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The resilience of social workers rendering services to nyaope-dependent youths

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ABSTRACT

The concept of resilience is increasingly gaining universal recognition among helping professionals and social scientists. It explains the complexities and responses of individuals, groups and communities to stressful, emotional, depressive, traumatic and challenging situations. Since social work is considered an emotionally demanding profession, resilience is a highly relevant concept that forms the theoretical basis of the article. This study used a qualitative research methodology to understand the resilience of social workers who render services to distressed communities. The primary goal of this study was to develop an in-depth understanding of resilience in social workers rendering services to substance abusers, especially nyaope-dependent youths. The researcher conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews using a purposive method of sampling. An interview guide was utilised as a data-collection instrument. The study employed an exploratory research design. Ethical requirements such as informed consent, debriefing, beneficence, confidentiality and avoidance of harm were adhered to. The study found that positive thinking and attitudes, the family support systems, satisfaction and religion are significant mechanisms used by social workers to cope with adversity and develop their resilience.

Keywords: challenges; coping strategies; nyaope-dependent youths; resilience; social workers

INTRODUCTION

Resilience is a concept increasingly applied to explain and describe the responses of individuals, groups and communities to stressful, problematic and traumatic situations (Boss, 2016). It is a term used to understand the complexities people experience and how they respond to such situations (Lindstrom, 2013). As such, resilience is gaining global attention among social scientists and professionals. This is because of the demanding nature of the work of helping professionals and the working environment they are exposed to (Kapoulitsas & Corcoran, 2015). Resilience is frequently conceptualised through the adaptive responses of patients, clients, caregivers and professionals within the helping professions (Shin et al., 2014). Helping professions are stressful and demanding in nature and require the strength, support and further assistance of professionals, who can respond better to stressful and traumatic situations (Boss, 2016). Resilience enhances the coping abilities of professionals to effectively bounce back after experiencing difficulties and function normally despite adversities. This is critical in the field of social work, because of the complexities experienced with difficult cases, specifically in this instance of working with nyaope-dependent youths. The literature indicates that individuals in the helping professions need to develop the ability to adapt and cope with difficulties to be productive in rendering social work services.

BACKGROUND, RATIONALE AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Social work is one of the most stressful, demanding and potentially depressive of the helping professions; as social work professionals are constantly exposed to trauma, they are required to be highly resilient (Crowder & Sears, 2017; Mahlangu & Kgadima, 2021). Hence, the profession depends heavily on people committed to rendering social work services despite the complexities and difficulties experienced (Van Breda, 2018). Social workers who remain in the profession despite the challenges of working with, amongst others, nyaope-dependent youths and dealing with other adversities might be considered immune to stressful events (Masilo & Matlakala, 2023). They are considered resilient because of their capacity to function effectively despite the stressful events experienced working with, for example, nyaope-dependent youths (Rose & Palattiyil, 2020). Resilience in social work is increasingly understood as a complex process shaped by individual characteristics as well as by the social, political, environmental and broader organisational culture (Mahlangu & Kgadima, 2021). In South Africa, resilience is an essential competency trait in social work because of the workplace dynamics such as high-pressure settings and operating in an under-resourced environment (Masilo & Matlakala, 2023). It enables professionals to navigate their emotional vulnerability, while ensuring social justice for their clients despite the prevailing constraints.

Although there are resilient social workers, the profession as a whole has been associated with professional burnout. Burnout is defined in terms of three elements: exhaustion, inefficacy and cynicism. It is a response to the emotional as well as the interpersonal stressors associated with the job (Collins, 2016). It could therefore be deduced that stress and, consequently, low work morale are accepted consequences of being involved in the social work profession (Crowder & Sears, 2017). Social workers are frequently exposed to significant caseloads, bureaucratic barriers, clients with emotionally charged interactions, and limited support from their respective organisations. This leads to a build-up of cumulative stress levels and exposes social

workers to a high level of burnout (Van Breda, 2018). Within the profession, lower work morale and increased stress levels are part of the expectations rather than incidental. The normalisation of stress in the social work profession may further advance a culture of not devoting sufficient attention to self-care (Mahlangu & Kgadima, 2021). This will increase the level of burnout and its linked or associated impacts on both the clients and the practitioner. The clients are automatically affected because they receive services from demoralised professionals who have internalised the effects of stress and burnout (Crowder & Sears, 2017).

Mindfulness intervention is a programme that helps to improve physical and mental health, and reduces stress levels among clients and pracitioners within a professional helping relationship (Khanyi & Malesa, 2022; Shier & Graham, 2011). This includes social workers, who experience stress and pressure daily, which leads to burnout (Van Heugten, 2011); these high levels of stress and burnout lead to low morale among social work professionals. Consequently, the retention rate of professional social workers in the workplace is lower than that of nurses and doctors. Social workers spend an average of 8 years in the profession, while nurses have an average of 15 years and doctors an average of 25 years (Curtis et al., 2010; Kapoulitsas & Corcoran, 2015). However, social work was also the profession with the highest satisfaction levels in countries such as the UK. This contributed significantly to the resilience and retention of social workers in the UK (Boss, 2016; Collins, 2016; Rose, 2003). Job satisfaction leaves social workers in a state of wellbeing and they experience positive emotions when assisting their clients (Wendt et al., 2011). It is therefore evident that social workers need to address those factors that contribute to stress and burnout for the sake of improving not only their own wellbeing, but also that of the profession (Carson et al., 2011; Van Breda, 2018).

Social workers are exposed to stressful, traumatic work environments that pose risks and threats to their personal wellbeing (Khamisa et al., 2015). The researcher's observations through engagement with social workers, data, journals and the relevant literature informed the problem statement guiding this study. The researcher developed an interest in the study because of the many social workers who leave the profession because of a combination of stress, pressure, depression and trauma – leaving, for example, the distressing abuse of nyaope unaddressed. Some social workers fail to return to normality after exposure to stressful environments (Khanyi & Malesa, 2022; Van Breda, 2018). Many social workers cannot remain in the profession because of the complexities they experience and change to other professions. They struggle to cope with the complexities and adversities associated with the profession and cannot return to normal functioning. This motivated the researcher to conduct this study by way of an investigation into social workers' handling of nyaope abusers.

This research is relevant to the social work profession because of the strategies it provides to address the challenges experienced by social workers and assist them with developing their own resilience. It guides social workers to develop techniques for coping with adversity and challenges in the workplace. The research also raises awareness of the need for building resilience among social workers as helping professionals and thereby ensuring that social workers can be retained in the profession. The findings of this study can assist social workers with developing coping techniques in the profession, despite the challenges experienced daily in the line of duty.

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND RESILIENCE

Generally, resilience is seen as a common trait in every person. It is a trait that every individual must possess at some level to deal with life's challenges and bounce back to function efficiently after exposure to stressful situations. Social workers, like other individuals, exhibit resilience as a capacity to cope with and adapt to challenging circumstances (Grant et al., 2014). Many social workers are able to cope with troublesome experiences, learn from such experiences, and bounce back to function normally (Kinman & Grant, 2011). Despite the challenges and traumatic experiences of working with nyaope users, social workers with a sound capacity for resilience cope well in difficult situations (Collins, 2016) and remain in the profession for longer. They draw on the positive feelings and emotions that stem from helping clients to cope effectively (Khanyi & Malesa, 2022). The satisfaction of assisting clients becomes a source of their own strength and resilience (Grant et al., 2014). The retention of social work professionals therefore depends on the effectiveness of their coping mechanisms, job satisfaction and ability to bounce back to function normally (Rajan-Rankin, 2014). The concept of resilience assists in understanding how social workers can cope with stress and difficulties more than others might need to (Rose, 2003). Many social workers grow, strive and do well personally and professionally; they draw on their abilities to bounce back to cope despite challenges and difficulties (Kapoulitsas & Corcoran, 2015). The support of colleagues, supervisors, family and religion is important in assisting with building the resilience of social workers. They are able to adapt, navigate emotionally demanding situations, and provide services in complex contexts that may reactivate memories or emotional responses associated with prior experiences (Adamson et al., 2014).

Burnout, stress and fatigue among social work professionals

Social work professionals are constantly exposed to conditions that lead to stress, burnout and fatigue. These elements affect the effectiveness of social workers to respond with resilience (Crowder & Sears, 2017). Social work is generally demanding and can can create emotional burdens, stress, burnout and fatigue (Bride et al., 2007). For survival in social work, social workers must develop the capacity to manage stress and develop ways to deal with fatigue and burnout (Berzoff & Kita, 2010). The proper management of stress, the development of coping mechanisms and problem-solving skills, and seeking support all assist with the management of burnout, fatigue and stress (Collins, 2016; Crowder & Sears, 2017). These skills and the capacity to manage difficulties may be attributed to their resilience. Cultivating mindfulness is one of the strategies suggested for addressing these emotional and psychological challenges; it may also contribute to greater wellbeing and job satisfaction. Happiness of the mind at work provides the satisfaction for the social worker to continue to do more and return to normality after dealing with adversity (Brinkborg et al., 2011).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Resilience theory was adopted as the foundation for the study. The concept of resilience was developed explicitly during World War II. The development of resilience as a theoretical construct was therefore influenced in reponse to wartime experiences, especially by Norman Garmezy, a developmental psychologist in America. Resilience theory puts the emphasis on understanding how people in distress and communities adapt to complexities, burnout, stress and adversity (Newell, 2020). It focuses on the individual capacity to contain the pressure and

respond to complex situations that may cause stress. Today it is a theory that is applied in various fields, including psychology, sociology and social work. The theory is relevant to this study because it focuses on the need for resilience among social workers working with difficult clients and environments in adverse conditions (Long et al., 2024; Werner & Smith, 1992). The theory explains how helping professionals can maintain resilience and understand the complex nature of the phenomenon they are experiencing. Resilience theory provides a psychological basis for cultivating coping mechanisms for those who need to function before, during and after a stressful event. The ability to succeed and even thrive under adversity and such stressful environmental conditions is attributed to the resilience of those involved (Newell, 2020; Watson et al., 2006). More specifically, helping professionals such as social workers, nurses and psychologists are critical to serving nyaope-dependent youths (Bonanno & Mancini, 2008; Molakeng et al., 2021). These professionals witness and are exposed to trauma and difficulties on an almost daily basis, and this can disrupt their social functioning (Masten, 2014). The professionals who continue to function under these circumstances, render services effectively and discharge their responsibilities despite their emotional distress are considered to be resilient (Long et al., 2024; Werner & Smith, 1992).

Resilience theory explains how social workers and helping professionals dealing with highly stressful situations can cope with complex, traumatic conditions (Khanyi & Malesa, 2022; McAllister & McKinnon, 2009). Not all social workers have the necessary resilience characteristics, and some eventually change careers after being exposed to the complexities of social work. Not only is it fundamental that employers assist social workers to be able to build resilience, but universities also need to prepare student social workers to become resilient.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study. This approach was used because the researcher wanted to obtain an in-depth understanding of the participants' feelings, experiences and attitudes within their natural environment (Blanche et al., 2021). A qualitative approach was specifically relevant in this study because it facilitated an in-depth exploration of social workers' experiences and meanings associated with the task of dealing with nyaope-dependent youths. The study used a narrative methodology to better understand the participants' feelings and ensure that participants were able to express themselves freely without pressure or prejudice. The study adopted an exploratory research design, because it provided an opportunity to explore how social workers understand, experience and develop resilience within the context of working with nyaope-dependent youths (Lapan et al., 2015). The design was significant because it provided an opportunity for the exploration of the resilience of social workers who are rendering services to nyaope-dependent youths.

The participants had to meet a set of criteria to qualify to be part of the study:

- The participants must be social workers with at least five years of experience working with nyaope-dependent youths;
- Must be employed by the Limpopo Department of Social Development;
- Must be a social worker registered with and certified to practise by the South African Council for Social Services Professions.

In response to the increasing prevalence of nyaope substance abuse in Limpopo province, a non-probability sampling approach was adopted to ensure the inclusion of social workers with direct experience in this context. The researcher used this sampling method because of the characteristics and traits required in the participants, although the convenience of the participants was also taken into account (Creswell, 2014). The study employed purposive sampling to deliberately select participants with the required experience of working with nyaope-dependent youths (Babbie & Mouton, 2017). The researcher had knowledge of the participants who met the requirements to be included in the study.

The study was conducted with social workers from the Department of Social Development in five municipalities of the Waterberg District, Limpopo province of South Africa. The study selected 19 social workers from a sample of 300 to participate in the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The reason for the choice of the location of the study was the prevalence of nyaope use in these areas as well as the loss of social workers to different professions. Despite the challenges and exposure to the difficulties associated with nyaope-dependent users, some social workers remained in the profession in this working environment. This in itself revealed elements of resilience, as these social workers were able to bounce back and function efficiently despite the adverse conditions. The study used face-to-face semi-structured interviews to collect data from the 19 participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2017), as this allowed the researcher to probe for more information. The collection of data was stopped when data saturation occurred. An average of 40 minutes per interview was spent for the data collection (Blanche et al., 2021). The participants were comfortable conducting the interviews in English. The researcher followed the steps in Creswell (2014) to guide systematic data analysis to ensure precise interpretation of the data.

The steps outlined by Gibbs in Creswell (2014) were followed to ensure confirmability of the study. Confirmability implies the corroboration and ability of others to confirm the research study. The use of an independent coder was important for the assessment of consistency between the data and the study findings (Babbie & Mouton, 2017). The researcher approached experienced researchers in the field to assist in reviewing the analysed data and preparing the summary and conclusions to ensure the credibility of the study findings.

The study adhered to the necessary ethical principles. The participants were informed about the reasons for undertaking the study and the risks and benefits of participation in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). They were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. The participants consented to being interviewed and audio recorded. This information was provided to avoid unethical behaviour or deception of the participants (Blanche et al., 2021). The principle of confidentiality was upheld by protecting the participants' personal and identifying information, and ensuring that it was not disclosed beyond the scope of the study. Interviews were audio recorded with verbatim transcriptions made subsequently. The researcher kept the audio recordings of the interviews and the data transcripts in a lockable cupboard to avoid compromising the integrity of the participants' data and the study. The researcher informed the participants that publication of the research findings would not divulge confidential information, and confidentiality was maintained to avoid victimisation and stigmatisation

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher protected the anonymity of the participants through the use of pseudonyms. The personal identity of the participants remained confidential and was never used in any public document of the research study. The researcher also avoided sensitive questions that could trigger adverse emotions in the participants. Debriefing services were provided for the participants who were triggered. The researcher had a contractual agreement with the psychologist from the Department of Health to provide debriefing services to the participants for free, if they needed this (Creswell, 2014). Ethical approval was granted by the ethics committee of the College of Human Sciences Research of the University of South Africa with ethics approval number: 2020-SWREC-69719675.

DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY FINDINGS

It is necessary for helping professionals to be resilient to remain in the profession and function effectively, despite having to deal constantly with adversity. The participants identified a range of difficulties in performing their duties while working with nyaope-dependent youths. The participants use several tools, techniques and mechanisms to cope with stress and remain resilient in their work: cultivating inner peace and satisfaction, being with a supportive family, religion and pastoral support, separation of work from personal lives, positive thinking and attitude, maintaining optimism, sufficient and effective supervision, and applying their problem-solving skills. The participants revealed that they rely on these features to cope with the complexities of their work and to be able to return to functioning normally.

Table 1: *Themes*

Themes
Theme 1: Inner peace, satisfaction and the fulfilment of helping nyaope-dependent youths
Theme 2: Positive support system
Theme 3: Religion and pastoral support
Theme 4: Separation of work from personal life
Theme 5: Optimistic emotions, appreciation and self-motivation
Theme 6: Sufficient and effective supervision
Theme 7: Problem-solving skills and field experience

Table 1 lists the themes that were identified from the data, which are important for the findings of this study. The study established the importance of developing inner peace, the satisfaction of assisting clients and finding fulfilment in helping clients to resolve their difficulties. The study further found that religion and pastoral support are fundamental to building and maintaining resilience. Separation of work from personal life was indicated to be key in ensuring the resilience of social workers who are working with nyaope users. Optimistic emotions, appreciation and self-motivation were also found to be important themes. Sufficient and effective supervision was important in sustaining the resilience of social workers, as they rely heavily on supervision. Their experience and problem-solving skills were essential to assist social workers in coping with the adversity and complexities associated with working with nyaope users.

Theme 1: Inner peace, satisfaction and fulfilment of helping nyaope-dependent youths

The participants revealed that they were satisfied and felt inner peace when assisting their clients (Grant & Kinman, 2018; Nordick, 2002). Interestingly, such inner peace and sense of satisfaction helped the participants to build resilience and function normally despite the complexities of the task. The participants also drew on their personal strengths to sustain their resilience (McFadden et al., 2014). Social workers strive to help clients with their problems and needs, giving them inner peace and satisfaction as well. Satisfaction and inner peace have been found to motivate social workers to continue helping their clients despite the difficulties.

> *I strive to assist my clients because this brings me joy and makes me want to do more. I get fulfilled when I provide help to vulnerable people. I go all out to ensure that distressed communities receive the best services they deserve.* (P7)

When describing the source of strength that keep them going, participant 9 revealed that a sense of satisfaction assists them. The participant highlighted the pleasure of helping needy clients (Molakeng et al., 2021; Nordick, 2002).

> *I get satisfied with performing my duties and competently, effectively providing services to the needy. I am satisfied with advocating for the communities to receive the services they deserve without thinking of too much workload, burnout and lack of resources. I sleep well at night and feel fulfilled when I help. Getting money is the best feeling, and this keeps me going.* (P9)

Khanyi and Malesa (2022) concur that a sense of satisfaction plays a critical role in maintaining the resilience of social workers working with nyaope users. Helping clients successfully helps social workers to becomes fulfilled and satisfied, which in turn assists them to build their resilience and cope with adversity and complexity (Newell, 2020). The satisfaction brings inner peace to social workers who work with nyaope users and motivates them to do more to help these clients. Inner peace, satisfaction and personal fulfilment help social workers to build resilience and be able to return to normality and function productively.

Theme 2: Positive support system

The participants in this study recognised the important role of family. The family was found to be a source of resilience in social work and helps in coping with stress, trauma and exposure to depressive situations (Khanyi & Malesa, 2022). Supportive family systems help social workers to develop resilience by enabling them to deploy protective factors to address stressful situations. The participants found that a supportive family system can help them overcome challenges and adversity (Nelson-Becker, 2013).

> *My family has a positive attitude, approach, and respect for my job. This makes it easy for the family to support me when I have been exposed to stressful situations at work. My family is very important in assisting me with coping with trauma and adversity. My family understands that social work is a stressful profession and indirectly gives me courage and reassurance to keep going.* (P2)

Moreover, the participants reported that family, which includes siblings and parents, is always important.

> *My family always has positive vibes and can easily understand when I am ill. They attend to the challenge that may be bothering me and bring back a smile to my face. They understand the important role they need to play because of the complexity of the social work profession. The family allows me to vent about any work-related problems and provides support thereafter.* (P16)

Interestingly, the participants included colleagues as part of their 'families' and pointed out that they also play an important role. Colleagues were found to be a critical part of coping, because they are readily available to provide debriefing, support and case discussions (Crowder & Sears, 2017).

> *My colleagues are my family because I spend most of my time with them, more than with any other people. This is more important because colleagues are more likely to provide information that will relieve pressure from social workers. I can easily arrange case discussions with colleagues that may likely stress the social worker and not provide solutions. Using colleagues is very important because of their experience and pool of solutions to assist me in addressing the challenges better.* (P11)

A positive family is a reliable support system for social workers working with nyaope-dependent youths (Crowder & Sears, 2017). The emotional competencies of the family are important during difficult times to assist with maintaining resilience. It makes sense for the participants to rely on their families for support and proper social functioning (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009). Social workers have invested significantly in their families to help them cope with trauma. This happens with families who manifest positive attitudes and optimism (Nelson-Becker, 2013). Colleagues are a fundamental source of strength for social workers, and they rely on them for support. Social workers spend most of their time at work with colleagues, and they receive support through case discussions, consultations and counselling for anxiety. Colleagues are essential pillars and stakeholders in the workplace to provide support and assist in building resilience (Crowder & Sears, 2017). Colleagues are also available to provide support when some are experiencing difficulties with their personal lives.

Theme 3: Religion and pastoral support

Several studies have revealed that religion and pastoral support foster resilience among social workers. Religion is a source of sustenance to cope with challenges and build resilience in social workers (Truter et al., 2014). The social worker's belief, faith and religion, as well as the pastoral support, assist in fostering their resilience (Oxhandler et al., 2021). The participants in the study are rooted in their religion and derive strength and spiritual wellness as sources of resilience. Spiritual wellness helps them to be resilient, because they meditate and pray when faced with adversity (Bober & Regehr, 2006).

> *I am a spiritual person, and I believe in getting help from the Lord. I never experience difficulties if I put my faith in God and try to meditate and pray about it. I serve a dependable God who will always be with me through challenges and make things easy. My spiritual*

beliefs give me the strength to bounce back and function normally despite the problems, adversity, and challenges I experience. (P15)

Participant 17 pointed out that pastors are crucial in supporting social workers to cope and become resilient.

My pastor completes me with my spiritual needs and provides support, counselling, and prayer for me. When I encounter difficulties, I kneel down, call my pastor to pray for me, and sometimes visit the pastor. Pastors play a huge role in helping me cope with challenges. (P17)

It was clear that the participants' relationship with God, pastors and spirituality plays a fundamental role in building their resilience (Bober & Regehr, 2006; Egan et al., 2017). Participants revealed that they would pray before they go to work and talk about the challenges they experience and their clients. Religion is a source of strength that enhances resilience in social workers (Nadat & Jacobs, 2021). The participants use prayer and meditation to calm down and depend on God to meet the challenges they experience (Nadat & Jacobs, 2021; Southwick et al., 2016). The pastors assist with the problems that require spirituality, prayer and intervention from God (Jones et al., 2018). The study findings emphasise the variety of sources that social workers draw on for their resilience when having to deal with complexity and adversity. But it is clear that social workers exposed to nyaope users depend heavily on their religion, the services of pastors, prayers and meditation to cope. They depend on their spirituality and strength from God to build resilience as well as a strong personality to bounce back from dealing with adverse situations.

Theme 4: Separation of work from personal life

The participants interestingly revealed that separating work from personal life is critical in helping them cope with stress (Rose & Palattiyil, 2020; Weuste, 2006). The study found that social workers felt that they must leave work-related stress behind and switch to addressing home-related issues (Aclaro-Lapidario, 2007; Long et al., 2024). Separation of personal and work domains is important, because it assists with leading a balanced life and knowing when the appropriate time is to deal with certain matters. The study found that it is imperative to separate work from personal life (Rose & Palattiyil, 2020).

We must separate our personal lives from work-related activities and events. I should not take clients' issues home; I work from 7:30 to 16:30, which is the period designated for work. When I knock off, I focus on my family, who support me and assist me in coping with work challenges. Despite the need to be empathetic, work-related issues are to remain at work after knocking off, and the files will be opened the following day or after weekends (P3)

The participants outlined the boundaries that separate work and personal life:

At all times, I must understand that I do not need to overstep my boundaries of leaving work at home and wearing a different cap when I get home. Professional life is highly regulated, with a range of ethics to be considered, as well as values and the characteristics of a helping relationship. (P7)

Maintaining a healthy balanced relationship between personal and professional life is important. Participants emphasised the need for boundaries.

> *I have an understanding of separating the work from the personal life, and this assists me in focusing and creating resilience and coping with trauma. These principles of separating work from professional life guide participants to understand what needs to happen to cope with challenges.* (P14)

It is ideal that social workers set boundaries and separate the performance of their social work duties from their personal life (Hitchcock et al., 2020). The social workers must develop positive personal networks that they can rely on in times of need to cope with challenges. There should be a clear demarcation line of the relationship between work and home (Pooler et al., 2014). Social workers who have separate activities for work life and personal life at home develop the ability to cope with difficulties they encounter more easily. Maintaining the boundaries between personal and work life is essential to assist social workers to experience a balanced quality of life (Rose & Palattiyil, 2020). Separation of responsibilities and wearing different caps at work and at home helps to build resilience, and to better understand and cope with stressful, demanding and challenging situations. The fundamental principle of separating personal from professional life serves as a source of strength and builds the resilience of social workers (Hitchcock et al., 2020). This is important because social workers often struggle to separate their professional helping work from their personal lives, and so become stressed because of the nature of their work.

Theme 5: Optimistic emotions, appreciation and self-motivation

The study emphasised the importance of positive thinking as a source of strength and resilience (Grant & Kinman, 2018). The participants highlighted that they adopt positive thinking and emotions. Positive emotions and optimism reduce pressure and stress, and this helps social workers cope better with challenges (Carroll, 2013; Khanyi & Malesa, 2022). Positive thinking and emotions can assist in coping with stress, burnout and poor supervision, and lead social workers to develop techniques to remain resilient (Crowder & Sears, 2017; McFadden et al., 2014).

> *I always ensure that I have positive things about myself and my work. I do everything within my abilities to suppress any negative thoughts that may come my way to avoid stress and negative emotions. I am always optimistic about my responsibilities at work, which makes me strong and ready for any eventuality. I quickly deploy the defence mechanism to address any adversity and challenges I experience.* (P11)

> *I have achieved everything at work because of positive thinking and appreciation. Optimism assisted me in developing a good sense of resilience and progress in my professional life. I draw my strengths from self-motivation about the challenges I experience, and ensure that my thoughts and emotions are positive. Social work is a stressful, challenging profession, and you need to always be positive and optimistic about life and the challenges posed by the profession.* (P15)

There is sufficient evidence to support the value of positive thinking and optimism as part of coping mechanisms in social work. Positive thinking reduces fears, anxiety and stress (Grant & Kinman, 2018). Positive thinking addresses the factors that may disrupt the social and professional functioning of social workers (Long et al., 2024; McFadden et al., 2014). It is critical to deploy positive emotions and optimism in dealing with stressful situations. The literature indicates that social workers who suppress negative thoughts are able to cope with adversity and return to function efficiently after exposure to challenges. Being optimistic is essential to remain positive about work and life, and this also assists with self-motivation (Newell, 2020). The deployment of constructive defence mechanisms is one of the critical tools used to address adversity through the avoidance of negative thoughts and not paying attention to aspects that cause needless stress for professionals.

Theme 6: Sufficient and effective supervision

Social work supervision is an important element of the profession (Ju et al., 2024). This plays a fundamental role in coping with burnout, stressful workload, helping social workers cope with burnout, and the complexities of dealing professionally with nyaope users (Armour, 2018). It has been widely established that supervision, colleagues, and social support and societal reinforcement assist with the development of the resilience of social workers (McFadden, 2018). Reflective supervision also promotes and enhances the resilience of social workers (Dan, 2017; Paris, 2012).

> *Supervisors have a special role in social work practice and must use it effectively to benefit their subordinates. In our stressful profession, you need to have caring supervisors who also look at the welfare of the supervisees. I view supervisors as a tool for coping mechanisms and assisting social workers with resilience. Sufficient supervision that aligns with the supervision framework assists social workers with their challenges, over workload, and burnout.* (P4)

> *Supervisors in social work need to be competent and equipped with the knowledge and education to support subordinates. I have experienced good supervision and understand its impact on the stressful working environment and the adversity that social workers experience.* (P10)

The study clarifies the relationship between sufficient and effective supervision, coping mechanisms and resilience (Egan et al., 2017). Effective social work supervision contributes to resilience, inner peace and staff retention (Armour, 2018). The social work supervision framework reinforces the supportive, educational and administrative nature of supervision that helps with developing techniques for coping (Department of Social Development & South African Council for Social Service Professions, 2012). Van Breda (2018) pointed out that social work supervision needs to be implemented according to the principles specifically applicable to the kind of supervision necessary for social workers. Upholding the social work supervision framework is critical for retaining staff, improving job satisfaction and building resilience (Paris, 2012). It was evident from the participants that it is important to have sufficient supervision that takes into account the wellbeing of the social workers (Chibaya, 2018). Supervision should be understood to be a critical form of support and essential part of social

work practice (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014; Paris, 2012). Dan (2017) also make the makes the point that that effective supervision improves the satisfaction level of social workers and assists with bouncing back from adversity. The availability of good supervision has been found to make social workers enjoy their work and remain in the profession despite the difficulties and complexities (Chibaya, 2018). The participants highlighted the importance of effective supervision, which helps with the retention of social workers in the profession as well as the fulfilment of their professional lives (Van Breda, 2015).

Theme 7: Problem-solving skills and field experience

Fieldwork experience is a critical element closely associated with resilience and coping mechanisms (Chang, 2012; McGowan et al., 2009; Rice & Liu, 2016). The participants mentioned drawing on their problem-solving skills in dealing with the challenges they experience. The problem-solving skills learned in the social work training programme were found to be essential in assisting social workers to cope with complexity and adversity (Harzer & Ruch, 2015). Problem-solving skills and experience are the tools and strengths that social workers need to cope with adversity. The participants revealed the significance of drawing on their skills to bounce back and function effectively (Aclaro-Lapidario, 2007; Crowder & Sears, 2017).

> *As a person in the helping profession, I provide services to the members of society and assist with solving problems and helping them determine their problems. I take this opportunity to use some of my problem-solving skills to my advantage and address my challenges. I have skills and cannot suffer from challenges when I can deploy my abilities to address the trauma I experience.* (P12)

> *Obviously, as a social worker, you are exposed to various cases; some of these cases serve as experience for me to refer to when I experience problems. Using experience is critical because it is a readily available service to assist in resolving the difficulties experienced. Most of what I may experience as a problem is what I have witnessed with clients and assisted with determining their problems.* (P18)

The participants revealed that they draw on their experience to deal with the challenges they experience (Aclaro-Lapidario, 2007; Crowder & Sears, 2017). They described using problem-solving skills and drawing on their experience to effectively cultivate alternative techniques to become more resilient (Rice & Liu, 2016). Applying experience and problem-solving skills assists with retaining professionals in the social work profession (Long et al., 2024; McGowan et al., 2009). The appropriate application of problem-solving skills, experience and expression of emotions has an important part to play in helping to cultivate the resilience of social workers and develop their coping mechanisms (Riley & Park, 2014).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Some scheduled interviews and appointments had to be cancelled because of the competing priorities of the participants. During the data-collection process, there were many restrictions because of COVID-19, making it difficult for the researcher to obtain data. The confinement of the study to the Waterberg area is another limitation, as it restricts the transferability of the

findings to other geographical contexts that may differ in terms of resources, organisational structures and client populations. This limited geographic scope may also have reduced the diversity of participants' experiences, thereby constraining the range of perspectives captured in the study and potentially influencing the comprehensiveness of the findings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Positive support systems are fundamental to assist social workers in coping with the complexities and adversities they experience while working with nyaope-dependent youths. Effective support from colleagues, family and supervisors is essential and would build resilience among social workers. Although it is difficult to measure the levels of satisfaction, fulfilment and inner peace of social workers, it is important for employers to equip social workers with the resources that will enable them to provide effective services to the clients. These elements were found to be significant in helping social workers to cope and bounce back from adverse situations. It is imperative that social workers separate work from personal life to have a sound work-life balance to ensure a healthy quality of life. Optimistic emotions are fundamental to assisting social workers to better deal with distressing situations in the workplace. Suppression of negative feelings, thoughts and emotions is essential for social workers dealing with nyaope-dependent users. This will assist the social workers to be self-motivated and willing to render more effective and efficient services to nyaope users. Social workers need to deploy their problem-solving skills and their experience in the field to cope with the adversities and challenges they encounter with nyaope users in the workplace. Experience of working with difficult clients and cases will help them cope with challenging cases in the future. The study further recommends that academic social work institutions must prepare students at the university level to build resilience.

CONCLUSION

The study has revealed that the resilience of social workers is an important element in their practice of the profession. Developing coping strategies is critical to ensure job satisfaction and staff retention. Effective support from supervisors can create a sound environment for the wellbeing of social workers. It is evident from the study that the promotion of positive thinking and emotions, as well as an optimistic frame of mind, helps with developing and sustaining coping techniques. It was further evident from the study findings that social workers need to cultivate inner peace and satisfaction to promote their resilience. The study findings have indicated that social workers cope with adversity because of religious support, and supportive colleagues and family. Deploying their experience and problem-solving skills in challenging situations was critical to assisting social workers to cope with difficult situations. Resilience is important in social work to assist with understanding and coping with the difficult complexities experienced daily in the profession. Despite challenges, social workers must develop coping skills to provide more effective interventions without emotional attachment. The study findings indicate the significance of the strength-based approach, which focuses on the strengths of social workers in dealing with complexity and adversity.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Tumelo Sekgobela is a lecturer at the University of Venda, South Africa. His research interests are the resilience of social workers, substance abuse and bullying. The article is drawn from his Master of Social Work thesis completed between 2020-2021 with the University of South Africa. The author conceptualised the study and conducted fieldwork for data collection, and interpreted the research findings.

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