	Male	60	1124.00	.00
	Female	60		

Note. VTS= Vicarious Trauma Scale

The Mann-Whitney U test was used to assess differences between males and females in the total vicarious trauma scale scores (Table 2). The Vicarious trauma scale scores for females (mean rank = 71.77) is significantly higher than for males (mean rank = 49.23), $U = 1124.00$, $z = -3.555$, $p = .00$. This effect can be described as small ($r = .10$).

Personality and Vicarious Trauma

Table 3. Correlation between Big Five Personality and Vicarious Trauma measures .

	Mean	Standard Deviation	VTSr _s
Extraversion	25.84	6.645	-.458*
Agreeableness	31.83	5.892	-.080
Conscientiousness	30.16	5.839	-1.53
Neuroticism	24.63	6.984	.471*
Openness to experience	36.53	4.649	-.022

Note. * $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed); r_s = Spearman's correlations; VTS= Vicarious Trauma Scale.

Bivariate correlation (Spearman's Rho) was used to examine the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and vicarious trauma reactions across the entire sample (Table 3). Extraversion is inversely related to vicarious trauma ($p = .000$) and neuroticism is significantly positively correlated with scores on the vicarious trauma scale ($p = .000$) suggesting that individuals who score high on neuroticism have higher levels of Vicarious trauma.

Social Support and Vicarious Trauma

Table 4. Correlation between Social support and Vicarious Trauma measures .

	Mean	Standard Deviation	VTS r_s
MSOPSS	65.41	13.826	-.142*

Note. * $p > 0.01$ (two-tailed); r_s = Spearman's correlations; VTS= Vicarious Trauma Scale; MSOPSS= Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

Bivariate correlation (Spearman's Rho) were used to examine the association between perceived social support and vicarious trauma reactions across the entire sample (Table 4). Perceived social support is negatively correlated with vicarious trauma indicating higher social support, lesser the trauma experienced. But, this association is not significant.

Predictor Variables of Vicarious Trauma**Table 5. Predictors of Vicarious Trauma among Law students.**

Independent Variable	B	T	r square	F	Durbin-Watson
Gender	.254	3.252**	.348	10.063	2.143
Extraversion	.098	-3.521**			
Neuroticism	.094	3.213**			

Note. Dependent variable: Vicarious Trauma, **p <0.01

The results indicate that gender, neuroticism and extroversion explain 31.4% of variability in vicarious trauma in the population and 34.8% of variability in vicarious trauma in the selected sample. Since $f(6,119) = 10.063$; $p < 0.01$ (Table 5) indicating results are significant and good fit for data. This further suggests gender, extraversion and Neuroticism help in predicting vicarious trauma.

Discussion

The overall results support the prevalence of vicarious trauma in law students exposed to trauma through exposure to traumatic cases (Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996). Based on the socio-demographics, it is suggested that trainees who indulge with offenders or victims of offense experience indistinguishable effects of vicarious trauma. Those who deal with offenders have to manage strong emotional reactions of anger, disgust, etc. due to the client's stories of perpetration and deviant fantasies which are traumatic in nature. On the other hand, trainees dealing with victims experience a decreased sense of safety and disrupted cognitive schemas (Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995). This finding is consistent with previous literature suggesting professionals dealing with both survivors and perpetrators experience similar vicarious trauma effects (Way et al, 2004).

Another finding from this sample reveals that the trainee's specialization i.e. criminal or non-criminal does not lead to alteration in experiencing vicarious trauma. This might be due to the nature of legal-work which is trauma provoking, as both criminals, as well as non-criminal work, poses a major threat to the safety and well-being of the individual. This finding is inconsistent with previous studies suggesting those who deal with criminal cases report higher levels of self-reported vicarious trauma, stress, depression, and cognitive changes (Levin & Greisberg, 2003; Vrkleviski & Franklin, 2008). Furthermore, qualitative analysis would help gather additional information with respect to, what aspects of law work are most distressing.

It was observed, students in their 4th -year reported significantly higher levels of vicarious trauma than those in 5th year with more internship experience. This may occur due to incompetency to deal with trauma-related work and subsequent inability to seek reliable supervision and support due to negligent attitude towards beginners at internship sites. Also, students with lesser experience may not have well-established coping strategies, especially if they have inadequate knowledge about vicarious trauma. This finding is in

line with previous studies suggesting that students with lesser experience are more likely to experience countertransference issues (Stoltenberg et al., 1994; Tyron, 1996). Therefore, close supervision is required for new trainees working with traumatic cases.

Consistent with the existing researches (Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995; Adams & Rigs, 2008) the hypothesis that females would score higher on vicarious trauma scale in comparison to their male counterparts is supported in this study, suggesting that females tend to have a lower capacity to deal with repetitive traumatic cases. These findings offer further support to Vrkleviski and Franklin's (2008) research that female lawyers are at a greater risk of suffering from vicarious trauma. It is indicated that gender as a construct, can be utilized for predicting vicarious trauma. As compared to the inconsistency in past literature, this study claims that gender differences in the development of vicarious trauma exist. Therefore, additional preparation training and counseling is required to reduce the risk of development of vicarious trauma in females.

Investigations into the relationship between big five personality factors and vicarious trauma are consistent with the current hypothesis and previous research that personality traits influence vicarious trauma (Maltby et al., 2010). It was revealed that individuals, who score high on neuroticism, are more susceptible to experience higher levels of vicarious trauma. High levels of neuroticism, or low emotional stability, is also a useful personality predictor as it places individuals at a higher risk of experiencing both intrinsic and extrinsic symptoms of vicarious trauma. Additionally, individuals who show higher levels of extraversion are less susceptible to score high on vicarious trauma scale. This can be attributed to the idea that extroverts do not internalize their problems easily, resulting in a less likely outcome of being adversely affected by vicarious trauma. On the other hand, people who score high on neuroticism, tend to internalize their problems, resulting in lower levels of self-efficacy which is marked by high levels of stress and anxiety.

The findings on social support do not support the current hypothesis and are contrary to findings from previous researches on social support in practicing lawyers (Maguire & Byrne, 2016). This study revealed that social support is not significantly related to vicarious trauma, indicating that high level of social support cannot always mitigate and serve as a protective factor to reduce vulnerability to develop vicarious trauma. This contrast can be attributed to the attempt made by legal professionals to detach themselves in order to protect their social-support system from tertiary exposure to trauma-related work. Therefore, they avoid discussing work-related issues, when away from their jobs.

Additionally, the inconsistency from the existing body of literature can be due to the long-term damaging effects on interpersonal functioning as a result of repetitive trauma experienced due to dealing with traumatic cases (Campbell, 2015). Since intimate relationships are often compromised, both low and high levels of social support might not serve as a protective role against the development of vicarious trauma among law students. The constructivist self-development theory also asserts that interpersonal memory systems get disrupted and fragmented due to traumatic experiences, which hampers the ability to maintain healthy relationships (Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995). Therefore, professionals who have been traumatized on account of listening to others, lose the ability to utilize social support as a protective factor against vicarious trauma. These conclusions must be taken cautiously because it is unknown what type of trauma the participants experienced.

Implications and Future Research

The overall findings support the theoretical framework regarding vicarious trauma. These findings serve critical implications for institutions, trainers, and supervisors of graduate students in law programs.

This is the first study focused on vicarious trauma in the Indian context that directly targets mental illness at the level of institutions and communities to assist aspiring lawyers to be aware of the potential risk factors leading to vicarious trauma. This kind of awareness would reduce high turnover rates among legal professionals.

Since this study revealed the prevalence of vicarious trauma in law students, the current findings support Bober & Regehr's (2006) suggestion that strategies used to reduce negative symptoms associated with trauma work should be aimed at the institutional level. These interventions should include substantial trauma-specific training in the form of a full semester of coursework or intensive workshops to assist those adversely affected by trauma work.

From an institutional viewpoint, personality as a predictor is encouraging news that can be utilized by institutions in the screening and selection of individuals. Especially, law schools may not attract or admit individuals scoring high on neuroticism.

The current findings rule out social support from friends, family, and significant others as a protective factor, implying, there is an urgent need for a multidisciplinary staff to provide appropriate supervision and support for law students. Therefore there is a need for exploration of other potentially protective factors in an effort to understand and meet the needs of these students.

Future research should help set grounds for psycho-education, with the purpose of prevention for aspiring lawyers. The main focus should be on assessing the protective factors and executing these supports to varied professions exposed to distressing information at work. This work would then form a basis for incorporating interventions for legal professionals at both; training and professional levels to safeguard individuals from the negative consequences of traumatic work. A longitudinal collection of data consisting of a larger sample size of students would facilitate the building of this model.

Limitations

There are a few methodological limitations that suggest caution in the interpretation of the findings in this exploratory study. Despite using measures with high validity and reliability, results might be influenced by response biases like minimization, less self-awareness /insight, or concerns with confidentiality. The literature suggests multiple trauma history of the individual is associated with greater vicarious trauma effects. This is not tapped in this study making it unclear whether responses in questionnaires are related to primary traumatic events or to the effects of working with traumatic cases. This study does not look into institutional or organizational factors related to vicarious trauma. Further limitations arise due to the subjective nature of self-report measures utilized to investigate vicarious trauma. Since these measures rely completely on participants to acknowledge and accept the existence of symptoms which might create bias in how individuals attach meaning to such experiences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study extends the current body of literature on vicarious trauma to a sample of law students who are adversely affected by exposure to traumatic cases. What emerges from this study is that females and students whose personality is characterized by low extraversion and high neuroticism are more vulnerable to develop vicarious trauma. From this study, it is speculated that educators/ trainers should employ intervention strategies that are targeted at the institutional level to ensure that aspiring lawyers are well-equipped and prepared prior to working with traumatized clients. Future research should emphasize on supporting these claims and recommendations to prevent the psychological impact of trauma on law student trainees. Overall, we encourage promoting the well-being of law students through legal education using strategies such as supervised training and curriculum renewal.

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