

CHAPTER 6: LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION OF THE CURRENT RESEARCH STUDY

6.1 Introduction

Even though the findings in the current research appear to be compelling, and make a significant contribution to the field of secondary traumatic stress and/or compassion fatigue, as well as the understanding of the impact of employee assistance programme roles on the EAP practitioners, the current research essentially is limited, and subject to flaws. The current research acknowledges a few limitations that should be noted to help with interpretation of the results, and adding to the scant literature on the relationships between employee assistance practices, secondary trauma or compassion fatigue, sense of coherence and the contributions of the work environment. This chapter aims to provide the limitations of the current research with particular reference to the research design, measures used, sample and lack of consistent role of sense of coherence to be a moderator with the aim to critically evaluate the findings. In addition, implications for the research findings and recommendations for future research will be discussed.

6.2 Research Design

The current research employed a quantitative research method, categorised as cross-sectional and correlational design. As a result of the use of a correlational design, no causal inferences can be derived from the present study (Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1991). Several statistically significant relationships were found amongst variables, which indicate that they contribute to the scant empirical research the wellbeing of EAP practitioners as contributed by work environment and compassion fatigue. However causality cannot be inferred. Therefore, experimental studies need to be used in the area of secondary traumatic stress, in order to examine causal relationships between the variables in the study.

The use of longitudinal research is ideal and also needed to examine the joint effects of work environment variables (job control, workload and collegial support) on compassion fatigue and sense of coherence for EAP practitioners in the short and long term. Such research would yield significant contributions to the understanding of both the aetiology and prevalence of compassion fatigue overtime. The use of longitudinal research is advantageous because it permits the measurement of differences or change in a variable from one period to another, which is essential to the helping

profession, since the impacts of compassion fatigue are not known overtime. Limitations with this method are also acknowledged, one key limitation is sample attrition, which can either be natural (e.g. death, retirement) or can be voluntary (change of careers). In addition, the use of longitudinal research especially in low populations such as that of EAP practitioners in the country would compromise the sample size. This would also impact on the statistical analysis and significance of the current study towards contributions to the area.

Data in the current research was collected from numerous organisations in different locations, which led to other difficulties, which was also aggravated by the voluntary nature of the research and distance from other provinces in the country.

The response rate in the current study was relatively low, which indicates that the sample may not be representative of the total population of EAP practitioners in South Africa. A concerning issue is that most practitioners who participated in the research were from the public sector. This indicates that the findings of the current were biased towards government EAP practitioners. In addition, the difference between respondents and non-respondents has been highlighted in previous studies to be significant (Howell, 1998). Such response rate biases might have resulted in the current research. However, a satisfactory response rate is not known in the area, due to a lack of empirical research, especially in the South African context. Nonetheless, various researchers consider an appropriate response rate to be above forty percent, which implies that the current research's response rate is considered satisfactory. Thus, future research undertakings on EAP practitioners in this area should work on improving the response rate.

6.3 Measures used in the study

Questionnaires in the current research were self-report ratings, thus problems of self-report bias need to be taken into account, as responses may not have been completely accurate (Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1991). In addition, appropriate norm groups in the current research to interpret measures, were not available, especially on the compassion fatigue scale. Thus this limitation raises questions of the generalisability of the study to other context.

Antonovsky (1993a) argued that the concept of sense of coherence was developed as a global orientation and that it is supposed to be measured as an overall total score,

and not as components of manageability, comprehensibility and meaningfulness. In the current research it was measured as a global orientation (total sense of coherence). Nonetheless, other researchers in the field have given attention to the three-components separately, based on theoretical and practical consideration. Thus, future research should ideally examine the construct of sense of coherence together with its components, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the moderating role of the concept.

The validity and in-depth reliability were not conducted in the current study, especially considering the point that sense of coherence scale had concerning level of internal consistency reliability. In addition, it is argued in the literature that most psychological measures are developed outside South Africa, which raises concerns on the applicability of these measures when considering the South Africa multicultural context. Attention needs to be paid to the construct validity of the measures used in the current study. Furthermore, cross-cultural issues also deserve some scrutiny by future research in the area.

In the literature there are different conceptualisations and views on the impact of helping traumatised population. Stamm (1997, p. 5) conducted a literature review on the impacts of working with traumatised clients and declared that "the great controversy about helping-induced trauma is not, can it happen, but what shall we call it?". Stamm (1997) concluded that there is no consistently used term regarding the impact of being exposed to traumatic material as a consequence of being a therapist. Stamm's (1997) review revealed four terms namely compassion fatigue (CF), countertransference, secondary traumatic stress (STS) and vicarious traumatisation (VT). Other researchers argue this phenomenon can also be coined empathic stress (Wilson and Lindy, 1994), and others also include burnout (McCann and Pearlman, 1990).

Due to this inconsistency future research should examine indicators of secondary trauma as measured in Ortlepp (1998). Ortlepp's (1998) research measured secondary traumatic stress as compassion fatigue, compassion satisfaction, burnout, and silencing response. Furthermore, research should examine the theoretical underlings of these concepts and relevance to the EAP practitioner role.

A key limitation with regards to the compassion fatigue self-test measure developed by Figley (1995) is that the literature indicates that the questionnaire measures either risk for compassion fatigue or experiences of compassion fatigue. The two statements are different, and indicate two distinctive states, one is potential to experience and the other is experiencing. Thus, it is difficult to interpret the prevalence and level of compassion fatigue on a sample of EAP practitioners.

A positive relationship between workload and compassion fatigue, may possibly indicate that the measure of workload employed in the current study, may not be specific to the EAP practitioner role or even mental health related professions such as social workers and psychologist. Thus, the psychometric properties and applicability of the measure to the EAP practitioner role needs to be investigated in future research in the area.

It is also important to note that limitation with data analysis methods needs to be taken in to consideration, when interpreting the results of the current study. Several researchers (Aguinis & Stone-Romero, 1997) have pointed out that a number of methodological and statistical artefacts affect the statistical power of MMR. Stated differently, these factors lead researchers to make the sample-based conclusion that there is no moderating effect, while there is; the problem is the MMR yield conservative results. Thus, future research needs to employ various methods to determine a moderator or use test that are more vigorous and sensitive.

Obviously, the low power of MMR tests, as well as the subsequent failure to detect a moderating effect, is a hindrance to theory development and the advancement of knowledge around the value of moderating constructs. Not detecting existing moderating effects because of a low-power statistical tool is a luxury that organizational science researchers cannot afford, as it has implications to the practice and application of psychological findings to the world of work.

6.4 Sample

The sample used in this study is small, when compared to the number of EAP practitioners in the country; it is therefore a very small percentage of practitioners. The issue of representativeness of the current sample of EAP practitioners to the population of EAP practitioners in South Africa is also raised. In addition, the extent to which the findings of the current research are generalisable to EAP practitioners in the country is also compromised. However, the sample size was adequate to indicate general trends and find significant relationships, in an explorative manner.

The majority of participants in the current research were from the Gauteng province, employed in the public service and female. Thus the sample in the current research is focussed on one province, sector and gender. This is a limitation in the current research, because certain statistical analysis, which may examine the impact of the above demographic information (province, sector and gender), could not be conducted. Thus, this point limited the scope and depth of the analyses and findings in the current research. Thus, future research needs to include representative sample of EAP practitioners in the country. Voluntary nature of participation in the EAP practitioner's in the research has potential to bias the results.

6.5 Implications of the current research

Despite, limitations of the current research, the findings of the current research make valuable contributions to the field of organisational research, secondary traumatic stress, sense of coherence, as well as employee assistance programmes. These contributions are specifically relevant to the South African context of scant literature and empirical research on these areas. Thus, the findings of the current research have both theoretical and practical implications, which are applicable to the context of EAP practitioners in the current research and similar context.

The theoretical implications of the current research are:

- The current research provides an understanding of the impacts of compassion fatigue on the EAP practitioners and that another person's trauma can impact on the caregiver.
- More importantly, the current research indicates the even counselors that are broad brush (over service not limited to trauma debriefing and counseling, they are impacted and influenced by the compassion fatigue).

- With reference to the occupational psychology, the current research indicates that work environmental conditions impact on experiences of stress and compassion fatigue.
- Finally that an EAP practitioner's level of sense of coherence is important to utilising both internal psychological resources and external psychosocial resources.

The practical and organisational implications of the current research are:

- Organisations need to implement strategies for preventing the development of compassion fatigue, which include leading a balanced life, maintaining boundaries between one's professional and personal worlds, and seeking therapy and supervision.
- With reference to organizational psychology and education the current findings suggest that EAP practitioner's training, selection and profession needs to minimise the risk of compassion fatigue and raise awareness of the problems of compassion fatigue.
- Possibly the selection procedures for EAP practitioner's needs to use of sense of coherence as a measure. This indicates the importance of sense of coherence as a coping resource.
- Other assessment measures, which need to be utilised are whether EAP practitioners have suffered previous trauma, which is important to offering assistance.
- More importantly organisations need to minimise conditions that impact on practitioners such as high workload, low job control and low collegial support.

McCann and Pearlman (1999) argue that it is important for helping professionals to participate in debriefing sessions, training and supervision. Professional training or development, staff or peer support groups, supervision and consultation are an important way of providing added insight and learning. Danieli (1985) commented that counsellors and helping professionals would benefit from five coping strategies: social support, task focussed behaviours, emotional distancing, cognitive self-talk and a group approach to dealing with secondary trauma, so as to normalise counsellor's reactions and provide a safe environment for therapists to diffuse painful or disruptive feelings.

Catherall (1995) developed a five step plan for institutions and or organisations to use in dealing with secondary trauma that includes 1) identifying staff level of exposure to secondary trauma, 2) developing a plan with the staff for dealing with secondary trauma, such as highlighting avenues for discussion and staff responsibilities, 3) psycho-education for staff on secondary trauma, 4) handing out a "preparedness structure" to staff that highlights the agency's philosophy and plan in dealing with secondary trauma, and 5) evaluating the effectiveness of the plan and making necessary changes. Pearlman and Saakvitne (1995) emphasise that trauma therapists or helping professionals need to be trained in both trauma and non-trauma issues so that they can remain connected both to their present field of work and also to broader areas of therapeutic training.

6.6 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should use additional measures of Compassion Fatigue, and possibly employee a secondary traumatic stress indicator model in other to include other related constructs, such as countertransference, secondary traumatic stress (STS), vicarious traumatisation (VT), empathic stress and burnout.

Validation studies should also be conducted on the measure utilised in the current research, to assess the appropriateness of the measures used on a sample of EAP practitioners. In addition, a number of researchers argue that the appropriateness many psychological measures from the 'west' need to be examined in the multicultural South African context.

An interesting finding in the current research is that the EAP practitioner profession was found to be comprised of the following professions: social work, nurses, human resources practitioners and psychologist. This finding has implications for future research because the different professionals have different training, educational background, and thus could impact on their level of compassion fatigue, or ability to cope with the experience of compassion fatigue. Thus, future research should compare the role of professional affiliation on experiences of compassion fatigue.

Future research should also assess the impact and prevalence of compassion fatigue in early and late career for EAP practitioners. Alternatively, employ comparison strategies amongst early career and late career practitioners.

Due to the scarcity of literature and empirical studies on the EAP practitioner role, future research should ideally employ triangulation studies, which will assess statistical significance of correlation relationships and explore contextual organisational and environmental conditions, which were not examined in the current research. This research should also attempt to employ representative sample with reference to gender, race, employment sector and provinces. This is to achieve representativity and generalisability of studies on EAP practitioners nationally.

Future research should also employ both the mediator and moderator models as to theoretically explore the role of sense of coherence.

6.7 Conclusion

The primary research has aimed to investigate the relationship between the EAP practitioner's work environment (WE), sense of coherence (SOC) and their influence on compassion fatigue (CF) as an outcome experienced by practitioners working with traumatised clients or patients in an organisation. The findings in the current study were that there was a negative insignificant correlation between job control and compassion fatigue, a positive significant relationship between workload and compassion fatigue and positive significant relationship between collegial support and compassion fatigue. In addition, there was a positive insignificant relationship between sense of coherence and compassion fatigue. Finally, there was an insignificant positive relationship between job control and sense of coherence, negative insignificant relationship between workload and sense of coherence and insignificant negative relationship between collegial support and sense of coherence.

Furthermore, to explore whether sense of coherence (SOC) has a moderating effect on the relationship between work environment variables and compassion fatigue. Results indicated the sense of coherence only moderated the relationship between collegial support and compassion fatigue, and the relationship between workload and sense of coherence. Various limitations, implications and recommendation for future research have been highlighted in the section.

Researchers such as Maiden (1999) argue that within the South African workplace context, EAPs are a growing workplace service, but they still remain few and far

between. The current research has added to the scant literature on Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) in the South African organisational context. In addition, compassion fatigue has traditionally been studied in the area of trauma and trauma counselling (Figley, 1995; Ortlepp, 1998). Other researchers have shown that counsellors working with clients, who are not traumatised in terms of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) classification, show symptoms of secondary traumatisation (Catherall, 1995; Pearlman and Mac Ian, 1994; Sexton, 1999). Thus, the current research indicates that EAP practitioners that are broad-brush, experience compassion fatigue or are at extremely high risk of compassion fatigue, which extend traditional views of compassion fatigue. Arguably, the current research contributes to a larger body of knowledge on the impact of work environments on secondary traumatic stress and wellbeing at work, and the moderating contributions of sense of coherence to experiences of lack of collegial support, high workload and high compassion fatigue prevalence.

In summing, the findings of the current research suggest that EAP practitioners work environment with reference to job control, collegial support and workload needs to be examined and monitored. This is because these variables contribute to experiences of compassion fatigue. More, importantly organisational-based initiatives to reduce experiences of compassion fatigue needs to be implemented as discussed in the current study.