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# Understanding the client resistance patterns at family court in Egypt: Implications for Social Work Practice

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#### **ABSTRACT:**

Practicing social workers face many challenges at Family Dispute Settlement Offices in family courts across Egypt. One of the most important barriers, as previous studies with Western populations have shown, is client resistance to change. The current study explores this professional practice barrier in social work within an Arab environment. The purpose of this study is to identify the patterns of client resistance at family court in Assiut city Egypt. The sample of this study consists of 30 social workers, 20 male, and 10 female, ages 20 through 49 years. Findings indicate that these social workers faced 25 patterns of resistance in family court. Finally, strategies for helping social workers deal with client resistance in family court in Egypt are suggested.

**KEYWORDS:** Client Resistance- Family Court - Family Dispute Settlement Offices, Egypt

## INTRODUCTION

In October 1956, Ruth Michaels wrote the first scientific article on the concept of client resistance in social work. Michaels points out that the first problem facing social workers in the medical care setting is that client's often surgical intervention, believing that their life and integrity are under assault. In order to keep the client alive, she or he must resist these medical efforts. Ruth emphasizes the need to pay attention to the problem of client resistance so as to ensure the success of medical efforts with the patient (Michaels, 1956).

The concept of client resistance in social work was first referred to in the mid 1980s, as manifestations of ambivalence and negative feeling. Arthur explains that this is a problem facing many social workers, particularly in the early days of their careers. Although practicing social workers are well-trained, they still face difficulties finding patterns of resistance when dealing with clients (Leder, 1985).

The concept of client resistance first appeared in the writings of Sigmund Freud in his studies of hysteria, in 1985. The resistance was first called "defense against painful experiences" and then in his study of neurosis as "distortion tricks" or "defensive mechanisms" (Cornillot, 2005, P148). In more detail, Freud stated this term when he published a short paper entitled 'The resistances to psychoanalysis in 1925. (Freud, 1925; Burnett-stuart, 2010; Otani, 1989).

In social work, the problem of resistance appears with large categories of clients, whether the clients are a voluntary client or an involuntary client. However, in most cases, resistance is more

pronounced with the involuntary client, as service is imposed on this client without obtaining the desire (Ibrahim, 2010).

Trotter (2015) indicates that there are many examples of involuntary client or mandated clients such the prisoners, drug addicts/users, juvenile delinquents, child or domestic abusers, etc (Trotter, 2015).

Fenchel and Flapan (1985) define resistance in the treatment setting as any behaviors that oppose the process of explorative therapy. Resistance is comprised of a number of defense mechanisms: the means by which the client defends himself from the pain that therapy may arouse (P30).

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

Wells (1990) notes that the essence of resistance is a client's negative attitudes toward the counselor or the counseling process. To counter resistance, the counselor must act in ways to establish positive attitudes (P.87).

Gitterman (1983) highlights that the problem of resistance emerges from strains in the encounter between client, worker, and agency and out of their respective efforts to maximize their control over the process. Allgood (1992) points to client's resistance to change as one of the most commonly addressed phenomena across all therapeutic theories in the clinical literature. He also notes that new therapists may have a difficult time effectively dealing with this issues (Allgood, Bischoff, Smith, & Salts, 1992).

Bernstein & Landaiche (1992) have also stressed that "without resistance, therapy cannot take place. A lack of resistance means that nothing is being directly encountered and worked through." (P7). It is required that social workers address client resistance before and during the treatment process (Bernstein & Landaiche, 1992).

Mahalik (1994) explains that resistance prevents open communication between client and therapists and blocks the client's conscious intention of cooperating with the counselor. Mahalik (1994) presents the Client Resistance Scale and categorizes patterns of resistance across 5 main dimensions: Opposing Expression of Painful Affect, Opposing Recollection of Material, Opposing Therapist, Opposing Change, and Opposing Insight. The scale contains 35-items in total. On the other hand, Hall (2003) classifies client resistance into the following four categories, in terms of the causes of resistance: caused by stress and trauma, delusions, cognitive impairment and client deceptiveness. Moreover, Mahalik (1994) explains that there are

both verbal and nonverbal forms of resistance, such as tardiness, forgetfulness, changing the subject, leaving out information, exaggerations, diversionary tactics (such as telling jokes), silence, hesitating prior to answering social worker's' questions, refusals to acknowledge that they have problems, and refusals to follow social workers' recommendations (Hall, Juhila, Parton, & Poso, 2003). Additionally, Strier & Bershtling (2016) identify clients' refusal to participate in intervention programs, ambivalence in complying with social services regulations, passive aggression, reluctance to change unwillingness to recognize risk behaviors, noncompliance to the rapeutic instructions or tasks. Chui & Ho (2006) also document examples of client resistance: avoiding seeing the social worker, missing interviews, being unwilling to talk about their personal feelings, and controlling the content of the conversation.

F. Newman (1994) explains and presents some client resistance client case examples; the client minimizes the potential positive effects of changing her behaviors, refused to complete these tasks, Intentionally forgetting; clients neglect to engage in their assignments; high levels of expressed emotion toward the therapist, from hostility to overt flirtation; avoidances in session; clients may state at the start of a session that they have "nothing to discuss today," or they may be prone to answer most of the therapist's salient, probing questions with the pat answer "I don't know".

The literature regarding client resistance indicates the importance of the investigation this concept more deeply and across all social work settings. Our study uses a sample of social workers in family court in Egypt so as to explore the barriers facing the social workers in family courts. In a relevant previous study, we found that 89% of participants identified numerous patterns of resistance to customers when dealing with spouses. (Ibrahim, 2017). The current study attempts to address the patterns of client resistance to change facing social workers at family courts across Egypt.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

# Social Work Practice in Family Court Setting across Egypt

Egypt is considered to be the first Arab and Islamic country to start a legalization of personal status. The provisions of the law has reached about 25 articles at this time. In view of the fact that these provisions are not addressed to many parts of the family, Law No. 44 of 2000 was issued. (10) Of 2004 establishing family courts. (Mansour, 1997).

Family courts have emerged across Egypt in response to an increase in family problems and their complexity, and the need for a specialized board to deal with these various issues. This led to the promulgation of Law No. (10) Of 2004, establishing family courts. Consequently, a family court now exists within each district court in Egypt (Ibrahim, 2017).

Imam (2007) defined the family court as "one of the judicial organs in the Egyptian environment concerned with dealing with family disputes and problems in a legal manner. The family courts go through three phases in the process of resolving family disputes between the parties to the conflict. These are: reconciliation, agreement, litigation." (P 1254)

One of the most important areas of professional practice for social workers across Egypt is in family court settings, within offices called Family Dispute Settlement Offices (FDSO). These offices are established directly under the Ministry of Justice. Social workers in these settings have the right to intervene between spouses in order to mediate an end to the family dispute in an amicable manner, rebalance social relations, promote balanced family interactions and preserve the primary cell of society (Al-Fakhani, 2009; Tharwat et al., 2007). The FDSO is usually composed of a president with legal experience and a number of psychologists and social workers.

The philosophy of the FDSO is restorative, relying on social, psychological and scientific considerations in accordance with the provisions of Articles 6 and 8 of Law No. 10 of 2004. The main objectives are promoting reform and stability between the spouses and in line with the interest of children. If an amicable solution cannot be reached, the FDSO resorts to rules of law as a consultative as a second option. (Salem, 2005). The FDSO are competent in dealing with all family issues, except for cases in which there may be no conciliation, urgent and very time-sensitive cases, and execution disputes. The FDSO is competent in the following disputes: all kinds of divorce; dislocation or conditioned divorce; family expenses; custody upbringing of a child; the right to see and visit a child; detention cases; obedience warning; marital life; and dowry issues (Ali, 2016). The FDSO gives their response to the dispute within fifteen days of the date of submission of the application (Abdul Hamid & Fawzi, 2007).

Social workers perform many tasks in the family court. These tasks include: conducting interviews with the parties, carefully examining their requests, clarifying the consequences of their disputes, and mediating between the parties to settle the dispute in an amicable manner to maintain family structure (Mabrouk, 2010; Takla, 2004).

# PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This cross-sectional study seeks to understand the patterns of client resistance to change which social workers face when they dealing with a dispute within Family Dispute Settlement Offices in family courts across Egypt. And determine the differences between client resistance patterns at family court in Egypt and Gender, client community variable.

# STUDY HYPOTHESES

- There are statistically significant differences between client resistance patterns at family court in Egypt and Gender variable.
- There are no statistically significant differences between client resistance patterns at family court in Egypt and client community variable.

# **METHOD**

# **Study Design:**

The current study is part of a cross-sectional study designed to assess the patterns of client resistance to change which facing social workers when they dealing with the parties to the dispute in Family Dispute Settlement Offices at family court in Egypt.

# **Study Sample:**

The study sample included 30 selected social workers across Egyptian family courts. Participants are given questionnaires to fill out. The selection of participants was based on a purposive sampling technique. Data was collected in 2018.

# **Data Collection Procedure and Ethical Considerations:**

For this study, we created and administered a survey with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, potential confidentiality issues, and informed consent to the respondents. Consent was obtained from each of the social workers. Letters were sent from the Department of Social Casework at Assiut University to family courts in the Assiut governorate of Egypt, before distributing surveys to social workers in Family Dispute Settlement Offices. The data collection process lasted for 25 days.

## **MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENT:**

The questionnaire consisted of 32 items and took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. 25 items were used to examine the patterns of client resistance to change faced by social workers in family courts across Egypt. 7 items were used to establish relevant demographics: age, education level, social status, and how many training courses were completed, if any. 14 items assess social workers' perceptions of professional requirements, 9 items assess professional knowledge requirements, 15 items assess the professional value requirements, and 8 items assess professional value requirements.

Response options were presented on a five-point Likert-scale assessing agreement with the stem: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4= agree, and 5 = strongly agree. The final instrument was reviewed for content validity by five social work professors with expertise in this area in order to assure that the survey content was appropriate. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha was used to calculate the internal consistency of the measurement scale. From the statistical analysis, it can be concluded that the instrument was reliable as a score of 0.801 was obtained for the items. See (Table 1). The table above shows that most of the coefficients of the variables have a high degree of reliability, thus their results are reliable, and the tool is finalized

Table (1) - Results of the Reliability of the client resistance Scale Using the Alpha Cronbach Coefficient and the Spearman-Brown correction

Dimension	The Spearman-Brown correction	Alpha Cronbach Coefficient	
Client resistance	0.821	0.878	

# ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the family court in Assiut. In addition, verbal consent from the respondents was obtained prior to the commencement of the study.

# **Data Analysis**

Data analyses were performed using SPSS for Windows 20.0 (Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.). Descriptive statistical techniques were applied to clarify demographic characteristics of the study sample. Such techniques included the frequencies and percentages were calculated and (mean, median and standard deviation) were determined for each Likert-scale item. Internal Consistency for

validity, Lastly, Brown-Spearman's split-half equation and Cronbach's alpha to assess the reliability of the study tools and measure the strength of the tools' consistency and T-Test to determine the differences between client resistance patterns at family court in Egypt and Gender, client community variable.

## **RESULTS**

# **Demographic Information**

Table 1 displays the demographic information of participants. A majority of participants (63.3%) reported being between 30-39 years of age; only 6 respondents (20%) reported being between 20-29 years of age; and 5 (16.7 %) reported being between 40-49 years of age (M 34.67, SD 0.615). 20participants were male (66.7%) and 10 (33.3%) were female.

Half of the participants, 15 to be exact, reported holding a Bachelor's of Social Work (BSW) as their highest level of education, while only 4 participants (13.3%) reported holding a BSW of Arts from the Department of Sociology, 4 (13.3%) reported holding one or more Diploma, 4 (13.3 %) holding a Master's in Social Work (MSW), and 3 (10 %) reported completing their PhD. The majority of respondents, 27 to be exact, were married (90%), and 3 (10%) were single. 15 participants (50%) lived in rural areas 15 and another 15 in urban areas. 17 participants (56.7%) reported having 1 to 7 years of professional experience, 10 (33.3%) reported having 8 to 12 years, 2 (6.7 %) reported having only one year or less; and only 1 respondent (3.3%) reported having 13 to 20 years of experience. (M 7.17, SD 0.661). 8 participants (26.7%) completed two training courses; 7 (23.3%) completed three training courses, 6 (20%) completed one training course, 3 (10 percent) completed more than three training courses and 6 (20%) had not participated in any training course. (M 2.73, SD 1.289).

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**Table (2) Demographic characteristics of the participants (n = 30)** 

Table (2) Demographic characteric	Frequency	%	Mean	SD
Age	Trequency	70	Wietin	50
20-29	6	20		
30-39	19	63.3		
40-49	5	16.7		
Total	30	100	34.67	0.615
Gender				
Male	20	66.7		
Female	10	333		
Total	30	100		
Education				
BS of Social work	15	50		
BS OF Arts, Department of Sociology	4	13.3		
Diploma (s)	4	13.3		
MSW	4	13.3		
PhD	3	10		
Total	30	100		
Social Status				
Single	3	10.0		
Married	27	90.0		
Total	30	100		
The client community:				
Rural	15	50.0		
Urban	15	50.0		
Total	30	100		
Years of experience				
One years or less	2	6.7		
1-7	17	56.7		
8-12	10	33.3		
13-20	1	3.3		
Total	30	100	7.17	0.661
Number of training courses				
not participate in training courses	6	20		
One training course	6	20		
Two courses	8	26.7		
Three courses	7	23.3		
Three + courses	3	10.0		
Total	30	100	2.83	1.289

# Patterns of client resistance at family court in Egypt:

Social workers participating in this study were asked to select from a list of items exploring perceptions of client resistance across family courts. Results are shown in Table 3 Twenty-five items were included in this section. The 5 most commonly perceived forms of client resistance were as follows: 53.33% (n=16) of participants strongly agreed with the statement that their clients have had false advance expectations of attempts to resolve the dispute amicably; 30% (n=9) of participants agreed somewhat with this statement, 16.67% (n=5) neither agree nor disagree, while no participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (n=0). 43.33% (n=13) strongly agreed with the statement that clients have failed to attend sessions. 40.00% (n=12) agreed with this statement, 16.67% (n=5) neither agreed nor disagreed, while not a single participant disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. 46.67% (n=14) of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that their clients have blamed their spouses or another family member; 30.00% (n=9) agreed with this statement; 23.33% (n=7) neither agreed nor disagreed; while not a single participant disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (n=0). Furthermore, 46.67% (n=14) of participants strongly agreed the statement that their clients have claimed to be innocent with regards to the issue of dispute; 26.67% (n=8) of participants agreed with this statement; 20.00% (n=6) neither agreed nor disagreed; 6.67% (n=2) disagreed; and no participant (n=0) stated that they strongly disagreed with this item. Lastly, 40.00% (n=12) of participants indicated that they strongly agreed with the statement that their clients have refused to respond to attempts to end the settlement by reconciliation; 33.33% (n=10) agreed with this statement; 20.00% (n=6) neither agreed nor disagreed; 6.67% (n=2) disagreed; and not a single participant (n=0) strongly disagreed with this statement.

Table (3) client resistance patterns at family court (n = 30)

N	Client Resistance Patterns at family court (	Mean	SD
1		3.53	1.137
	The client consciously lies to the social worker		
2	The client justifies the motivation of his/her behavior	3.20	0.997
3	The client denies committing any wrongdoing to spouse in the partner's right.	3.60	1.133
4	The client refuses to give information specific to the disputed case	2.10	1.213
5	The client refuses to make a partial concession to reach a settlement of the dispute.	2.80	1.448
6	The client is given false information about the issues that he or she brought to court.	3.07	1.172
7	The client complains about the unfairness of spouse	3.00	1.083
8	The client pretends that he does not hear the words of the social worker	3.10	0.960
9	The client refuses to respond to attempts of reconciliation.	4.07	0.944
10	The client worries about the social worker's questions	2.47	0.973
11	The client avoids answering specific questions about the disputed case	2.80	0.847
12	The client deliberately misleads the social worker by hiding the truth with regards to self.	3.50	1.167
13	Client fails to attend sessions	4.27	0.740
14	The client reduces the professional capabilities of the social worker	3.10	1.185
15	The client is silent for long period while social worker attempts to have a conversation with him or her	2.67	1.184
16	The client blames the spouse or other family member	4.23	0.817
17	The client gives the social worker an unsatisfied look	3.93	0.691
18	The client threatens the social worker	3.43	1.165
19	The client interrupts the social worker	3.97	1.033
20	The client withdraws from the session designed to specify the problem	3.40	1.133
21	The client drops the causes of the problem on the other partner and claims to be innocent	4.13	0.973
22	The client has false advance expectations of attempts to resolve the dispute amicably	4.37	0.765

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N	Client Resistance Patterns	Mean	SD
23	The client insistss on continuing the conflict and not wanting to solve it.	2.67	1.241
24	The client expresses fears that the settlement will end with agreement		0.890
25	The client insists on moving the dispute to litigation phase		0.890
TOTAL		85.40	10.156

#### **RESULTS OF STUDY HYPOTHESES:**

Results are shown in **Table 4** the differences between the average scores of clients on their resistance to change pattern in family dispute settlement offices in the family courts according to the gender variable. The average score of clients in male clients was 81.70 and standard deviation (9.985) against the average of female clients who reached (92.70) and a standard deviation (10.078). The calculated value (t) is 2.835, which meaning that the calculated t is greater than the t-table, indicating statistically significant differences between the average scores of clients in family dispute settlement offices in the family courts for the benefit of female clients.

Results are shown in **Table 5** the differences between the average scores of clients on their resistance to change pattern in family dispute settlement offices in the family courts according to the nature of the clients community variable. The average score of rural clients (76.67) and standard deviation (7.178) (9486) and a standard deviation (6,486). The calculated value of (t) was 6,486. This means that the calculated t is greater than the t-table. This indicates that there are statistically significant differences between the averages of the clients Family disputes in family courts for clients residing in urban areas.

Table (4) The differences between client resistance patterns at family court in Egypt and Client Community variable. (n = 30)

The main Variable	Client Community	Mean	SD	DF	T Value	Sig
Client	Rural	76.67	7.178			
Resistance Pattern	Urban	94,07	6,486	28	6.966	0.01

Table (5) The differences between client resistance patterns at family court in Egypt and Gender variable. (n = 30)

The main Variable	Client Community	Mean	SD	DF	T Value	Sig
Client	Male	81.70	9.895			
Resistance Pattern	Female	92.70	10,078	28	2.835	0.01

#### **DISCUSSION**

This study attempts to clarify social workers' perceptions of client resistance patterns in family court settings across Egypt. Our study attempted to fill the gap associated with carrying out studies on the issue of client resistance within an Arabic environment, and specifically across Egypt – a need we identified in a previous study (Ibrahim, 2016). The results of this study indicate that social workers most commonly and strongly perceived form of client resistance was false advance expectations with regards to attempts to resolve the dispute amicably and the risks that may be raised after litigation

The client believes that he or she is likely to face some economic or social risks if the dispute is settled amicably. According to the results of this study, The client has false advance expectations of attempts to resolve the dispute amicably. it is one of the most important forms of resistance faced by the social worker when dealing with the couples within family courts. This means that social workers should clarify the positive implications of a friendly settlement of the dispute and highlight the risks of carrying out the dispute.

The participants this study referred to the effect of the lawyer on the client case. The lawyer may ask the client not to attend the professional sessions or not to interact with the social worker, claiming that this preserves his legal right. Accordingly, the client will refrain from participating in professional sessions, which will negatively impact chances of reconciliation. Our results were in line with those found by Salem (2000) and Abdel-Rasoul (2004): their studies showed that the most important barriers facing social workers in family court settings are ?the issues of the effect of the lawyer on the spouse life and this issue prevent social work in making his or her roles with clients at family court in Egypt.

Our study also points to the existence of defense mechanisms that clients use to resist change, such as blaming their spouse or another family member, regressing, the causes of the problem on the other partner, insisting on referring the dispute to the litigation stage, not agreeing with the other partner; and denial the client to commit any misconduct against his partner. Our findings are consistent with those found by Mahalik (1994), Newman (1994), Hall et al. (2003), Chui & Ho (2006), and Strier & Bershtling (2016).

Moreover, our study indicates that clients show certain forms of resistance towards practitioners, such as interrupting the social worker, giving them an unsatisfied look. This suggests that training practitioners on how to respond to such forms of resistance within family court settings is important. Again, our results are in line with those of other relevant studies (e.g. Chamberlain et al., 1984).

The present study also showed that the first hypothesis, assuming there is a statistically differences between client resistance patterns at family court in Egypt and Gender variable was verified.

The result of the present study also showed that the second hypothesis, assuming There are a statistically significant differences between client resistance patterns at family court in Egypt and client community variable was verified.

This study attempted to fill the research gap in identifying the patterns of resistance that prevent the end of the family conflict process in an amicable manner, as demonstrated by the results of the current study.

#### **STUDY LIMITATION:**

There are clear limitations to this study. Although the study uses a purposive random sample of social workers practicing in family courts across the Assiut governorate, it is inappropriate to generalize the results to all social workers. Samples from different geographical regions may provide different results. Secondly, the questionnaire was self-reported and did not capture the actual practices related to professional requirements. Thirdly, self-reporting measures introduces sources of errors and biases, such as participants consistently choosing high or low ratings.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Client resistance to change is an important concept to explore within a social work setting, specifically in family court systems. Client resistance to change may interfere with the process of treatment at all stages and levels. For this reason, our findings have useful academic and practical implications, especially social workers working in family court settings. Thus, we make the following recommendations:

- 1. Include client resistance issues in social work educational curriculums at both the undergraduate, graduate levels and continuous education programs.
- 2. Creating a series of training courses for social work students in all social work education phases with the purpose of reducing client resistance to change within a professional work setting.
- 3. Carrying out future studies to identify professional interventions to reduce client resistance in social work practice settings, and especially family court settings.
- 4. Carrying out future studies to identified the relationship between type of familial dispute and type of client resistance.

5. The results of this study showed that there is a major factor effected in the client resistance because the client-lawyer / agent trying to help the client to resist the social workers efforts, which may require from the practitioners to train on some of the techniques that may affect this problem, especially because of the intervention of some lawyers from negative situation affecting in the professional interaction process with client at family court.

# **CONCLUSION**

The present study identifies social worker's perceptions of client resistance to change patterns, within family court systems across Egypt. Client resistance to change greatly affects the chances of resolving disputes amicably and prevents social workers from successfully completing their professional work. There is a need to conduct further studies exploring the concept of client resistance as well as a need to incorporate findings and recommendations for professional practice in all social work educational programs.

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