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# An Analysis of Research on Secondary Traumatic Stress in Korea

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#### **Abstract**

**Objectives:** Given that research on secondary traumatic stress in Korea is in its beginning phase, the current research is aimed to investigate research trends on the topic in Korea to provide directions for future research. **Method/Statistical Analysis:** To this end, 16 domestic articles about secondary traumatic stress, registered (or nominated to be) in the National Research Foundation of Korea, were examined. Using content analysis, these studies were analyzed according to subjects of research, research themes, and the methodologies used. **Findings:** According to the results of the study, the subjects of research in the field of secondary traumatic stress were mainly child protective service workers providing direct services to abused children and/or their parents. Major themes found in this study were level of secondary traumatic stress, factors affecting secondary traumatic stress, and relationship between secondary traumatic stress and some variables of interests. With regard to methodologies, quantitative methodology was used frequently. Very few studies used qualitative, mixed method, or literature review. **Improvements/Applications:** Findings of the study suggested needs for conducting more research and extending the scope of research subjects, themes, and research designs in this filed.

**Keywords:** Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, Research Trends, Secondary Traumatic Stress, Vicarious Traumatization

## 1. Introduction

Helping professionals working with trauma victims often tend to be revealed to specific stories of traumatic incidents while offering services to those trauma survivors. It has been proposed that helping professionals' exposure to the victims' trauma experiences may lead to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)-like symptoms or trauma related cognitive changes of the service providers. These phenomenon is called Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)<sup>1</sup>. According to<sup>2</sup> STS refers to "the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other [or] the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (p.1435)<sup>2</sup>.

STS is similar to PTSD in many ways including symptoms. However, while PTSD results from experiencing a direct traumatic evet, STS is related to experiencing indirect traumatic incident. That is, STS occurs as a result

of knowing and indirectly engaging with someone's traumatizing event (e.g., repeatedly listening to trauma victim's trauma related stories) in therapeutic relationship.

STS tends to be interchangeably used with some constructs including vicarious traumatization and compassion fatigue. Although these constructs overlap, subtle differences exist between them. Vicarious traumatization has something to do with the change of the service provider's inner experience and highlights cognitive changes about self, others, and the world (e.g., negative cognitive shift in therapists' worldview). Compassion fatigue is defined as the overall experience of emotional and physical fatigue (e.g., reduced empathic capacity) resulting from being exposed to traumatized individuals.

When affected by STS, therapists' cognitive schema could be changed, which could affect feelings,

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relationships, and life of therapists2. In particular, therapists exposed to traumatic events and traumatized clients may experience cognitive schema alteration or disruption in the five psychological needs including safety, trust, esteem for self and other people, control, and intimacy. Symptoms of STS also involve intrusive thoughts and images; distressing emotions; physiological arousal; and functional impairment<sup>2</sup>. Research on STS is needed because STS not only has negative consequences on helping professionals but also subsequently affects their helping process. Research showed that helpers suffering from STS can adversely affect helpers' abilities to make appropriate clinical judgments (e.g., misdiagnosis) during therapeutic work<sup>3</sup>. In order to provide effective and ethical service to clients, research exploring prevention and/or coping interventions regarding STS is important.

High proportion of helping professionals is at risk of experiencing STS. For example, 34% of workers in the field of child welfare were found to experience STS symptoms<sup>3</sup> and 55% of the sexual abuse counselors were reported to suffer from STS<sup>4</sup>. The phenomenon of STS has been recognized over the past two decades in the United States and mounting research has been conducted on this topic. However, STS is relatively less familiar and under-researched in Korea<sup>5</sup>. Despite lack of attention given to STS in Korea, several studies have shown that practitioners working with trauma victims suffer from STS<sup>5-7</sup>. Considering negative impacts on helping professionals and potentially clients, examining current status of research on STS in Korea is needed as a way to apprehend research trend to date and suggest directions for future research in this field.

The topic of STS among helping professionals has been widely studied in the United States. Extensive research has examined various subjects related to STS. A number of studies have identified individual risk and protective factors regarding the occurrence of STS. They found that individual characteristics such as a service provider's history of traumatic experiences and psychological difficulties can act as risk factors of STS8-10. On the other hand, having organizational and social support, being older, higher education level and socioeconomic status can generally play a role of mitigating the occurrence of STS8-10. At the macro level, factors which may cause or mitigate the occurrence of STS within organization have been examined. Some research have found that organizational characteristics such as bureaucratic constraints, inadequate supervision, lack of availability

of client resources, and lack of support from professional colleagues may contribute to the development of STS<sup>9,11</sup>. Although some literature on STS yielded mixed findings on STS-related subjects (e.g., associations between some factors and STS<sup>12</sup>) there has been abundance of research on this subject.

However, despite of increased awareness of STS, little research has been devoted to explore this subject in Korea. There has been a paucity of research in terms of quantity and no research has given attention to provide an overall picture of STS research up to date. Given the importance and prevalence of STS<sup>5</sup> there has been increasing awareness of the need for scholastic inquiry in this field. Thus, research effort to analyze research trends of STS in Korea has value at this time because it would add further research insights and potentially form the basis for research and practice.

# 2. Methodology

For the purpose of analyzing research trends in secondary traumatic stress in Korea, this study reviewed domestic articles only that are registered (or nominated to be) in the National Research Foundation of Korea up to date. The time period for selection of articles was not particularly set in this study because this study is the first research effort to review domestic studies on STS. The search was then filtered for articles that include "secondary traumatic stress" as key word. For classification of category of the articles selected, this study referred to that of past review research<sup>13</sup>. As a result, the articles were analyzed according to subjects of research, research themes, and the methodologies used.

# 3. Study Results

A total of 17 studies were found through computerized search. One study was excluded due to the lack of its relevance to the subject of interest. Using content analysis, the present study finally analyzed a total of 16 domestic articles in the area of STS. The results of the analysis are described in the below.

# 3.1 Subjects of Research

The majority of research subjects were child protective service workers providing direct services (e.g., counseling, case management) to abused children and/or their

parents in child welfare settings (Table 1). Eight studies were conducted with this population of research subject (Table 1). There were three studies that included service providers working with survivors of sexual assault and spouse abuse as research subjects (Table 1). Public social welfare specialists were included as research subject in two studies (Table 1). In addition to these research subjects, fire fighters, individuals working in emergency settings (e.g., emergency medical technicians, emergency nurses), and mental health social workers were included in the rest of the studies. Across the studies, research subjects were mostly females and males occupied relatively small percentage. The age range of the subjects was from 20's to 50's. The sample size of the 12 quantitative studies ranged from 238 to 654 individuals. The number of participants in the qualitative studies ranged from 5 to 10 individuals. Interestingly, while most studies used current service providers as research subjects, one study14 included retired child protective service workers to inquire their STS experiencing processes and its influence affecting their lives even after their retirement.

#### 3.2 Research Themes

The present study categorized research in STS into five different themes: level of STS, factors influencing STS, relationship between STS and some variables (e.g., job satisfaction, burnout, physical symptoms), evaluation and validation of STS measurement, and subjective experiences of workers experiencing STS. First of all, among them, examining STS prevalence and factors influencing STS was the research theme that most frequently appeared (Table 2). Studies in this area tapped into individual variables such as age, gender, level of education, health, service provider's personal trauma history, psychological state, and coping strategy. Such occupational variables as years of work, trauma work-

loads, working hours, supervision, security concerns, job satisfaction, and vocational self-efficacy were examined as related factors of STS. For instance<sup>15</sup> found that work hours, chronic disease, physical violence and threats, avoidance-oriented coping strategy, and vocational selfefficacy were significantly related to higher STS among women public social welfare specialists.In<sup>2</sup> also found that such individual factors as stress, young aged, and being female were significantly related with high level of STS among child service protective workers. All of these studies investigating related factors of STS examined level of STS among research participants and found high level of STS. For example, a study16 on determinants of STS among public social welfare specialists showed that 69.0% of the subjects experienced STS and 36.9% of them were in a high-risk group. The prevalence of STS was also found to be high among service providers working with domestic violence and sexual assault victims. For example, found that the mean score of STS among service providers working for victimized women was 38.697, which means that more than half of respondents were in need of clinical attention.

Secondly, there were also studies that attempted to investigate relationship between STS and some variables of interests and 2 studies were done for this purpose (Table 2). In<sup>12</sup>, for instance, examined moderating effects of ego-resilience and social support between STS and job satisfaction among mental health social workers. This study found that STS and job satisfaction is significantly related to each other. This study also demonstrated the moderating effect of ego-resilience on the relationship between STS and job satisfaction. However, social support was found to show no moderating role between STS and job satisfaction. Another study<sup>5</sup> investigated relationship between job characteristics such as role conflict, workload, and self-efficacy, STS, and burnout of

**Table 1.** Research subjects

Service workers in child welfare settings	Service workers in domestic violence settings	Public social welfare specialists	Others	Total
8	3	2	3	16

Table 2. Research themes

Level of STS & factors affecting STS	Relationship between STS and some variables	Examination of STS measurement	Subjective experiences of workers experiencing STS	others	Total
8	2	2	2	2	16

social workers who are engaged with work for victims of child abuse, spouse abuse, and sexual assault. This study found that STS mediated the influence of those job characteristics on burnout.

Third, evaluation and validation of STS measurement was main research theme in 2 studies (Table 2). In<sup>18,19</sup> developed the measurement for STS of Korean helping professionals and tested the psychometric properties of the measurement. The results of these studies showed that the measurement can be used for helping professionals to measure the level of STS in trauma related field practice.

Fourth, exploring subjective experiences of workers exposed to STS was another theme of interest. Two studies were done for this research purpose and qualitative methodologies were used in these studies (Table 2). For instance<sup>20</sup> investigated child welfare social workers' experience in coping with STS. They found that the central phenomenon was 'persistently coping with anxiety and pain'. The term of cause-and-effect on the central phenomena was 'the dreadful field which was unforeseeable. The term of contexts appeared as 'losing sense of direction and being indecisive, 'being under pressure by the heal of workload, 'the lack of the legal position and the administrative support. The action/interaction strategies for adjusting the central phenomena were: 'avoiding', 'confronting reality', and 'progressing assertively'. Another study<sup>14</sup> tried to explore STS-related experiences of workers in more depth. This study was interesting in that it included retired child protective service workers to inquire their STS experiencing processes and its influence affecting their lives even after their retirement. This study found that STS affected lives of the retired workers and suggested a system for the worker to realize themselves the STS, and support base, network and concrete alternatives through which they are able to relieve the STS.

Lastly, other themes appeared in this field (Table 2). Mentioning intervention models in the United States, one study<sup>21</sup> introduced STS and examined overall issues of STS. Given that STS and burnout tend to use interchangeably in research, a study<sup>22</sup> was done to examine whether STS and burnout differ, being significantly affected by different variables of each own.

### 3.3 Research Methodologies

The results of the analysis revealed that the most of the studies used quantitative methodologies. 12 studies were conducted using quantitative methodologies (Table 3). Such quantitative methods as T-test, ANOVA, or regression, were used frequently. Some studies used more sophisticated quantitative methods (e.g., LISREL, AMOS) to examine relationships among measurement variables. For example<sup>5</sup> investigated relationship between job characteristics such as role conflict, workload, and self-efficacy, STS, and burnout of social workers who are providing services to victims of child abuse, spouse abuse, and sexual assault. This study found that STS mediated the influence of those job characteristics on burnout. More sophisticated methodology as such can contribute to the advancement of knowledge on STS. The analysis revealed that 2 studies used qualitative methods (Table 3). More specifically, grounded theory and phenomenological methodology were used in these studies to explore STSrelated experiences of research subjects in more depth. The remaining 2 studies used mixed methodology and literature review (Table 3).

Table 3. Research methodology

Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed	Literature review	Total
12	2	1	1	16

#### 4. Conclusion

The present study reviewed research articles in the area of STS with a purpose to examine research trends in this area. Several issues were emerged as a result. First of all, it is noted that despite the importance of the research topic, there appears to be a dearth of published scholarship on STS in Korea. Only 16 studies have been conducted up to date and thus our knowledge on the topic is in its early stage. In order to have better understanding of STS, more research effort needs to be made in the future.

Second, the scope of subjects and themes of STS research appeared limited. For instance, as for research subject, much of the STS studies have included service providers working in child or women violence protective agencies. In terms of research themes, main focus of the studies has been on examining factors affecting STS. More extensive research endeavor to identify and examine diverse research subjects and themes would be beneficial in order to develop more accurate and comprehensive understanding of STS. Future research could examine the magnitude, severity, and related factors of STS in more diverse populations of helping professionals other

than workers providing services to the victims of child or women abuse. Given that work place in the human service field tends to offer a broad variety of work schedule (e.g., part-time), it will be scholarly meaningful to explore if or how work schedule is related to STS among workers. Despite risks of being involved with victims, research has shown that service providers recognized the experience of working with victims rewarding and meaningful. They reported that the experiences have provided opportunities to gain a deeper insight into inner selves, their views about world and human and personal value23 which leads to the development of better selves and maturity. The topic of posttraumatic growth can be one of the research themes which would add further insights into STS. Also, analysis of research trends in this area has revealed that organization factors in relation to STS have been under researched. For example, research effort to explore strategies to prevent unfavorable impacts and foster favorable results for workers at organizational level is scarce. Examining such macro-level factors would be beneficial in capturing a more accurate picture of STS and providing implications for practice.

Finally, in terms of research design and methods, this study found that quantitative methodologies have been used frequently in this research field. Quantitative methodologies were used for the purpose of investigating impacts of certain factors on STS or relationship between certain factors and STS. Although some studies<sup>5,17</sup> used more sophisticated quantitative methodologies, research effort to explore how STS interferes with other critical negative (e.g., burnout) and positive (e.g., posttraumatic growth) outcomes still lacks. Such research effort can offer important knowledge about the mechanisms related to onset and the maintenance of mental health problems. This knowledge, in turn, can contribute to offer evidence-based interventions in practice. Along with the quantitative approaches to examine the topic of STS, qualitative methodologies could help to explore STS experiences from study participants' views, which, in turn, would yield more comprehensive features of STS. Further, to confirm suggested relationship between STS and certain factors, conducting studies using larger samples would be fruitful. Finally, conducting longitudinal research will be worthwhile to attempt to figure out how service provider experience affects STS. Research on STS up to date has been conducted based on cross-sectional designs and results from these studies do not allow consideration of how experience of service providers have changed over time and/or how the experience affects STS at various later points in time<sup>23</sup>. Thus conducting longitudinal study can help to more clearly understand the issue of STS.

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