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# Holding the Justice Divide: How Social Workers Serving Clients from the Rival Group in Conflict Zones Cope with Divergent Perceptions of Intergroup Justice

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## Abstract

Social workers who serve clients affiliated with the rival side of a protracted political conflict occupy an unusual professional position. The people they are mandated to help belong to the collective that their own group regards as adversary, and the two parties frequently hold incompatible understandings of who was wronged, who bears responsibility, and what a just outcome would require. This article examines how practitioners manage the distance between their own perceptions of intergroup justice and those of their clients. Bringing together the clinical social work literature on practice in conflict-ridden settings and the social psychology of intractable conflict, the discussion maps the sources of the justice gap, the ways it surfaces in the helping relationship, and the strategies practitioners use to cope with it. These range from silence and the recasting of political difference as cultural difference, through the bracketing of personal conviction behind the professional role, to relational approaches that attend to the differential emotional needs of clients from victimized and perpetrator-associated groups. The analysis argues that avoidance protects the working alliance at the cost of reproducing the asymmetries of the conflict inside the consulting room, and that cultural sensitivity by itself is insufficient. A reflexive, politically aware, and justice-conscious practice is proposed.

**Keywords:** social work, political conflict, intergroup justice, competitive victimhood, cultural competence, coping

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## 1. Introduction

In societies marked by protracted political conflict, the boundary between adversary groups rarely stops at the door of the welfare office or the clinic. Social workers are routinely called upon to assist clients who belong to the group on the other side of that boundary, and the encounter carries a charge that ordinary cross-cultural practice does not (Baum, 2011). The client may be perceived, however reluctantly, as a representative of the enemy collective, and the worker may be perceived by the client in much the same way (Baum, 2011). Beneath the immediate clinical task lies a deeper divergence, because the two parties often understand the moral history of the conflict in fundamentally different ways. They disagree about who the

victims are, who is responsible, and what would count as justice (Bar-Tal, 2007; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998).

This divergence, which can be termed the intergroup justice gap, is the concern of the present discussion. This article examines how social workers who serve clients from the rival group cope with the distance between their own perceptions of justice and those of the people they help. It first locates the justice gap in the social psychology of intractable conflict, then considers how the gap surfaces within the helping relationship, and finally analyses the repertoire of coping strategies that practitioners adopt, weighing their benefits and their costs. The Israeli setting, in which a substantial body of empirical work has accumulated, supplies many of the illustrations, although the dynamics it describes recur wherever helping professionals work across the lines of a violent and unresolved conflict (Boetto, 2025).

## 2. Divergent Perceptions of Justice in Protracted Conflict

Intractable conflicts are violent, enduring, and experienced by those who live through them as existential and zero-sum (Bar-Tal, 2007; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). Over time each society develops a shared ethos and collective memory that explain the conflict, justify the goals of the in-group, and cast the rival group in delegitimizing terms (Bar-Tal, 2007). A central element of this outlook is a sense of self-perceived collective victimhood, in which the in-group understands itself as the party that has suffered unjustly (Bar-Tal, 2007). Because both sides typically hold this belief at the same time, the result is competitive victimhood, a contest over which group has endured the greater wrong (Noor et al., 2012). Such claims are not merely descriptive. They perform psychological work by securing the moral legitimacy of the in-group, deflecting responsibility for harm done to the other side, and mobilizing support (Noor et al., 2012).

Perceptions of justice follow directly from these narratives. If one's own group is the principal victim, justice is readily understood as redress, recognition, and the restoration of what was taken, and the suffering of the other group, when it is acknowledged at all, is treated as secondary. The two parties therefore arrive at the encounter with asymmetrical and often irreconcilable accounts of what fairness demands. The needs-based model of reconciliation clarifies what is at stake emotionally in this asymmetry. Members of a victimized group experience a threat to their sense of agency and power and seek empowerment, whereas members of a group cast as perpetrator experience a threat to their moral image and seek acceptance (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). These needs operate at the level of the group as well as the individual (Shnabel et al., 2009). The difficulty is compounded by the fact that group members often see themselves as both wronged and wronging at once, a duality that competitive narratives work to suppress (Simantov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014).

## 3. The Practitioner Positioned Across the Divide

When the helping relationship crosses the conflict line, these collective dynamics enter the room with the two people in it. Baum (2011) identified three features that set therapy with a client from the opposing side apart from other forms of cross-cultural practice: the felt presence of the enemy in the consulting room, the worker's mistrust of the client as a representative of the rival group, and the client's guilt toward the worker as a representative of the injured group. The task is therefore not only to bridge differences of language, custom, and worldview but to manage the affective residue of a moral conflict in which both parties are implicated (Baum, 2007).

The position is not symmetrical, and its character depends on where the worker stands. A practitioner from the majority group serving a client from a minoritized rival group brings the power of the dominant group into a relationship that is already unequal, and the client's

experience of historical and continuing injustice may be present in the room whether or not it is named (Allasad Alhuzail et al., 2024). A practitioner from a minoritized group serving majority-group clients faces the reverse predicament. In a study of Palestinian social workers in Israel working with Jewish clients, Kadan et al. (2017) found that these encounters were saturated with tension, fear, anger, and at times hatred, and that workers managed them through a limited set of strategies that included avoidance, the reversal of the usual power relation, open confrontation, the minimizing of differences, and the deliberate use of differences. On both sides, the national and professional identities of practitioners are difficult to disentangle, and external political events readily penetrate the workplace and the relationships within it (Lev et al., 2024).

#### **4. How the Justice Gap Surfaces in Practice**

The justice gap rarely announces itself as an explicit argument about politics. More often it appears obliquely: in a client's account of an event that the worker would narrate quite differently, in expressions of grievance that implicate the worker's own community, in mutual silences, or in the worker's private difficulty in extending empathy to a person associated with the group held responsible for harm. Violent political conflict can distort assessment and intervention with members of the rival community in ways that practitioners do not always recognize, and neither good intentions nor cultural knowledge prevents these distortions on their own (Baum, 2007). The mistrust that can mark these relationships shades easily into a guardedness that the client perceives, while the worker's awareness of the client's grievance can produce a guilt or defensiveness that narrows the space for the work (Baum, 2011).

#### **5. Strategies for Coping with the Justice Gap**

Practitioners do not generally confront the justice gap head on. They develop, more or less deliberately, a repertoire of strategies for keeping the relationship workable in its presence. These strategies differ in how much of the gap they acknowledge and in what they cost.

##### **5.1. Silence and the Avoidance of the Political**

The most widely reported response is to keep the conflict, and the competing claims of justice bound up with it, out of the encounter altogether. In their study of Palestinian and Jewish social workers during a period of acute political violence, Ali-Saleh Darawshy et al. (2024) found that most practitioners coped by remaining silent on political matters, and they traced the subjects on which silence was kept, the reasons for it, and the rare occasions on which it was broken. Silence of this kind has a protective logic, because it shields the working alliance from a dispute that neither party can win and that the setting is poorly equipped to hold (Baum, 2007). Its protection is nonetheless partial, since the unspoken conflict continues to shape what each party feels able to say and how each interprets the other.

##### **5.2. Recasting Justice as Culture**

A second strategy reframes a political and moral divergence as a difference of culture, to be managed with the familiar tools of cultural sensitivity. This move is appealing because it converts an unfamiliar and threatening problem into one for which the profession already has language and technique. Yet cultural sensitivity, while necessary, is not enough in conflict-ridden settings, because the dynamics introduced by violent political conflict are not reducible to cultural difference (Baum, 2007). A framework that treats global and local conflict as a distinct domain of practice, rather than a variant of cultural diversity, is better matched to what these encounters demand (Boetto, 2025).

### **5.3. Bracketing the Self Behind the Professional Role**

A third strategy appeals to professional ethics and a shared humanism, setting the worker's national and political self apart from professional conduct. Practitioners often hold these identities apart, foregrounding humanistic and professional values while keeping their own convictions about the conflict out of view (Lev et al., 2024). This separation can sustain a sense of integrity and protect the client from the worker's politics, but it is effortful and incomplete, because the personal, the national, and the professional are not fully separable in a context where the conflict permeates daily life (Lev et al., 2024).

### **5.4. Strategies Particular to Minoritized Practitioners**

Where the worker belongs to the minoritized group and the client to the dominant one, the coping repertoire takes a distinctive shape. Kadan et al. (2017) described responses that ranged from avoidance to a reversal of the customary power relation, in which the professional role temporarily inverts the social hierarchy, and from the minimizing of group differences to their deliberate use within the work, as well as moments of open confrontation. These strategies show that coping is not only a matter of damping conflict down. It can also involve drawing on professional authority to renegotiate, however briefly, an asymmetry that the worker experiences in the surrounding society (Kadan et al., 2017).

### **5.5. Attending to Differential Emotional Needs**

A more relational approach treats the justice gap not as a debate to be avoided or won but as a configuration of unmet emotional needs to be addressed. The needs-based model suggests that a client from a victimized group is helped by communications that restore a sense of agency and power, whereas a client from a group associated with perpetration is helped by communications that affirm acceptance and moral standing (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Shnabel et al., 2009). Read in this way, the worker's challenge is less to adjudicate competing claims of justice than to discern which need the client brings and to respond to it, a reframing that turns an impasse of conviction into a task of attunement.

### **5.6. Holding Both Narratives**

Finally, some practitioners work toward holding both accounts of justice at once rather than choosing between them. Experimental evidence indicates that inclusive framings, which recognize that each group has been both harmed and harmful, can reduce competitive victimhood (Simantov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014), and that recategorizing the parties into a shared identity, whether as common victims or as common perpetrators, can lower competitive victimhood and ease forgiveness (Shnabel et al., 2013). Within the dyad, this looks like acknowledging the client's suffering fully without erasing the suffering of the worker's own community, and resisting the pull of a narrative in which only one side can be wronged.

### **5.7. Reflexive Supervision and Collegial Support**

None of these strategies can be sustained in isolation. Reducing the distortions that conflict introduces into practice calls for deliberate preparation and ongoing reflection rather than reliance on good will (Baum, 2007). Supervision, peer consultation, and attention to the worker's own well-being provide settings in which the emotional load of cross-line work can be examined rather than enacted, and in which silence itself can be made a subject of reflection (Boetto, 2025).

## 6. Integration and Critical Reflection

Across these strategies runs a tension between protecting the relationship and honoring the client's reality. Silence and the recasting of politics as culture both buy workability by removing the justice gap from view, and both exact a price. For a client from a minoritized group, the worker's refusal to name the conflict can reproduce, inside the helping relationship, the very erasure of grievance that marks the client's position in the wider society (Ali-Saleh Darawshy et al., 2024; Allassad Alhuzail et al., 2024). What is presented as professional neutrality may be received as a familiar asymmetry, in which the dominant account of events goes without saying and the subordinate one goes unspoken. The recognition that cultural sensitivity is necessary but not sufficient (Baum, 2007) points toward a practice willing to acknowledge the political and moral dimensions of the encounter rather than translating them into safer terms (Boetto, 2025).

The needs-based and inclusive-victimhood approaches are attractive because they convert an apparently irreconcilable clash of justice claims into something a practitioner can work with relationally (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Simantov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014). Their promise should be held with caution. The evidence for them comes largely from experimental social psychology, and transferring it to a real helping relationship raises questions that the experiments do not settle, including the risk of instrumentalizing the client's pain in the service of a smoother encounter and the place of the worker's own needs in an exchange that the model describes as reciprocal. What the more constructive responses share is reflexivity, the worker's capacity to recognize that their own perception of justice is itself a product of group membership and collective narrative (Bar-Tal, 2007), and therefore one account among others rather than the neutral measure against which the client's account is judged.

## 7. Implications for Practice, Education, and Research

For practice, the analysis favors a stance that neither forces the conflict into the open nor pretends it away. Where a client signals readiness, naming the justice gap can be more respectful than silence, provided the worker has the reflexive and supervisory support to hold what follows (Baum, 2007; Boetto, 2025). Attunement to the client's differential emotional needs offers a concrete alternative to debate (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), and sustained attention to the worker's own position guards against the unnoticed distortions that conflict produces (Baum, 2007).

For education, the implication is that preparation for practice across conflict lines should treat political awareness as a complement to cultural competence rather than a substitute for it, and should create settings in which students can examine the interplay of their personal, national, and professional identities (Boetto, 2025). For research, the evidence remains concentrated in a small number of settings and weighted toward the experiences of practitioners rather than measured outcomes for clients. The relational models drawn on here have rarely been tested inside the helping relationship itself, and comparative and longitudinal study of how coping strategies affect the working alliance and client outcomes would strengthen a literature that is still largely descriptive.

## 8. Conclusion

The gap between a social worker's perception of justice and that of a client from the rival group cannot be dissolved by the practitioner, because it is anchored in collective narratives that long predate the encounter and will outlast it (Bar-Tal, 2007). How the gap is handled, however, is within the worker's reach, and it matters. Silence and the translation of politics into culture keep the relationship moving but risk re-enacting the conflict's asymmetries in miniature. A practice

that is reflexive about the worker's own position, attentive to the differential emotional needs of the client, and able to hold more than one account of suffering at once offers a more durable footing. It does not promise resolution, but it allows the work to proceed without requiring the client to surrender the reality of their own grievance, which is itself a small act of justice in a setting where justice is contested.

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