

Professional Strain in Social Work Field

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Abstract

This study investigates the occupational stress experienced by professional social workers with a focus on their socio-demographic characteristics, stress levels and related work-life challenges. Conducted among 100 social workers in Coimbatore District using a descriptive research design and purposive sampling, the study utilized standardized instruments to assess stress-related factors. Findings revealed that a majority of respondents were young, female and unmarried with many specializing in medical and psychiatric social work and working in resource-limited settings such as NGOs. The results highlighted significant stressors including unclear responsibilities, repetitive work, heavy workloads, limited autonomy and poor institutional support. Despite experiencing fulfillment from helping others respondents also reported symptoms of burnout, career stagnation and inadequate time for self-care. Regression analyses from previous literature reviewed in the study further confirmed the predictive role of social support and work-life balance in burnout levels. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for organizational interventions, enhanced support systems and professional development strategies to mitigate stress and improve the well-being and retention of social workers.

Key Words: Stress, Professional Social Workers

Introduction

A feeling of anxiety or tension brought on by a challenging circumstance is known as stress. Stress is a normal human reaction that makes us confront obstacles and dangers in our lives. Everyone goes through periods of stress. Social Work is challenging profession dealing with complex human issues that often do not have straightforward solutions. The unique stressors that social workers face are emotional intensity, high caseloads, ethical dilemmas and personal investment.

However, how we handle stress has a significant impact on our general wellbeing. The burnout, physical health, mental health, quality of care and professional turnover are the impact of stress on social workers.

Professional Social Workers

Professional social workers are qualified and trained professionals who render services to individuals, families and communities for their wellbeing. They strive to address social problems and social discrimination thereby eradicating social injustices. To address both individual and systemic issues, social workers employ social work methods, approaches, models and strategies by abiding professional standards and ethical guidelines. The role of social workers in assisting individuals in resolving psychological issues is most evident in practice.

Review of Literature

Selwyn Stanley, Anand Jerard Sebastien, (2023). This study investigated the prevalence of burnout, perceived social support and work-life balance among 73 social workers in two cities in South India using a cross-sectional quantitative design. Data were gathered through standardized surveys measuring the core variables and multiple regression analysis was employed to identify predictors of burnout. The findings revealed high levels of burnout and low levels of both social support and work-life balance among participants. No significant differences were observed in these variables based on socio-demographic characteristics. Importantly, social support and work-life balance emerged as significant predictors of burnout. The results highlight the critical need to address burnout and compassion fatigue within social work education in India. Emphasis on self-care, maintaining a healthy work-life balance and enhancing access to social support are recommended as key strategies to improve the mental health and well-being of social workers. Implementing these measures can contribute not only to the personal resilience of practitioners but also to the overall quality of services provided to the communities they serve.

Dima, G., Meseşan Schmitz, L., & Şimon, M. C. (2021). This study examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on job stress and burnout among social workers in Romania. Using a convergent mixed-methods approach data were collected from 83 professionals across various intervention areas in both public and private social services. The findings revealed significant levels of job-related stress during the pandemic which strongly correlated with increased burnout, particularly in work-related (average score: 52.5) and personal (average score: 55.9) domains. In contrast, client-related burnout was comparatively lower (average score: 38.4), indicating that organizational and work environment stressors such as excessive workload, frequent changes in legislation, managerial inconsistency and unclear procedures were more influential than direct client interaction. Notably, 15.7% of participants experienced high to very high work-related burnout and 44.2% reported upper-medium levels, largely due to high job demands and limited institutional support. Meanwhile, 14.5% demonstrated strong stress management with very low burnout levels and 27.7% reported lower to moderate burnout. The study emphasizes the need for effective self-care strategies and robust organizational support systems to prevent burnout. Recommendations incorporate insights from both managers and field practitioners advocating for sustainable, adaptive measures to address the challenges of working in a volatile uncertain complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment.

Samusevica, A. & Striguna, S. (2023). Social work demands continuous intellectual and emotional investment professional competence and effective collaboration with clients. Although the profession can be deeply meaningful mentally stimulating and rewarding it can also become monotonous, stressful, and emotionally draining. The study highlights the urgency of addressing mental health concerns among social workers and emphasizes the importance of preventive measures to support their well-being. Based on research findings theory-driven recommendations are provided to help reduce symptoms of burnout and enhance professional self-efficacy. These strategies are particularly crucial in the context of the dynamic and ever-changing challenges faced by the social work profession.

Research Methodology

A researcher's plan for doing their research is outlined in their research methodology. It's a rational, methodical approach to solve a research issue. The goal of descriptive study design is to gather data in a methodical manner in order to characterize a population, circumstance, or phenomena. To gather the required number of samples from the universe, the researcher has employed the purposive sampling technique. One hundred respondents from the Coimbatore District made up the sample size. Simple percentage analysis was used to analyze the gathered data.

Objectives of the Study

- To study the socio demographic characteristics of the respondents
- To assess the stress level of the respondents
- To recommend measures to reduce the level of stress.

Salient Findings of the Study

Half of the respondents belong to the age group of 21-25 years. Nearly three forth (72%) of the respondents were female. Majority (80%) of the respondents were unmarried. Nearly three forth (72%) of the respondents specialized in medical and psychiatric social workers. Seventy percent of the respondents were from rural background. Less than half (32%) of the respondents have experience of 2-3 years. More than half (56%) of the respondent's monthly income were Rs 10,000-Rs 20,000. Forty percent of the respondents work as counsellor. Nearly one third of the respondents (32 %) work in NGO setting. Thirty eight percent of the respondents disagree that they are unclear about the objectives of their job. Nearly one third (34%) of the respondents disagree that their job is boring. More than one third of the respondents (36%) agree that they are not aware about their responsibilities. Two fifth (40 %) of the respondents agree that each day of work appears as though it will never end and they are depressed about the working environment. Nearly half (46%) of the respondents disagree that they are involved in unnecessary job activities.

Forty percent of the respondents agree that they should take decisions on career so that it satisfies their expectation. Half of the respondents (50%) agree that they have enough opportunities for independent thought and action in their job. Less than half (40%) of the respondents agree that they have good scope in the profession. More than half (56%) of the respondents agree that they help others in solving their problems. Thirty six percent of the respondents disagree that they are not rightly accepted by solving their problems. Forty percent of the respondents agree that they receive conflicting request from two or more people. Nearly half of the respondents (54%) find it difficult to delegate work to someone else while they are busy.

Less than half (46%) of the respondents agree that they have job activities that are accepted by one person and not by others. Forty three percent of the respondents agree that their job is too difficult. More than one third (42%) of the respondents agree that their job is routine. Forty four percent agree that they are responsible for too many jobs. Nearly half (41%) of the respondents agree that their job involves pressure constant deadlines. Forty two percent of the respondents disagree that their work is very stuffy and smelly. Nearly one third (34%) of the

respondents agree that they don't have time to take an occasional break from the job. Thirty eight percent of the respondents agree that they don't have authority to do their job well. Less than half of the respondents (45%) agree that they are standstill in their career. Nearly half of the respondents (48%) agree that they have enough opportunities to advance in their career in the present organization. Fifty percent of the respondents agree that they have 360-degree performance appraisal system and feedback from the employees in the organization.

Discussion:

The present study offers significant insights into the socio-demographic profile, occupational stressors, and work-related experiences of professional social workers. The findings highlight that a majority of respondents are young (21–25 years), female (72%), and unmarried (80%), indicating that the social work profession in this context is largely composed of early-career professionals, potentially more vulnerable to job-related stress due to limited experience and support systems. Most respondents (72%) specialized in medical and psychiatric social work, and 70% came from rural backgrounds—suggesting a strong rural workforce presence in emotionally and mentally demanding specializations.

Job experience and income data reveal that 32% of the respondents had 2–3 years of experience, while 56% earned between ₹10,000–₹20,000 monthly—figures that may contribute to perceived job insecurity or dissatisfaction, especially given the nature of their professional responsibilities. Moreover, 40% were working as counsellors, and 32% were employed in NGOs, often environments where resources and institutional support are limited.

Stress-related data paints a complex picture. While a considerable proportion of respondents (38%) disagreed with being unclear about job objectives and 34% disagreed that their work is boring, 36% admitted being unaware of their responsibilities. Furthermore, 40% felt depressed and overwhelmed by their daily work, and an equal number agreed on the need to make career decisions that align with personal expectations.

Although 50% of respondents felt they had opportunities for independent thought, only 40% believed there was good career scope in the profession. This signals a disconnect between autonomy and career advancement. A majority (56%) felt fulfilled in helping others, yet conflicting expectations (40%), workload pressures (44%), constant deadlines (41%), and limited authority (38%) emerged as recurrent themes indicating job-related stress. Other notable challenges include difficulty delegating work (54%), conflicting tasks (46%), and routine, repetitive work (42%). About 34% felt they lacked time for breaks, and 45% felt stagnated in their careers. While nearly half (48%) acknowledged career advancement opportunities within their organizations, the same number agreed they had access to a performance appraisal and feedback system, which may aid career development but still appears insufficient to mitigate stress and dissatisfaction.

Recommendations include:

- Enhancing support structures such as supervision and mentoring
- Improving compensation and work conditions
- Promoting clarity in roles and responsibilities

- Offering professional development opportunities
- Implementing regular mental health check-ins
- Encouraging participatory decision-making within organizations
- Targeted interventions addressing both systemic and individual stressors are essential to improve the well-being, satisfaction, and retention of professional social workers.

Conclusion:

The findings underscore the presence of substantial occupational stress among professional social workers, especially among early-career female professionals in emotionally taxing roles and under-resourced settings like NGOs. While respondents find intrinsic satisfaction in helping others and experience a moderate level of autonomy, many grapple with unclear responsibilities, repetitive tasks, insufficient authority and workload pressure.

These stressors are compounded by limited income, restricted career growth, and organizational challenges such as poor delegation, conflicting expectations and inadequate institutional support. The duality of feeling both empowered to help others yet personally strained points to the need for systemic changes within the profession.

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