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SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: A STUDY IN THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, EHLANZENI DISTRICT, MPUMALANGA PROVINCE

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School of Human and Community Development, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Occupational Social Work.

2016

DECLARATION

I declare that this is my own unaided work. It has not been submitted previously for any degree or examination at any other university

_____ _____

Ntombenhle Brenda Moyane Date

DEDICATION

I thank the almighty Father for strength that guided me through this study.

To my husband, Dr S.P. Mandlazi, for his support, care and encouragement, my children (Theo, Nkateko and Melusi) whose presence kept me going, and encouraging words from my siblings (Jabulani, Eugene, Londiwe, Sanele).

To my In-laws (Mandlazi family), much appreciation for the support.

To my friends and classmates mostly Kgashane Malisa and Adelaide

Much appreciation to my supervisor, Ms Francine Masson, for the endless support. I am really grateful and cannot thank you enough.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CSWE	Council on Social Work Education
EAP	Employee Assistant Practitioner
IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers
NASW	National Association of Social Workers
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
SACSSP	South African Council for Social Service Professionals

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The concept of occupational stress is prevalent in academic literature globally. The influence of stress has been researched in a variety of fields in South Africa, including the occurrence of stress in the social work profession (Erasmus, 1997). With the dawn of democracy in South Africa, the working environment has been facing different and major changes triggering different experiences of stress as compared to the period prior to 1994. Democracy brought in social, political and economic transformation; however, there were both positive and negative changes. Basic social services (sanitation, water, electricity) to citizen benefited. Services had been biased against the black majority, resulting in educational challenges such as inadequate classrooms, textbooks, libraries, laboratories and undersupply of teachers. The health sector faced crisis in the administration of health facilities and personnel. The major causes of the challenges were economic: hence unemployment still needs to be addressed. The influx of unskilled and poor rural South Africans moving into cities and the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS caused by various factors are discussed in Chapter 2. Social workers can be included in the group of South African employees enduring high levels of stress following increased demand for services. According to Rothmann (2008), the social work profession experiences significant occupational stress caused by the changing working environment; stress as a phenomenon has received attention and research indicates that social workers are faced with various stressors in the work environment, such as unsatisfactory working conditions, role conflict, inadequate salaries and high caseloads.

In light of the above this research explored, examined and analysed the experiences and perceived impacts of occupational stress among social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province, Ehlanzeni District.

1.2 Statement of problem and rationale for undertaking the study

Social work aims to promote the holistical functioning of individuals within society through empowerment, equipping communities with problem solving abilities bringing about social change within human relationships (Hare, 2004). Stress within the workplace and particularly within the sphere of social work, is most evident. The social work profession experiences

numerous stressors within contemporary South African social work practice. Since the dawn of democracy in 1994, the social work paradigm has been influenced by the emergence of human rights and new targets of social work practice, thereby increasing the duties and tasks executed by social workers.

Furthermore, the social work profession deals with, but is not limited to high levels of poverty, crime, unemployment, lack of education and a lack of basic services (Habib & Kotze, 2002, p. 8). Such changes create or cultivate an atmosphere ripe with potential stressors for qualified social workers. In that light, the above mentioned facets of our society directly influence the people and communities that are served by social workers, making them more volatile, increasing their needs and indeed aggravating the problems they are faced with. All of these facts can be seen as cultivating additional occupational stress for social workers. In that regard this research focused on the exploration of perceived stressors and impacts of occupational stress among social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province, Ehlanzeni District.

There have been numerous studies indicating the link between social work and occupational stress. Ross (1997) indicates that the social work profession is faced with challenges that can result in occupational stress for employees. In addition, Coyle, Edwards, Hannigan, Fothergill and Burnard (2005) mention that the challenges that social workers are experiencing can be overwhelming, leaving them stressed. These challenges include low salaries compared to the workload and limited resources in relation to the work to be done. In 2007 the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) membership workforce online survey revealed that there was high level of dissatisfaction with the working conditions among social workers in South Africa. At the same time the tasks that the social workers do can be stressful especially because the roles change over time. Asquith, Clark and Waterhouse (2005) indicate that social workers' roles include the social worker as an advocate, counsellor, caseworker, risk assessor, care manager and agent of social control. Although the list is not exhaustive it is an indication of the range of potentially challenging roles which social workers are seen to fulfil. Although occupational stress varies in different organisations and among individual employees in the study conducted by Earle (2008), it found that most South African social workers experience poor working conditions, less recognition for their work, lack of resources and support, increased demands for services and shortages of social workers due to high staff turnover (Earle, 2008). Unemployed social work graduates struggle to find employment as reported by communities and

the media. In response to the statement received from the media and communities, the Minister for the Department of Social Development Bathabile Dlamini in a media statement requested all unemployed social work graduates to register on the database with the aim to keep records of how many social workers are unemployed. She further indicated that by 2030, 60 000 social workers will be needed to serve the communities (Department of Social Development, 2016).

The high rate of occupational stress among social workers has been identified as caused by various factors, among others workload, insufficient resources and low salaries. The government introduced the social work bursary scheme in 2003 with the aim of increasing the number of students joining the profession. However, due to the questionable demand-led model used to attract graduates to the profession unsuitable candidates may be selected. The Social Work Task Force (SWTF) (2012) launched a consultation with stakeholders to review the current bursary scheme with the aim of reviewing the intake process. In addition; the Department of Social Development has Employee Assistance programme (EAP) structures available to provide constructive assistance to employees with personal as well as work-related problems. There are also retention strategies in place to keep social workers within the government sector.

Strategies to address the above challenges have been put in place. Therefore situation may have changed over time and so the purpose of the study is to find out social workers' experiences of occupational stress currently. In this study the researcher personally reached out to the social workers as participants and collected data from their respective offices using a self-administered questionnaire to ensure equal opportunities for expressing their views and experiences.

It was the intention of this study to explore the work experiences of social workers employed by the Department of Social Development, Ehlanzeni District, Mpumalanga Province based also on the assumption that that what one employee regards as a stress might not be stressful for another. Mpumalanga is a predominantly rural province and might be experiencing different challenges from those experienced in urban areas. Social issues are a national challenge; however, the increased number of poor immigrants, poverty, accessibility of health services, mostly to the vulnerable groups such as the disabled people, children, women, elderly people and the poor is more prevalent in rural areas. It is exacerbated by the insufficient resources such as health care centres, transport, education, food, water, sanitation and knowledge. Lack of knowledge and understanding among communities about the social work profession, aggravated by political influences causes social workers to perform non-social work duties. Social workers have a considerable role to play in working with marginalised populations and mitigate extreme poverty

in many vulnerable groups. Social workers face serious challenges at micro, meso and macro level; therefore the increased demand for service needs sufficient resources, management support and effective health and wellness programmes for the social workers. The conclusions will hopefully assist in improving the working environment of social workers and to help alleviate or reduce occupational stress among social workers.

1.3 Research questions

1.3.1 Primary aim

The main objective of the research was to explore the experiences of occupational stress as perceived by social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province, Ehlanzeni District.

1.3.2 Secondary objectives

The secondary objectives included:

1. To understand the experiences of occupational stress among social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province.
2. To explore what the social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province consider as contributory factors to occupational stress.
3. To measure the level of work-life quality using the Easton and Van Laar (2012) WRQol scale, among social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province.
4. To explore the coping strategies that social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province utilise when experiencing occupational stress.

1.4 Anticipated value of the research study

Occupational stress is of great concern globally. In South Africa, there are numerous occupational studies but relative dearths of studies exist from a social work perspective. In the case of this study site there are no existing studies that focus on the province, except those

conducted nationally. Occupational stress affects employees differently in various disciplines; for instance Steyn and Kamper (2006), Abel and Sewell (1999), Adams (1999) and Engelbrecht and Eloff (2001) investigated occupational stress from an educational perspective (the respondents being teachers). Researchers such as the NASW (2007), Ross (1997), Coyle et al. (2005) and Earle (2008) contributed significantly to understanding occupational stress among social workers. This study therefore seeks to fill an important empirical lacuna in the South Africa literature and feeds into more current literature on occupational stress among social workers in South Africa. Furthermore, the research also hopes to make an analytical contribution by its recognition and appreciation of the significance of occupational stress from a social work point of view and specifically with reference to the lives of social workers. The research hopes to benefit the Department of Social Development in developing strategies to mitigate occupational stress of social workers and ensuring that working conditions are conducive for all; to elicit points for review by the Department of Social Development and important to the social workers themselves; to assist the employer and the employees in paving a way forward on how the best quality of work-life can be enhanced.

1.5 Definition of key terms

Stress: The word stress has been defined differently across literature. According to Van der Merwe (2004, p. 13) stress can be defined as the "physiological, psychological, emotional and behavioural response to internal and external demands or pressures".

> This response to these demands and pressures often evokes a reactionary adaptation by the person experiencing them, as they attempt to move towards a state of equilibrium. While the term stress can and is associated with psychological pressures or demands, scientists use the term to describe anything that leads to the impairment and stability of balance and homeostasis in the body (Van der Merwe, 2004, p. 14).

Occupational stress is the response that people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope (World Health Organization, 2003).

Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) is a confidential assistance and support service designed to help employees to cope with personal and work-related challenges that affect their lives, behaviour and performance at work (Heery & Noon, 2001).

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014).

Occupational social work is a specialised field in which programmes and interventions are targeted to the population in the workplace. It is bound by the National Association for Social Workers' code of ethics and the Association's guidelines for culturally competent practice (Kurzman, 2008).

1.6 Overview of research design and methodology

This study utilised a mixed methods approach and was exploratory in nature. A questionnaire consisting of both qualitative and quantitative questions was completed by 40 respondents. A WRQoL scale including open-ended questions was used as the data collection instrument. The WRQoL scale and the open-ended questions complemented each other for reliability. All social workers with a minimum of a year's working experience, working in the Department of Social Development, qualified to be in the study. Thematic content analysis and descriptive statistical analysis were used to analyse data.

1.7 Organisation of the research report

This is an outline of this study:

Chapter 2 is an exploration of literature on occupational stress as well as the contextual background of the study. It includes exploration of different literature relating to occupational stress.

Chapter 3 describes the research methods and design. It discusses the methods and research design adopted by the study, such as how data for the study were gathered and how they were captured and analysed.

Chapter 4 presents the research results from the study in relation to the research questions.

Chapter 5 discusses the summaries of the study and draws conclusions and makes recommendations.

1.8 Assumptions underlying the study

Firstly, Mpumalanga mostly consists of rural areas; therefore, the social workers mostly service rural areas more than urban or suburban areas. The assumption is that social workers servicing urban and rural areas might not experience the same challenges, yet they can be similar.

Secondly, similar studies have been conducted on occupational stress of social service professionals. However, provinces decide what works best for them in a way that each province works differently and the challenges faced are different. For example, some provinces use "division of labour" where one social worker focuses on one area or programme such as foster care or HIV/AIDS or substance abuse, among others, whereas in other provinces social workers undertake all the programmes of social work.

Thirdly, occupational stress can have positive or negative outcomes. Different individuals when confronted with same situation respond differently. People are different in the way they perceive stress, in how the environment affects them, and they react differently to different situations. Therefore these aspects should be taken into consideration when looking at the contributory factors of stress (Furnham, 2006). What is stressful to one might not be stressful to the next person.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of social work as a profession is to improve people's well-being and meet their basic needs, particularly among marginalised, vulnerable and oppressed populations (NASW, 2008). Employees in the profession are prone to certain levels of stress because of complex social issues that they deal with coupled with the dynamics of organisational structure, culture and climate. This chapter focuses on the theoretical framework, the current situation of where the study was conducted, the history of social work, occupational stress, contributory factors of occupational stress among social workers, coping strategies and the theoretical approaches to coping and.

2.2 Theoretical framework

The study will be guided by the interactional model of stress as it is interested in understanding the complex interactions of individuals with their environments, social and psychological pressures in the incidence of occupational stress among social workers. The interactive model was employed for the study and it emphasised that the environmental and individual differences in thinking and reactions to stress need to be considered to understanding stress (Furnham, 2006).

2.3 Interactional models of stress

The interactional approach views stress as an interaction between complex variables. In this model, stress is seen as a way in which individuals perceive their environment. An individual's judgement of a problem and the availability of resources to deal with the problem make it possible to determine the stress levels experienced. Interactional models emphasise the important structures of the stress process: they identify which stressors are likely to lead to which outcomes and to which populations (Cox, Griffiths & Rial-Gonzales, 2000). In that light the environment and the individual are both important for the appraisal process. Interactional models identify the importance of support to an individual, because stress occurs when demands are high as compared to the support received (Storey and Billingham 2001).

2.4 Transformation of social work in South Africa since 1994

According to Gray and Lombard (2008) South African social work was transformed as a political response in the recent past, which made the profession the principal source of social welfare services. As a result the growth of the social work profession was linked to the growth of government social welfare services in South Africa.

Under the apartheid government, social work enjoyed institutional support and played a dominant role in the provision of organised welfare services, both in government and in the private, voluntary welfare sector (Gray & Lombard, 2008). McKendrick (2001) observes that social work during apartheid focused mainly on white people. It did not take into account black poverty in any way. Social control was practised in social work using remedial, individualistic, casework interventions. The 1994 general elections brought about key changes in South Africa. While celebrating the post-apartheid era, a majority of South Africans were still living with high levels of poverty, crime, unemployment, lack of education and a lack of basic services (Habib & Kotze, 2002, p. 8).

This drove the then new South African government run by the African National Congress, to transform the welfare system and put an end to racial discrimination in accessing services and benefits. The adoption of the developmental welfare model in South Africa has had serious consequences in the profession of social work (Gray, 2000; Joint Universities Committee for Social Work, 2001). Changes to social work structures in the transition to a comprehensive welfare system have created an environment filled with possible stressors for social workers. Keete (2000) conducted a study on perceptions and attitudes of social workers. He argues that social workers can develop uncertainties and resistance to an approach because of misunderstandings and confusions on how it works. Another study conducted by Mohamed (2005) on the social workers' experiences of implementing the developmental approach showed that social workers both in the non-governmental sector and in the Department of Social Development were frustrated and sceptical instead of being informed about social welfare services. In a study conducted by Mashigo (2007), social workers indicated that they had not been properly prepared for the adjustments and as a result they became suspicious of the sudden programme changes brought about by the government. The social workers felt that they had not received adequate training when the developmental approach was introduced. The above factors show the impact of changes in the welfare system on social workers which in turn can be seen as cultivating additional occupational stress for social workers.

2.5 Occupational stress and social work

Van der Merwe (2004) describes stress as outcomes of both internal and external demands. Palmer and Dryden (1995) explain that the internal and external demands can results into health problems. There are therefore multiple stresses that people can experience. “Work stress” is a “condition or intermediate arousal state between objective stressors and strain”, with strain being “reactions to the conditions of stress” (Dollard, Winefield, & Winefield, 2001, p. 15).

Farley and Smith (2006, p. 7), define social work as “an art, a science, a profession that helps people solve personal, group, family and community problems, to attain satisfying personal, group and community relationships through social work practice. For social work to be effective, social workers have to perform a “healthy job”. A healthy job is likely to be one where the pressures on employees are appropriate in relation to their abilities and resources, to the amount of control they have over their work, and to the support they receive from people who matter to them (Spielberger, 2010).

Occupational stress and workplace health have become matters of grave concern internationally over the past few years. According to Szymanski (1999) it is not a surprise that work stress is on the increase considering the amount of time people spend at work and the changes that always affect the nature of work. Due to lack of adequate resources and support, social workers are most likely to be stressed, more especially where salaries are lower as compared to tasks to be performed (Siegrist, 1996). Stress has been reported to have a detrimental effect on thinking, job performance and health of an individual (Alexander, 2013; Siegrist, 1996).

In an attempt to understand stress, Cohen and Single (2001, p. 167) provide the following comprehensive list of types of stresses:

(i) “*Emotional stress* – anxiety, nervousness, worries, depression, anger, irritability, guilt, moodiness and loss of enjoyment of life, loneliness, loss of humor, lack of confidence, isolation and job dissatisfaction;

(ii) *Physical stress* – feeling restless, feeling uptight, jumpy, high blood pressure, back and neck muscle tension, lack of energy, dry mouth, headaches, insomnia, dizziness, loss or increase in appetite, and ringing in the ears;

(iii) *Behavioural stress* – impatience, impulsiveness, hyperactivity, short temper, aggressiveness, alcohol abuse, use of drugs, avoiding difficult situations, loss of sex drive and overworking;

(iv) *Mental stress* – Frequent lapses of memory, constant negative thinking, being very critical of oneself, inability to make decisions, difficulty getting things done, distorted ideas, very rigid attitudes and difficulty in concentrating; and

(v) *Health* – High blood pressure, higher than usual susceptibility to colds and flu, migraines, irritable bowel symptoms, ulcers, stomach disorders, heart attacks, angina, strokes, asthma and skin rashes".

These different types of stress presented by Cohen and Single (2001) indicate the consequences of different occupational stress that social workers can potentially experience. Social workers deal with various methods of intervention at different levels in their social environments with the aim to promote a holistic functioning in societies (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, & Larsen, 2010).

Social workers provide preventive, restorative and case management services to voluntary and involuntary clients of all ages in diverse settings (Hepworth et al 2010). As licensed professionals, social workers are governed by values and ethics that promote dignity and worth, equity, informed consent, multiculturalism, client strengths, self-determination, evidence-based practice and lifelong learning (Council on Social Work Education, 2008; International Federation of Social Workers, 2000; NASW, 2008).

Adhering to the profession's mandates can increase social workers' potential for occupational stress, as a result of the nature of public- or private-sector work (Kim, 2010). Characteristics of the client, role conflict, high workload and work-life conflicts further impact social workers' stress (Kim, 2010; Storey & Billingham, 2001).

Social work is regarded as to provoking anxiety because of the complexity of human services. The focus on human beings, their complex problems and relationships, and emotionally-charged situations (Coholic & Blackford, 1999; Jones, Fletcher, & Ibbetson, 1991) can be highly stressful. It has been established that anxiety in social workers is associated with depression and burnout (Jones et al., 1991). Social workers are prone to higher levels of stress as compared to other occupations (Andrew, 2000; Dollard et al., 2001). However, other studies argue that social workers and other human service practitioners have lower levels of stress than other professions (Demerouti Bakker Janssen. & Schaufeli, 2001; Soderfeldt et al., 1995).

2.6 Sources of stress in social work

Social work grew from the humanitarian perspective. According to Pines et al., 1981 (cited in Kendall, Murphy, O'Neill & Bursnall, 2000) the vulnerability of an individual to stress can also be caused by personality traits. In addition, Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001), indicated that interpersonal skills of employees in helping profession can be a contributory factor.

Work stressors more than personal factors are significant factors in causing and increasing stress and burnout (Barak, Nissley, & Levin, 2001; Dollard et al., 2001). Client experiences have been identified by Barak et al. (2001) as contributing factors to burnout, though a causal link has not been established. According Um & Harrison (1998) and Zunz (1998) organisational, professional and personal support can help moderate stress at work.

2.6.1 Work stressors

Caseload, workload and unavailability of resources affect productivity in organisations and have been identified as contributing stressors among social workers. Environmental aspects such as working space, office furniture, ventilation, noise and time spent at work result in stress at work. A study conducted by Whitaker, Weismiller and Clark (2006), indicates that social workers experience work overload that leads to burnout and occupational stress and adversely affects the quality of work and ability to complete tasks on time. Work overload and underload can result in stressful symptoms among employees. Overload is caused by time pressure and deadlines whereas underload is a result of too little work available for an employee. Both experiences can be stressful (Willowick, 1993). When employees have too much work to do within a short space of time or have very little to do at work this might result in burnout, and employees being demotivated and stressed. Maslach et al. (2001) highlight that workload is likely to decrease the quality of work and service to clients mostly because the focus is on the quantity.

Effective supervision which is highly supportive is viewed as playing an important role towards job satisfaction and lessening the impacts of work stress while poor supervision contributes to higher work stress (Dollard et al., 2000; Winefield, Dollard & Winefield, 2000). Good supervision is important as it helps control the load placed on social workers (Jones, Fletcher, & Ibbetson, 1991).

2.6.1.1 Shortage of social workers

Social workers are among the main role players in the developmental approach. Social workers are directly involved with clients. The White Paper for Social Welfare (1997, p. 19) shows that "there is a serious shortage of human resource capacity in the welfare sector to address the social development needs of the country".

In South Africa, Brown and Neku (2005, p. 226) report that, "there is still a challenge on the number of social workers working in rural areas especially because there is a high demand of service with less resources". These have a potential to create stress because of the demanding workload that must be completed by a limited number of social workers in the area. Earle, (2008) indicates that "in 2005 a number of 11 111 social workers were registered with South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP). Western Cape had 49.9 social workers per 100 000 of population, Gauteng province had 35.0, Northern Cape had 32.7, Mpumalanga had 12.6, Limpopo had 12.7 and North West with 13.4 social workers".

In addition to the statistics mentioned above, Department of Social Development "Social Work Indaba" (2006) in their survey found out that the social work profession has experienced a critical decrease of social workers in South Africa. This was discussed at an Indaba held in April 2006 which was led by the Deputy Minister of Social Development, Jean Benjamin and the Social Development Portfolio Committee. The purpose of the Indaba was to develop strategies to retain and recruit social workers and to address the increasingly complex social problems facing South Africa. Dollard et al. (2001) argue that high job demands coupled with poor support systems are major factors in causing burnout and stress. The Department of Social Development, as part of a retention strategy, gives scholarships to students who want to pursue the social work profession, financial rewards aimed at encouraging employees are employed, the Health and Wellness Section is available for support, and employee allowances such as pension, medical aid, car allowances and housing allowances, are available for employees.

Social work graduates have difficulty in finding employment; this is the statements raised by communities and media. In response to the statement received from the media and communities, the Minister for the Department of Social Development, Bathabile Dlamini, in a media statement requested all unemployed social work graduates to register on the database with the aim of keeping records of how many social workers are unemployed. She further indicated that by 2030, 60 000 social workers would be needed to serve the community (Department of Social

Development, 2016). The database will assist in showing if South Africa still has a shortage of social workers or too many social graduates who are unemployed.

2.6.1.2 Organisational culture

Caseload, workload and unavailability of resources and shortage of social workers have been widely researched as the main causes of stress in the helping profession (Jarman-Rohde, McFall, Kolar, & Strom, 1997; Cauvain, 2010). The organisational culture and structure appears to also have an impact among employees. The management and organisational culture can be affected by the management and the nature of the organisation. Furthermore; employees are likely to reinforce an organisational structure without noticing. Most organisations have a common culture that may cultivate in other departments within the same organisation. The work conditions that the employees experience can also result in a different culture (Bergh & Theron, 2009). In addition, Hitt, Miller and Colella (2006) indicate that organisational culture is based on values shared by employees and managers but they must be properly developed and nurtured. Lack of interpersonal relationships between employees and managers can result in work stress and as a result decrease staff support and increase conflict among employees.

2.6.1.3 Organisational structure

In a study conducted by Sundet & Cowger (1990) organisational structure and environment were identified as contributing factors to stress. A study conducted by Bradley and Sutherland (1995) showed that British social workers were stressed as a result of organisational structure and lack of feedback on performance. Organisational procedures like unfair job selections were related to perceptions of work stress (Dollard et al 2001). McLean & Andrew (2000) identified poor relations between employers and employees as causing stress in the work place.

The Department of Social Development, where many social workers are employed, is structured in such a way that it employs centralised decision-making processes and this challenges the uniqueness of each agency and its environment (Abbas & Asgar, 2010). Social work professionals, who are at lower level, have little control over decisions made in the organisation as compared to those that are at managerial level (Appelbaum, 2013; Simons, 2013). However, Tehrani (2002) argued that the involvement of employees in the culture of the organisation brings about a healthy working environment. Cotton and Fisher (1995) added that work

relationships among workers, lack of involvement of staff in decision making and disagreement are some of the contributory factors to stress.

Social work professionals have been found to have higher levels of stress as a result of their roles in statutory work; they often have limited autonomy and have to always make complex decisions (Dollard et al., 2001; McLean & Andrew, 2000). When workers have limited control and autonomy over their work, burnout and stress levels tend to be higher, coupled with lower job satisfaction. The social work profession is characterised by ambiguous roles; conflicting roles have been positively associated with work stress, burnout and emotional exhaustion (Barak et al., 2001; Dollard et al., 2001).

2.6.1.4 Role ambiguity, age and gender

Role conflict and ambiguity can lead to lower performance in some jobs, simply because workers do not know how to most effectively direct their efforts (Nwadiani, 2006). Spreitzer (1996) reported that the involvement of junior employees in decision making can potentially reduce role ambiguity and promote understanding of roles and responsibilities among employees. A clear demarcation on the roles and tasks of employees is important (Mayer & Gavin, 2005). Role ambiguity can be caused by interdependence of duties among employees (Kahn, 1964). Role ambiguity is one of the stressors among South African social workers as stated by Earle (2008) in the survey indicating that a distinction in job expectations is vital to avoid occupational stress among social workers. Jasmine (1987) in Karin (2001, p. 146) indicates that "public sector organisations experience more stress as compared to private sector because of the centralised control". Singh (1987) mentioned that workplace pressure can often be caused by organisational policy, procedures and role changes.

In addition, Cooper and Payne (1988) and Toohey (1994), indicated that conflict can have negative outcomes in an organisation. Also as part of structure, the issue of gender roles is of concern. Pines and Aronson (1981, p. 79) indicated that "stereotyping of occupations exists on all levels of the labor force, and that professional women experience more stress as compared to professional men for various reasons". This has a potential to negatively impact the social workers, especially because the profession is dominated by females. However, a number of male social workers are entering the profession.

2.6.1.5 Work significance and performance pressure

The meaning of work, its significance and the type of tasks that employees perform at work can have a major performance impact (Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Job specifications have both positive and negative effects in that specification increases focus and competitiveness in a particular field yet decreases the ability of an employee to do multiple tasks and might result in stagnation and boredom (Pines et al., 1981). Changing routines can decrease boredom; therefore employees need to explore more challenging tasks or consider parallel job changing (Carayon & Smith, 2000; Becker, 2004; Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004).

On the same note, employees might have little control over the changing world of technology at the workplace with employees having to adapt to changes (Bresnahan et al., 1999). This can cause pressure to keep up with the new developments and performance pressure to achieve the required standards of the organisation among employees that adversely leads to occupational stress (Cascio, 1995; Quick & Quick, 1994). Moreover, organisations promote monitoring of employees in a way that employees feel that they are under surveillance (Humphrey, 1998). However such practices are likely to increase work-related stress. In contrast to performance pressure, Pine et al. (1981) indicated that under-utilisation of skills result in boredom, burnout and occupational stress.

2.6.2 Non-work stressors

Personal and demographic characteristics usually play a role as moderating influences rather than causal factors of stress. Collings and Murray (1996) found that older workers tend to experience stress but Barak et al., (2001) found that younger workers tend to experience higher stress levels as compared to older workers. Dollard et al. (2001) found that anxiety and financial worries can cause stress in the work place. Social workers who are highly committed to their profession tend to have better work control, experience less stress and higher job satisfaction (McLean & Andrew, 2000).

Personality types can influence the level at which employees experience stress. Employees with calm personality types are more likely to have low levels of stress as compared to employees who are impatient (Walonick, 1993). Johnson (2001) argues that it is only when the signs of stress and the contributory factors to it are known that the intervention can be made and that interventions should focus on the coping skills and strategies to alleviate stress experienced by

an individual. In addition, a study by Bakker et al. (2006) indicates that personality traits can contribute to positive or negative occupational stress amongst employees. Employees in a helping and humanitarian profession such as social workers are more likely to experience occupational stress. Moreover: personal characteristics of an individual can contribute to the level of stress among employees. Employees who have characteristics of low self-esteem, and those that are submissive are likely to have a high level of stress at work (Maslach et al., 2001).

Spousal support has also been found reduce work stress; however, home and work conflict, such as work intruding on family life, has been associated to have a negative effect for social workers (Barak et al., 2001; Dollard et al., 2001).

2.7 Consequences of occupational stress

"Each occupation has its unique pressures and conflicts inherent to the work itself and the context in which the work is done" (Pines & Aronson, 1981, p. 23). Emotional drain is prevalent in a helping profession because of the exposure and the emotional demand of the job (Pines et al., 1981). The level of emotional drain depends on the employee's personality traits. Occupational stress can lead employees to quit their jobs believing that they have chosen the wrong career. Some employees remain in a job with very little progress at work, if any. However, occupational stress can also be a positive reinforcement in instances where employees realise the need to put more effort in what they do (Pines & Aronson, 1981). Maslach (1982) indicated that occupational stress results in work and family challenges.

There are indications that occupational stress is a concern among social workers in South Africa and in other countries; however the degree and level of challenges faced are not the same. Stressors have been identified and a means to address the challenges have been proposed. Challenges faced by urban areas social workers might be similar to social workers in rural areas with slight differences; moreover, findings change over time.

2.7.1 Organisational outcomes

Strong research evidence associates stress at work with negative outcomes for the organisation that tend to be costly, both in human resources and financially (Barak et al., 2001). High staff turnover has a direct cost on recruitment and training expenditures while organisations tend to

experience indirect costs like loss of trust and confidence on the part of clients because of change in staff (Barak et al., 2001). However, it is difficult to quantify individual organisation costs.

Work stress and other organisational factors cause high staff turnover which then places a burden on the remaining staff, who also become stressed and consider leaving their jobs as well. Unhappy employees create an organisational problem (Koeske & Kirk, 1995). Occupational stress leads to varying challenges for organisations and for those affected, as it is associated with low job performance (Barak et al., 2001; McLean & Andrew, 2000).

2.7.1.1 Personal outcomes

The impacts of occupational stress on social workers are a major occupational health and safety issues (Dollard et al., 2001). Those affected tend to be prone to physical and psychological effects.

High work stress in social workers is associated with poor health (Dollard et al., 2001; McLean & Andrew, 2000). According to Adams et al. (2001) stress at work has been linked to insomnia, exhaustion, stomach aches, high blood pressure, dietary issues and in some cases the stress has led to alcohol and drug abuse. Anxiety and depression, along with high cynicism and negativity and disassociation from clients, were identified by (Bennett et al., 1993; Jones et al., 1991) as being a result of lack social support for practitioners and social workers.

Psychological effects of stress can include but are not limited to altered religious or spiritual beliefs, change in world views, increased sensitivity to and fear of violence, intrusive thoughts, post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, despair and hopelessness, and poor concentration (Dane, 2000; Iliffe & Steed, 2000; Sexton, 1999). It is therefore not surprising that when faced with such stressful situations social workers think of leaving their jobs or changing their careers (Barak et al., 2001).

2.8 Coping with occupational stress

Coping strategies can be divided into internal and external resources (Billings & Moos, 1981; Seiffge-Krenke, 2013). External or environmental resources refer to the social support that one can get from home and also at work. Internal resources refer to personality traits such as hardiness (Ross, 1997). Burnout is a severe form of stress which is prevalent in the helping profession where professionals are required to do psychological intervention (Pine et al. 1981).

In the same study, Pine et al. (1981) further emphasise that one way of dealing with stress and burnout is by realising what the problem is, understanding the problem and doing something with it (Pine et al. 1981). Employees should be equipped with programs to be able to handle work overload. Organisations should also prioritise activities to ease the workload especially because employees remain accountable in their jobs and that can lead to occupational stress (Pines & Aronson, 1981).

Occupational stress is currently one of the most costly occupational health issues for many organisations. There is a need to cope with occupational stress on both the organisational and individual level.

2.8.1 Organisational strategies

There have been requests for the redesigning of work in the human services sector which no one has taken heed of (Dollard et al., 2001; Winefield et al., 2000). Many workers have limited autonomy while their case management has significantly increased (McDonald, 1999). Research has associated autonomy with low levels of burnout. However, a majority of employers are seemingly reluctant to allow this. It is the responsibility of the management to create and maintain an organisation which openly deals with work stressors, vicarious trauma and burnout. Supportive and good quality professional and administrative supervision can help reduce work stressors among social workers (Grasso, 1994; Rycraft, 1994).

The other way to help employees cope with occupational stress is support at work and outside work (Naples, 2014). “It is common for supervisors to avoid commenting on employees’ work except when things go wrong” (Pines and Aronson, 1981, p. 79). On the same note, employees who work with an expectation of being praised are more likely to be disappointed (Ekman, 2013). It should be sufficient enough to serve clients with dignity and share achievements with colleagues rather than hoping to be praised (Brody & Nair, 2013). By the same token, acknowledgement of good work done by an employee is important, either from the supervisor or colleague because it increases confidence (Kraaijeveld, 2013). Employees need to be acknowledged and listened to, and have staff meetings as part of social support using a bottom-up approach in discussing issues that affect employees. This can reduce stress at work because it allows employees to ventilate problems and promotes autonomy (Miguel, Camerer, Casey, Cohen, Esterling, Gerber & Van der Laan, 2014).

Conversely, social support can be a limitation in other organisations because of obstacles such as culture and gender differences (Pines & Aronson, 1981). Achievement can serve as a motivation and a coping strategy among employees (Miguel et al., 2014). Achievement in a career can improve confidence. Employees view achievement differently and set their own standards of what they regard as an achievement (Michou, Vansteenkiste, Mouratidis, & Lens, 2014). What one regards as an achievement, might be different to the next employee. Some employees are generally achievement motivated, and some are competitive in all they do. This can lead to pressure, burnout and occupational stress (Pines & Aronson, 1981). Management needs to embrace participatory work methods that enable effective team work and support has been shown to increase job satisfaction and moderate work stress (Sexton, 1999; Zunz, 1998). Debriefing is a useful tool that serves against stressful situations but it still remains under-utilised (Dollard et al., 2001; Iliffe & Steed, 2000).

2.8.2 Personal strategies

There are a number of self-care approaches that social workers can use to prevent or cope with work stress and secondary trauma, other than quitting their jobs or changing occupations. Most commonly used is getting emotional and contributory support from personal and professional networks, and through supervision. Workers who use such services usually do not have problems disclosing their issues to others. However, other people would rather shield their families and others from the stressful events and issues they confront on a daily basis, which in turn means they experience less support (Illiffe & Steed, 2000).

Bennett et al. (1993) argue that emotional distancing is helpful and useful in addressing occupational stress for those in the human services sector. This means that workers will have to clearly identify boundaries with their clients and work situations to avoid emotional exhaustion.

Humour and spirituality have also been cited as helping reduce occupational stress (Sexton, 1999). Spiritual activities such as meditation, being in nature, prayer and religious activities are said to help reduce occupational stress. Furthermore, some writers suggest that by creating and increasing self-awareness social workers can restore meaning, hope and connect with others. Zastrow (1999) argues that thinking positively may help social workers deal with stressful situations which tend to affect their confidence and self-esteem.

Emotional intimacy and sex can be considered as self-care strategies; they help with physical, emotional release and help workers connect with others. This helps them feel grounded, well refreshed and they tend to release stress in a healthy way (Dollard et al., 2001; Illiffe & Steed, 2000). Relaxing through movie watching, attending concerts, music and engaging in enjoyable hobbies can help reduce stress.

According to Illiffe and Steed (2000) being fully involved in change and adapting to stressful situations by taking action can be an effective way of addressing the organisational dynamics and processes that affect human service practice. This can inspire workers to feel in control. Some workers deal with workload stresses by planning, setting goals and time management of their work tasks.

2.9 Theories of coping with stress

Seiffge-Krenke (2013) indicated that personality traits or styles characterise more or less the everyday manner in which people approach the events of their lives. Individuals who use introversive styles of copying tend to be "emotionally flat" (Ganellen, 2013). These individuals use a cognitive copying style called minimisation and they tend to ignore, deny or rationalise problems and are often quiet. In contrast, individuals using a cooperative style follow advice (Sapulete et al., 2014). Those who are using sociable coping styles tend to be talkative, outgoing and charming (Strack, 2013).

The perceptual style approach focuses less on how individuals deal with emotions and more with how they deal with information and perceive situations differently (Aldwin, 1984).

The cognitive approach is based on the hypothesis that the way individuals cope with a problem is largely dependent on that individual's appraisal of the situation. The approach assumes that individuals can choose and change their coping strategies to suit the demands of a particular situation. Coping efforts include both problem- and emotion-focused strategies. The individual then uses an empiricist approach to identify the coping strategies to be used for specific situations and the conditions under which these strategies do or do not promote positive adaptation (Aldwin, 1984).

The **person in the environment** fit model was conceptualised by French, Caplan and Harrison (1982). It suggests that the interaction between the person and environment is the key to understanding people's cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions. This theory is based

essentially on the idea of employee adjustment in the work setting, which has been illustrated as being critical for overall well-being. This theory also postulates that high strain will occur when there is a mismatch between the person's needs and what they receive or confront at work.

The conservation of resources theory suggested by Hobfoll (1989) is similar to the person in the environment fit model. "One key difference in the conservation of resources model is that the Person in the environment fit model focuses predominantly on people's perceptions of fit, whereas conservation of resources theory incorporates more objective indicators of actual fit. The major principle of conservation of resources theory is that individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect and foster those things that they value" (Hobfoll, p. 341).

The **transactional model** was one of the first models developed by Lazarus and Folkman in 1984 to better describe and explain the process that a person goes through in trying to deal with stressful situations (Mitrousi, Travlos, Koukia & Zyga; 2013). According to the model there is engagement between the individual and the stressful situation because of the individual's assessment of the problem being faced. Then the individual evaluates the availability of coping resources (Lazarus, 2001).

The **interactive model** is the view that a person has to go through certain stages which are important to the ending of the problem. A person has to assess the extent of the problem and how it relates to the individual. Then the individual has to try to find solutions to dealing with the problem (Mitrousi, Travlos, Koukia & Zyga, 2013).

Literature contributes into understanding of occupational stress, therefore establishing means to alleviate possible occupational stress in organisations for the benefit of the organisation, the employees and the clients.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research design and methodology, explaining how the research process was carried out. It contains a detailed explanation of the research design and methods used, research instruments, methods of data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations as well as the strengths and the limitations of the study. Research methodology and designs are explained below.

3.2 Research design and methodology

Research design

Research design refers to the "plans or procedures that allow the study's goals to be achieved" (Padgett, 1998, p. 28). A mixed method was used and the study was exploratory in nature to enrich the in-depth understanding of the phenomena studied. Exploratory research is used to gain insight where little is known (Marlow, 1993).

The anti-positivism approach was employed for this study. The anti-positivists believe that reality is multi-layered, have multiple interpretation and complex (Cohen et al, 2007). In addition; Weber (1991) stipulates that a single method of investigation cannot interpret the understanding of human behaviour but goes beyond prediction, control and description as positivism believes. This approach believes in individualism and that individuals see and interpret things and situation differently. Moreover, causal factors for an individual's actions are affected by different variables such as environment, personality traits, historical background to mention a few.

Mixed methods were used. Mixed methods have the "strength of both qualitative and quantitative methods" (Creswell 2009, p. 203). Data was collected through a scale together with an open-ended questionnaire analysing the problem using both the qualitative and the quantitative methods. The nominal scale was used for the biographical profiles and a Likert scale was used with a scale of 1-5 ranging from strongly agree. The tool that that was utilised was a

questionnaire adopted from the 23-item Work Related Quality of Life (WRQoL) scale developed by Van Laar, Edwards and Easton (2009).

Research methodology

Schwardt (2007, p. 195) defines research methodology as "a theory of how an inquiry should proceed". Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, p.112) define triangulation as the "use of two or more methods of data collection to study a particular phenomenon". The study used literature review, scale and open-ended questions as a method of data collection and information was used to form themes and categories of the study. The study was cross-sectional. A cross-sectional study is used to gather information on aspects of people's knowledge, attitudes and practices (Gatimu, 2007). A cross-sectional research was conducted, naturally accumulating information about behaviour, attitudes and relationships of social workers in Ehlanzeni District Municipality, Mpumalanga. A one-time interaction with social workers targeting specifically those with a minimum of one year's active service in the Department of Social Development of the Mpumalanga was conducted, though age, gender, physical location and years of experience were different. The difference in age, gender, physical location and years of experience allowed the study to unveil different views of the social workers at different levels and with different perspectives. However, the results could have been affected by the cohort differences or similarities shared by employees stationed in the same area or physical location, age group, gender and environment. The cross-sectional design made it impossible to assess the developmental trends of the social workers' experiences of occupational stress and their coping strategy.

Ninety questionnaires were distributed over a period of six months. While attaining a minimum of 40 responses on a sample of 90 was set as a target, based on the area of study, 30 questionnaire responses was also regarded as an acceptable sample size. This study sampled social workers employed by the Department of Social Development as full-time and permanent social workers and 40 questionnaires responses were received.

3.3 Research instruments

The researcher used questionnaires with open-ended questions and the WRQoL scale. Items were scored on a five-point Likert scale (Joshi, Kale, Chandel & Pal, 2015). Factors scores were calculated by taking the average of the total question contributing to the factor. The construct validity of a scale was used with the idea that if a number of scales are given to the same sample,

then scales measuring related constructs should correlate with each other (convergent validity) and not correlate with each other if they measure theoretically unrelated constructs known as discriminant validity (Edwards, van Laar, Easton & Kinman, 2009).

De Vos (2007) defines a questionnaire as a set of questions on a form, which is completed by the participants. The basic objective of the questionnaire is to obtain facts and opinions about a phenomenon from people who are informed on a particular issue. The researcher used questionnaires consisting of open-ended questions to allow the participants to feel comfortable in expressing their views about the phenomena being studied. The researcher also used a WRQoL scale in order to increase the validity of the results. Edwards et al. (2009) indicated that the WRQoL scale draws upon both theoretical and applied sources to cover a broad range of quality of working life factors across work-life and non-work-life domains. The researcher was known to some of the participating social workers, therefore the self-administration of the questionnaire was most suitable to obtain and increase the level of confidentiality and anonymity.

3.4 Methods of data collection and procedures

Data collection method is "a technique and instrument to be utilized when collecting data for a research study" (Richard & Grinnell, 1993, p.44). A mixed method approach using a WRQoL scale and open-ended questionnaire was utilized for this study. According to Green, Caracell and Graham (1989) the rationale for mixed methods is complementarity and Creswell (2007) indicates that mixed methods give emphasis to both instruments for corroboration. The scale and the questionnaire complemented each other, allowing for flexibility, depth and breadth of understanding which subsequently validated the findings of the study.

Group administration and self-administered questionnaire was used wherein each participant was handed a questionnaire and requested to complete it while in the room, this method of collecting data was selected done for convenience and high response rate. Anonymity was ensured to reduce uneasiness among the respondents.

Questionnaires were distributed and participants completed and placed their questionnaires in a sealed box. The researcher separated the consent forms and the participant's information sheets to ensure that confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods was an advantage as they complemented and validated each other, increasing the reliability and validity of the study. A limitation of the data collection method was

that the researcher observed and interpreted the non-verbal communication of the social workers but it was not indicated in the study to avoid risk of subjectivity especially because the presence of the researcher could have influenced the reaction.

3.4.1 Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted when a research instrument was developed and tested as a before the questionnaires were administered to the actual sample. A pilot study can be described "as 'a dress rehearsal' for the actual study in order to detect possible flaws in measurement procedures, identify unclear formulated items and give an opportunity to notice non-verbal behaviours" (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2005, p. 148). The researcher conducted the pilot test on five social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in one of the Ehlanzeni offices in Mpumalanga to ensure the suitability of the tool. The respondents used for pilot testing were not used in the actual study. The outcomes of the pilot study were positive as respondents indicated that the questionnaire contained clear questions, while open-ended questions gave a good platform for elaboration and the length was manageable. The researcher observed pleasant non-verbal behaviours from the respondents of the pilot study who appeared to have liked the opportunity and platform of this nature.

3.4.2 Population of the study and inclusion criteria

Welman, Kruger, and Mitchell (2005, p.52) define population as "the study objects that possess certain characteristics". The population of the study were male and female social workers, having at least one year of working experience in the Department of Social Development and working in different branches in Ehlanzeni District, excluding those working with the researcher. The sample was specifically chosen based on the social workers' willingness to participate in the study. The samples were chosen after a formal letter written to the Department of Social Development was approved. The interviews followed a formal explanation of the purpose of the study using the participant's information sheet wherein the objectives of the study were clearly explained and confirmation given that this study was not funded by the government.

The consent forms were given to the participants who signed to confirm that the rights of the interviewees were read and translated into the language of the participants, that participation in the study was voluntary, and that there were no monetary benefits to the social workers for participating in the study. In the field during sampling, the purpose and procedures, as well as

confidentiality clause of the study were explained to the participants. Only the participants who had consented were asked to respond to questions. Again, the consent form indicated that no legal claim could be filed against the researcher or the institution where the researcher is a registered student, and that there were no direct risks known to the researcher that could potentially harm the social workers while participating in the study.

3.4.3 Reliability

Reliability "is concerned with the consistency of measurements" (Bless, Higson & Kagee, 2007, p. 150). Furthermore Neumen (2011, p. 188) indicates that "reliability suggests that same thing is repeated under the similar conditions". Reliability was maintained by ensuring that all numerical data was accurately recorded, as well as tallied and accumulated in a manner which represented respondents that replied correctly (Easton & van Laar, 2012). Although there were differences in subjects' views the degree of variance was low. The WRQol scale indicates greater perceived quality of working life when the scores are higher. Results of the WRQol scale were analysed against by the open-ended questions. For the equivalent form reliability or parallel form reliability the respondents completed both the WRQol scale and the open-ended questionnaire with homogeneous items for inter-correlation. To ensure test-retest reliability, this study was conducted by one researcher and all qualifying social workers as respondents, stationed in the same municipality and given the same questionnaire and the results were similar, and this extended across respondents of different sex and age groups.

3.4.4 Validity

The participants completed the open-ended questionnaire and the WRQoL scale concurrently. The WRQol scale is widely used and has produced good results with the overall aim of measuring the quality of life among employees (Easton & van Laar, 2012). The questionnaires were tested for validity by asking the same questions to all qualifying social workers as respondents to ensure understanding, clarity of wording, comprehension and ease of completion. The WRQoL scale can be generated in any organisation to measure the quality of work-life, and scores from a job satisfaction scale to a general well-being scale should correlate. Convergent validity was used which showed a pattern of correlations converging on the same themes. The WRQoL scale and the open-ended questions correlated well with the theoretical framework construct; interactional models of stress which are concerned with how individuals perceive their

environment were therefore better fitted to measure the construct of the welfare of the social workers as employees.

3.4.5 Trustworthiness and rigour

According to Creswell (2007), rigour is a process that ensures unbiased research findings. Guba (1981) adds that a research is trustworthy and rigorous when well-recognised research methods are used, description of the phenomena being studied are explained and recognition of the limitations of the study are clearly stipulated. The WRQoL scale measures quality of work-life and the open-ended questions with themes derived from the scale allowed the respondents to elaborate more on their views and experiences; therefore appropriate instruments for measuring quality of work-life and welfare of the social workers as respondents were used. Self-administration of the questionnaires maximised full and honest participation, enhancing anonymity, confidentiality and the freedom of expression without interference by the researcher.

Respondents who were working in the same office with the researcher were excluded from the research. Piloting was done on five social workers as respondents to test feasibility and attempt to improve the study design prior to the full research, and to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed study. The pilot study was well received, and no changes in approach or methodology had to be made. The consent form, and the questionnaires used to collect data are appended to the study report for reference purposes. Moreover the data analysis report was made available to participants on request for a detailed explanation of how the questionnaires were analysed.

Credibility is defined as the originality trust and truth of the research findings (Holloway& Wheeler, 2002; Macnee & McCabe, 2008). Triangulation using different data collection instrument was employed to cross check the responses of the participants and to reduce biasness. Data were coded for anonymity and fair interpretation of data; identification information such as age, gender, working experience and working area was coded to reduce bias when interpreting the results.

Transferability is when research findings can be transferred and be generalised to other settings of similar situation or environment (Bitsch, 2005; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Respondents were all willing social workers working at the Department of Social Development, Mpumalanga Province in the Ehlanzeni District Municipality with a minimum of a year’s working experience; data

were collected from all four sub-district offices of the Ehlanzeni covering both males and female; information was given and consent forms were completed prior to the commencement of the study. This was mainly to allow respondents to participate in the study without any form of duress and gave sufficient information about the study. Both the researcher and respondents entered into a contract with a clear understanding of possible risks and benefits of the study were indicated and attention was paid to ethical issues for participants to make an informed decision

Dependability refers to refers to "the stability of findings over time" (Bitsch (2005, p. 86). Confirmability refers to the level at which the results could be confirmed with literature (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). Triangulation approach in data collection was employed using a scale, open-ended questions and literature review; confidentiality and anonymity was prioritised by coding the questionnaires reducing uneasiness and discomfort among participants. Moreover; the study was derived from a theoretical framework rationale which gave a sense of structure and a background support and justification of the study. Limitations of the study were clearly stipulated as constrains to generalising the results.

3.5 Data analysis

The study used thematic content analysis for the questionnaire with open-ended questions and used descriptive statistics to analyse the results on the WRQol scale. Braun and Clark (2006) indicate that thematic content analysis seeks to formulate and analyse themes of data for better understanding and interpretation of a phenomena being studied. Descriptive statistics provided simple summaries about the sample and the measures. It permitted the researcher to meaningfully describe many pieces of data with a few indices.

Quantitative data: On the WRQoL scale respondents were required to rate statements on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree covering the six factors which are general well-being, home-work interface, job and career satisfaction, control at work, working conditions and stress at work.

The collected data were coded and captured on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. All responses were checked and frequencies generated. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics for frequency counts and were then presented using tables and charts.

Qualitative data: For the qualitative data that was collected a questionnaire with open-ended questions was utilised to provide a platform for a detailed explanation of what social workers view as contributing factors to occupational stress, their experiences, effects and coping strategies. Several factors contributing to occupational stress were stipulated, ranging from positive and negative social work experiences. From the self-administered schedule 5 major categories were identified:

Category 1: Factors contributing to occupational stress

Category 2: The impact of occupational stress

Category 3: Strategies for coping with occupational stress

Category 4: Professional support services offered by the organisation

Category 5: Addressing occupational stress faced by social workers

3.6 Research procedure

The following process was followed in carrying out the research project.

The researcher acquired approval to conduct research first from the head of the department in the Department of Social Development and then, through the branch social work supervisors, received permission to meet social workers and match them with the required research criteria. The purpose of the study was explained, the questionnaires were read and explained before completion for understanding. Consent was obtained and the researcher separated the consent forms and the participant's information sheets to ensure that confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. A group administration and; distribution of questionnaires and scale were used simultaneously. Questionnaires were sorted using numbers for confidentiality. Numerical information was tallied, and then organised according to categories and themes and then coded using numbers.

3.7 Ethical considerations

"The word "ethics" is derived from the Greek word "ethos" meaning one's character or disposition. It is related to the word "morality" derived from the Latin word "moralis" meaning one's manners or character. A moral issue is concerned with whether the behaviour is right or

wrong, whereas an ethical issue is concerned with whether the behaviour conforms to a code or a set of principles" (Bless et al., 2006, p. 140).

3.7.1 Informed consent

Informed consent means that the "participant has a right to know what the research is about, how it will affect him or her, the risk and the benefits of the participant, and the fact that they have the right to decline to participate or withdraw at any point if they choose to do so" (Bless et al., 2006, pp. 142-143). The researcher distributed a written statement that explained the aspects of the study to the participants and that participation should be a voluntary agreement. This ensured that participants were not coerced into participating.

3.7.2 Anonymity

This principle means that the "participant's data must not be associated immediately and obviously with his or her name or any other identifier" (Bless et al., 2006, p. 143). In addition Neuman (2011) indicates that anonymity is the ethical protection that participants remain nameless, their identity is protected from disclosure and remains unknown. The researcher assigned a number to the participants' data to ensure that their identities remained anonymous. This was also stipulated on the participant information sheet and the consent sheet to ensure that the respondents were at ease when answering the questions.

3.7.3 Avoidance of harm to participants

Avoidance of harm "is when the researcher protects the respondent from physical, mental and emotional harm" (Gray, 2009, p. 74). De Vos et al. (2007) point out that an ethical obligation rests with the researcher to protect the subject within reasonable limits, from any form of physical discomfort that may emerge from the research project. The researcher and the respondents agreed on the day and time of the collection of the questionnaire and the consent form was not attached to the participant information sheet, ensuring that the participants were comfortable.

3.7.4 Confidentiality

According to De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delport (2005, p. 61), "confidentiality refers to the handling of information in a confidential manner and it is regarded as a continuation of privacy which refers to agreement between persons that limits others' access to private information". Participants were assured that information gathered would not be disclosed without the respondent's permission, to avoid conflict between the employer and the employee.

Participants were informed that the researcher would refer respondents for counselling to a private practitioner free of charge should a need arise.

3.8 Limitations of the study

Response rate is often low. Social workers have a busy schedule most of the time and usually handle crisis cases; therefore the time factor was a challenge. The researcher personally delivered and supervised to completion of the questionnaires to increase the response rate.

Confidentiality was a challenge as the researcher is known to some of the respondents. The researcher has therefore separated the participant's information sheet from the consent form. The completed questionnaires were placed inside a sealed box separately from the consent form to increase confidentiality and anonymity.

Another limitation was that the study did not include the social work supervisors, the management and the EAP section, although the research revealed that they played an important role in the total functioning of the organisation, specifically the Department of Social Development. Again the study did not look at the salary scale of the social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in detail and in comparison with those employed by the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as it turned out that the salary was one of the factors contributing most to stress among social workers.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical results of the analysis within the broad categories of the research aims, research question and the discussion thereof. Data were obtained from the WRQoL and a self-administered questionnaire containing open-ended questions. Data were then analysed to explore and examine the perceived impacts of occupational stress among social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province, Ehlanzeni District. Recurring themes and subthemes were identified from the self-administered questionnaire. The social workers' responses on the WRQoL scale were used to analyse the impact of occupational stress.

4.2 Demographic profile of the sampled population

This section shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents: age, gender, years of experience in the social work field and the sub-district offices from which the respondents were drawn.

4.2.1 Age of participants

The ages of the participants ranged from less than 22 years to above 41 years. Twenty-two respondents were at the age of 30 and less, eight were between the ages of 31 and 35; another eight were between 36 and 40, while only two were older than 41 years old.

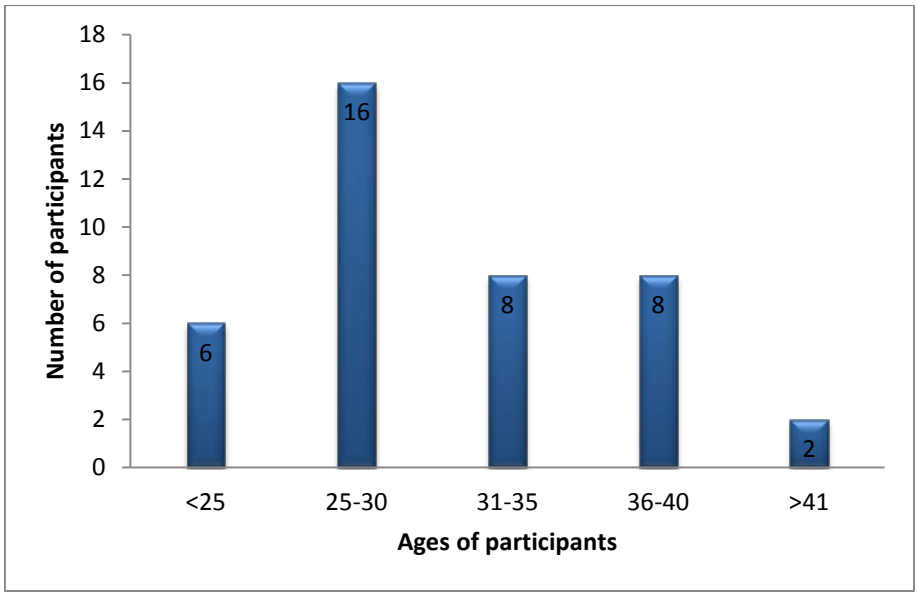


Figure 4.1: Age distribution of the participants (N=40)

There were no social workers younger than 23 because the sample did not have participants in that age group with a minimum of one year's active service in the Mpumalanga Department of Social Development. According to Billingham (2001) young social workers are highly prone to stress and burnout as compared to their older counterparts because of their expectations of the job compared to the reality they face on the job, excessive emotional involvement, weaker support networks and less competent coping strategies. The study has a high number of participants ranging from 23 to 30 with most young and less experienced social workers represented. It will therefore be revealing of their expectation of the job, what they view as occupational stress and the coping strategies they use.

4.2.2 Gender of participants

There were 30 female and 10 male participants. According to Skues and Kirby (1995) gender differences have an effect on coping with occupational stress; women are more susceptible to work stress and they are more likely to be employed in high occupational stress jobs like community and health services. Figure 4.2 shows the gender distribution of the social workers in study.

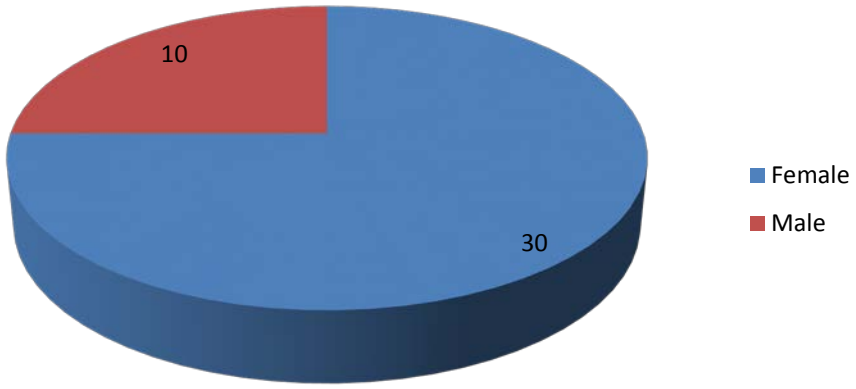


Figure 4.2: Gender distribution of participants (N = 40)

The reason why there is a gender imbalance in participants in the study – and in the profession as a whole, as reported by the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) – is that the social work profession has mainly been considered as a female profession as it falls under the caring professions. Traditionally women have outnumbered men in the caring professions like social work, nursing and education. However, there are more and more males coming to the social work profession. The findings of this study were consistent with SACSSP (2010) which found that more female social workers registered with the body than men. Nonetheless, men occupy decision-making positions in social work. In that light McPhail (2004) rightly claims that social work is not a female dominated profession but a predominantly female profession.

4.2.3 Years of social work practice

Given that the participants had varying years of work experience, their years of work experience were categorised for reporting purposes. Three categories were formulated as a result of different social work experiences. Data elicited from the questionnaire depicts that none of the respondent had less than one year of work experience. Of the 40 respondents, 19 participants had between seven and nine years of experience while 16 reported having four to six years of experience in the field and lastly a significant smaller portion of five had only one to three years of experience by the time of data collection of this study.

4.2.4 District offices where participants are based

The respondents of this study were drawn from Ehlanzeni District. The district consists of sub-district offices. Table 4.1 below shows the number of participants from each sub-district.

Table 4.1: Sub-district Offices of Participants (N=40)

Name of sub-district office	Number of participants based in the office
Matsulu	1
Mbuzini	3
Jerusalem	5
Phola	2
Msogwaba	3
Bushbuckridge	4
Mzinti	3
Mangweni	4
Tonga	3
Naas	4
Graskop	3
Mbombela	1
Phola	4

4.2.5. Mpumalanga Province District Municipalities

Figure 4.3. shows Mpumalanga Province District Municipalities. Mpumalanga is in the eastern part of South Africa and boarders Mozambique and Swaziland. It has 3 district municipalities and has 18 local municipalities. There are a number of social issues that are linked to immigrants therefore bring social change and for the Ehlanzeni District Municipality it means a high case load of such cases.



Figure 4.3 Ehlanzeni District Municipalities

Figure 4.3 is a map of the Mpumalanga Province showing 3 District Municipalities including Ehlanzeni District Municipality where the study was conducted. One District Municipality was covered due to the level at which the researcher conducted it, however, there is still a need to cover all the other Mpumalanga Municipalities in order the compare results and to come up with possible solutions for the Province.

4.2.6 Mpumalanga Province Local Municipalities

Ehlanzeni District Municipality covers a second largest area, the first being Gert Sibande District Municipality and the third is Nkangala District Municipality, however Ehlanzeni District Municipality has the highest number of population of all the districts in Mpumalanga. The capital city of Mpumalanga is Mbombela former known as Nelspruit and it is situated in Ehlanzeni Municipality and this could be the reason for a higher population is has as it attracts

number of people who move in to cities in search of jobs. Bushbuckridge Local Municipality situated at the Ehlanzeni Municipality has the largest population of all the local municipalities in the Ehlanzeni Municipality as indicated by Census, 2011 (Statistics South Africa 2012). Social workers handles a wide range of social issues in communities and Department of Social Development it means a high number of clients for Bushbuckridge.



Figure 4.4 Ehlanzeni Local Municipalities

Figure 4.4 is a map of the Ehlanzeni District Municipality in the Mpumalanga Province showing all local municipalities where the study was conducted. Mpumalanga has 18 local municipalities, however, the study focused on the local municipalities that are within the Ehlanzeni District.

4.3 Discussion of the WRQoL and self-administered schedule results

On the WRQoL respondents were required to rate statements on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree where 1 represents strongly disagree and 5 represents strongly agree. They also filled in a self-administered schedule where findings were organised into thematic categories. The data from the two instruments were triangulated and the results are shown below.

From the WRQoL scale, the following dimensions were measured:

- Job and career satisfaction
- Home-work interface dimension
- Control at work
- Working conditions
- General well-being
- Stress at work

From the self-administered schedule five major themes were identified together with sub-themes where applicable as shown in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: Themes and subthemes of the study

Themes	Sub-themes		Summary
Theme 1: Factors contributing to occupational stress	Subthemes	- Working conditions - Salaries -Workload - Lack of recognition - Lack of support	Main factors contributing to occupational stress as perceived by the participants were the poor working conditions, low salaries, high workload, lack of recognition and support.

Theme 2: The impact of occupational stress	Subthemes	- Impact on relationship with co-workers. - Impact on attitude and feeling towards work and clients	Highlighted impact of occupational stress was the poor relationship with co-workers and poor attitude to work and to clients.
Theme 3: Strategies for coping with occupational stress	Subthemes	- Prioritising work - Delegating work - Postponing stressful cases - Taking off-days - Ignoring cases	Coping strategies for the participants: participants felt that prioritising work make it easy to do what is possible and leave out what is not urgent for later; delegating duties to social auxiliary workers lessens workload for social workers; postponing stressful cases as it becomes too demanding and draining physically and emotionally; taking off-days in a form of sick leave or annual leave was seen as s coping strategy to avoid unmanageable caseload and lastly ignoring cases and “taking it easy”.
Theme 4: Professional support services offered by the organisation	Subthemes	- Consulting independent practitioner - EAP	Respondents indicated that they prefer getting professional support from independent practitioners, not the available structures in the organisation.

Theme 5: Addressing occupational stress faced by social workers	Subthemes	- Improved recruitment and retention strategy - Improved salaries - Adequate office equipment - Positive attitudes of supervisors and managers - Visibility of EAP	Participants felt that recruitment and retention strategies should be improved; improved salaries; adequate office equipment be prioritised (working conditions); increased support and positive attitudes of supervisors and managers towards social workers as employees on the ground and increased visibility of EAP.

4.3.1 Job and career satisfaction

The respondents' perception of job and career satisfaction was measured by seven items on the WRQoL as indicated in Table 4.3. Job and career satisfaction represents the level to which the workplace provides a person with the best things at work – the things that make them feel good, including a sense of achievement, high self-esteem and fulfillment of their potential. Training has become one of the important programs that organisations use to equip their employees with current knowledge as well as imparting different skills.

Table 4.3: Job and career satisfaction (N=40)

Q NO.	Description	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	F	%
3	I have fair opportunities to progress within the organisation	15	37.5	9	22.5	11	27.5	4	10.5	1	2.5
6	My workplace encourage innovation and rewards achievements	12	37.5	12	30	6	15	5	12.5	5	12.5
8	My work environment is encouraging and incites learning	16	40	13	32.5	7	17.5	3	7.5	1	2.5
19	I am satisfied with the career opportunities available for me	13	33.3	10	25.6	11	28.2	3	7.7	2	2.6
22	I feel encouraged to develop new skills at work	9	23.1	14	35.9	9	23.1	5	12.8	3	7.7
23	I get acknowledgement when i have done well in my job	17	43.6	9	23.1	8	20.5	2	5.1	3	7.7

30	There is organisational support available for me	21	53.8	4	10.3	8	20.5	3	7.7	2	5.1
25	I am able to carry out daily duties at work as expected	7	17.9	11	28.2	4	10.3	9	23.1	8	20
20	I feel satisfied with the training offered to me in order to perform my job	12	30.0	15	37.5	4	10.3	7	18.2	2	3.8
	AVERAGE		35.1		27.3		19.3		11.7		7.2

Table 4.3 shows the perceptions of respondents concerning their job and career satisfaction. Job and career satisfaction on the WRQoL scale indicated the level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction of employees at work. Acknowledgement, opportunity and favourable environment to grow and develop new skills at work came out strongly as an aspect that needed attention for greater quality of work-life.

More than half of the participants felt that there were not enough opportunities for progress within the organisation. Twenty-four of the 40 participants (60%) disagreed to be having fair opportunities to progress within the organisation and that their workplace did not encourage innovation and rewards achievements, five participants (13%) felt there were fair opportunities yet eleven (28%) were neutral on the availability of fair opportunities. Ten participants (25%) felt that they were encouraged for innovation and rewards, six (15%) were neutral on this question. Nineteen of the 40 participants (48%) felt that their work environment is encouraging and incites learning, four of the participants (10%) did not agree with the statement and seven (18%) were neutral. A high number of twenty-nine participants from the 40 (73%) were not satisfied with the career opportunities available in the organization, whereas five of the participants (13%) felt that they were satisfied and eleven of the participants (28%) were neutral. Twenty-three of the 40 participants (58%) indicated that they were encouraged to develop new skills at work, eight (20%) did not feel the same way and nine (23%) were neutral. More than half of the 40 participants, twenty-six of the 40 participants (65%) felt that they were not acknowledged when they have done

well in their job, five participants (13%) indicated that there is acknowledgement in their job when they have done well and eight (21%) were neutral. Twenty-five of the 40 participants (63%) indicated that there was organizational support available for them, five of them (13%) disagreed with the statement and eight participants (21%) were neutral. Eighteen of the 40 participants (45%) felt they were not able to carry out daily duties at work as expected, nine of the participants (23%) disagreed with the statement and four of them (10%) were neutral. Twenty-seven of the 40 participants (68%) felt satisfied with the training offered to them in order to perform the job, eight of the participants (20%) disagreed with the statement and four of them (10%) were neutral.

According to Rethinam and Ismail (2008, p. 64) learning opportunities and skills development have a positive effect on job and career satisfaction. Organisations should prioritise skills development for positive goals outcomes and to reduce stress level among employees. However; Collins (2008) alluded that when compared to other occupations social workers enjoy high job satisfaction. Rose (2003) further argues that social work sits just within the top 20 groups that enjoy high job satisfaction (Rose, 2003). Job dissatisfaction decreases performance at work and can cause occupational stress. However, in as much as other social workers had negative perceptions about their job and career satisfaction, job and career satisfaction depends on individual characteristics of the person, such as the ability to use initiative, relations with supervisors or the work that the person actually performs. Furthermore organisational strategies put in place for job satisfaction will not be successful if employees are not committed.

Stress at work

Table 4.4 depicts the stress at work measured by five items using the WRQoL scale. The stress at work factor is determined by the extent to which an individual perceives they have excessive pressures and feel stressed at work. Social workers in this study often went through strenuous times at work. In South Africa work-related stress is one of the job-health related problems and this study concurs with that assertion. All the participants indicated that they experienced several stressors in the work environment which leads to negative experiences and attitudes towards their work and clients. Moreover, many lose interest in their work. Institutional, infrastructural, organisational, departmental, financial,

human resources and supervisor/supervisee stresses were cited by the participants as stressors.

Table 4.4: Stress at Work (N=40)

Q No.	Description	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		f	%	f	%	F	%	f	%	f	%
09	I work for long hours and I do not get compensated for	4	10.0	6	15.0	10	25.0	10	25.0	10	25.0
13	I often argue and quarrel with my colleagues	3	7.7	2	5.1	6	15.4	15	38.5	3	35.9
21	I often feel excessive levels of stress at work	1	2.6	6	15.5	2	5.1	14	35.9	2	5.1
24	My work load is manageable	19	48.7	10	25.6	4	10.3	4	10.3	2	5.1
	AVERAGE		17.3		15.3		14.7		27.4		17.8

Table 4.4 has negatively phrased question which was reversed for analysis purposes, thus transforming all 1's to 5's and all 2's to 4's'; high scores on the negatively-keyed items became low scores where 5's became 1's and 4's became 2's for consistency among the items.

Five of the 40 participants (13%) felt that their work load is manageable however, whereas more than half of the participants which is twenty-nine of the 40 participants (73%) disagreed with the statement and four of them (10%) were neutral. It can be noted that very few of the participants which is five of the 40 participants (13%) felt that they did not often argue and quarrelled with their colleagues at work, eighteen of the participants (45%) agreed with the fact that they did argue and quarrel with their colleagues at work and six of them (15%) were neutral. Seven of the 40 participants (18%) indicated that they did not feel excessive level of stress at work, sixteen of the participants (40%) felt excessive levels of stress at the workplace and two of them (5%) were neutral. Ten of the 40 participants (25%) mentioned that they do not work for long and uncompensated hours, yet twenty of the participants (50%) felt that they do work long hours that are not compensated for and ten of them (25%) were neutral.

Limited resources, feeling of excessive levels of stress at work, inadequate compensation, unhealthy working relationships and high workload were perceived as high work pressures with reference to Table 4.4. Moderate work pressure and demands can result in positive outcomes. However, they become negative stress factors when they are excessive. Strategies to deal with and manage stress at work are of paramount importance as stress can affect individuals professionally and personally, considering that people react differently to stress. It also should be noted that poor career choices result in a fine line between stress caused by work demands and pressure for hard-working employees and indolent employees.

Clarke-McLeod & Sela (2005) carried out a study with social workers working for the government in East London; they experienced stress at work because they were expected to do too much with few resources. The South African Welfare approach was changed from residual to developmental (The White Paper on Social Development 1997). Bak (2004) argued that there has to be more efficient use of limited resources to discourage dependency

of the client. Lack of resources can impact on the service delivery and cause occupational stress. However, it should be noted that employees with passion and willingness to "go an extra mile" in an organisation gain great productivity. Collins (2008) argues that stress at work comes into being when there is inconsistency between an individual's perceived demands and their perceived ability to cope.

The following sections deal with some of the factors which the participants cited as causing stress.

4.3.1.1 Heavy caseloads and workload

Social workers deal with high volumes of pending, on-going and current caseloads. Results from

Table 4.4 indicate that social workers put extra hours to reduce workloads and that they are not compensated for overtime. However, in some sense it shows how passionate some respondents are with their work. According to Soji (2005) high caseloads are a challenge to social workers, as they never manage to finish their work load; Gray (1996, p. 9) argues that "high caseloads disempower social workers at a time when their services are needed the most".

There is a tendency for social workers' caseloads to increase unmanageably over time. Consequently, work becomes too much and respondents experience burnout. Participant 1 from Tonga reported that:

> I get stressed by the amount of work load that I have; the number of cases and population is too much for me to service, the caseloads are just unmanageable... the work is ridiculous. The workload is multiple and rapidly increasing, yet the resources and numbers of social workers remain stagnated (Participant 1).

Participant 2 expressed disgruntlement with the work load and said the following:

> High staff turnover creates stress, since it forces a social worker to manage more than one caseload, at times you find a social worker having more than one caseloads, seriously, this is crazy. I work under enormous pressure, l have no time to

> rest, at times I carry some work home, l work lots of overtime, yet there is no payment for any overtime or extra hours worked (Participant 2).

According to Earle (2008) staff turnover is quite high in the social work profession in South Africa; this worsens the work situation for those left behind as this means their workload increases. Another study by Arrington (2008) also indicates that heavy workloads do contribute to the stress of social workers. On another hand there is the concept of "job crafting". Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001, p. 179) describe what they call "job crafting" as a situation where two social workers may have the same job, but the quality and quantity of their work will be different as they place special emphasis on different aspects of their work like attending meetings, administration, record keeping, report writing, phone calls, emails, direct client/user contact and interview length. Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) argue that an individual's ability to cope with stress is influenced by how social workers handle their workload and their ability to identify the core of their work.

4.3.1.2 Limited resources

Resource availability is part of the success story of any organisation. A lack of resources therefore deprives employees of an opportunity to fully utilise their skills and talents. Data collected through the self-administered questionnaire showed that many social workers worked with limited resources hence their productivity was not to the fullest. A number of resources were not available including office space, cabinets to file documents, printers required to print reports. Participant 3 (with seven years of work experience) and Participant 4 were saddened by the lack of resources:

> I cannot begin to count my work stressors, the lack of resources and constant changes in the department due to resources constraints stress me to death.... the working space and offices are very small, the strict monitoring of cars, printers, telephones, faxes and stationary is a huge ... huge ... problem. It is not conducive at all (Participant 3).

> I get extremely stressed when the shortage of resources hamper and hinder me from being productive and progress in terms of my work. The office space is too limited; we share offices and work from open plan offices. How are we supposed to apply a principle of confidentiality in an overcrowded office? I can't properly help my clients due to lack of resources (Participant 4).

Earle (2007b) carried out an interview with two social workers who worked for the Limpopo government at sub-district level and they shared the same sentiments about difficulties of working with limited resources: sharing computers, unavailability of photocopying papers, no telephone lines and no chair or desk to work on were highlighted as hurdles to carrying out day-to-day duties.

Unavailability of resources is a contributing factor to occupational stress in this study; limited resources may cause failure of social workers to render proper developmental and holistic social work services. James (2002) concurs that lack of resources is a source of stress among social service providers; he argues that social services providers often experience a lack of, or inadequate resources. Pienaar and Rothmann (2003), also argue that occupational stress results from job demands and a lack of job resources.

4.3.1.3 Poor salaries, burnout and challenges with the department

More than 20 participants felt that the remuneration structure and package was unfair, uncompetitive and not aligned to their professional qualifications as social workers; moreover their salaries were insufficient when compared to the high and ever-increasing caseloads. Rothman (2008) identified inadequate salaries as a cause of occupational stress; however, for this particular study the researcher did not check the remuneration structure of the participants nor were their remuneration packages compared with those of social workers from other organisations and departments. However, Earle (2008) states that most social workers leave their jobs in the NGO sector to work in the government departments as there are better salaries and the workload is less compared to NGOs. Despite these improved salaries the social workers still complain about the low level of pay in relation to the high workloads, emotional stress and occupational risks involved. Below are some of the participants' responses. Twenty-one respondents indicated that they are constantly under pressure at work, which may result in participants feeling burnout. Participants 5, 6 and 7 said the following:

> I am now experiencing burnout due to the stress caused by unrealistic expectations from the managers and supervisors, who keep on forcing you to perform and do tasks that are beyond abilities in terms of time, in terms of competence, in terms of resources. These people only care about quantity and do not care about quality, to them it is only about reaching a certain number of clients, meeting a certain target, what about the quality of services (Participant 5).

> I do a lot of work and sacrifice my time for family yet the salaries we get is peanuts, it is next to nothing. The income is too little and does not motivate me to do my job well. Prices of basic commodities are going up and very soon we will not be affording to get a decent grocery for the month. Again I can't even afford to buy the simplest car...subsidy vehicles take forever to be approved (Participant 6).

> I have a burnout, l am so stressed such that at times l feel like picking up by bag and disappearing from this place, l feel like just quitting, l am tired of everything in this place, by the time l reach my retirement age l will be insane, honestly, this is not a place to be (Participant 7).

The participants state that social workers who fail to reach targets are called for disciplinary hearings without taking into consideration the available resources, pressures they endure and lack of staff.

4.3.1.4 Lack of acknowledgement and incentives

Acknowledgement of employees' good work can increase employee productivity whereas lack of acknowledgement de-motivates them and is a cost to the organisation. Earle (2008) in her study of social work as a critical profession recommended that in addition to increasing salaries, there was need for other monetary incentives in the profession. Despite the fact that the Department of Social Development gives a 13th cheque to all employees and performance appraisal bonuses in a form on money to employees who performed well, about 15 respondents felt that they were not recognised for their work and achievements. Two participants echoed these sentiments stating that:

> After a year's hard work, there are no incentives in the form of bonuses. The incentives are not enough and not proportionate to a four-year degree (Participant 16).

> I just work without any incentives, there is no danger allowance, and my life is in danger due to the fact that I work in rural areas, yet besides the danger allowance, I do not even get a rural allowance. When you have done something good, never think that the management will notice the effort and extra mile that you would have gone, they simply do not care (Participant 20).

Ekman (2013) argues that if employees work with an expectation of being praised they are more likely to be disappointed. It should be sufficient to serve clients with dignity and share achievements with colleagues rather than hoping to be praised (Brody & Nair, 2013).

Passion, willingness to serve and bring change should be a core value in the social work profession; it should be a feeling of "wanting to" more than "having to".

4.3.1.5 Lack of supervision and support

Supervision is a vital part of any organisation that intends to maximise its success potential. It naturally follows that poor supervision in a workplace is among the primary obstacles to achieving potential successes by any organisation. According to the responses from the interviews supervision rendered to the respondents was poor. However, this was a conclusion drawn only from the participants; the researcher did not speak to the supervisors in order to hear their views.

> Not getting adequate supervision, acknowledgement and support from the supervisor contributes to the stress I am experiencing in my work. The management team just turns a blind eye on the circumstances, poor working environments and shortage of resources that we face as social workers (Participant 30).

> I get stressed by not being supervised properly, supervisors are always not available for us, sometimes they remote control us by using telephones and emails to supervise us, and they lack that humane personal touch. Supervisors give us unrealistic deadlines; they forget that they were once social workers. Supervisors do not support us; all they do is just throwing us to the deeper end of the pool so that we can drown (Participant 35).

As much as supervision is very important, Gibbs (2001) argues that supervision does not give enough attention to the supervisee's emotional demands of work and their self-esteem and resilience. Regehr, Hemsworth, Leslie, Howe and Chau (2004) concur with this statement; they say that social support from supervisors and managers is limited when it comes to relieving symptoms of distress. However Leiter, Gascon, and Martinez-Jarreta, (2010) argue that supervisors have control over the work environment, job duties and deadlines and thus can have a direct impact on their employees' mental and physical health. Therefore supervision is an important part of any work and thus there should be a balance between the work being performed and the supervision received. It should be noted that the ratio of social work supervisors to social workers as supervisees was not discussed in this study; hence no conclusions could be reached on the effect of high workloads on supervisor performance.

4.3.2 The home-work interface dimension

The home-work interface dimension was measured by three items shown in Table 4.5. "Work-life balance assesses the degree to which employees feel they have control over when, where and how they work. It can reflect an individual's perception that he or she has a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work, to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society" (Easton & Van Laar, 2012, p. 19).

Table 4.5: Home-Work Interface (N=40)

Q No	Description	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
14	My work interferes with my personal life	7	17.5	11	28.2	10	25.6	5	12.8	7	17.9
15	I am able to maintain a good work-life balance	6	15.4	13	33.3	7	17.9	6	15.4	4	10.3
16	I have time for my family	15	8.5	9	23.1	6	17.9	4	10.3	1	2.6
17	I have time to pursue games and leisure activities	2	5.1	11	28.2	9	23.1	11	28.2	6	15.4
	AVERAGE		11.6		28.2		21.1		16.7		11.6

Table 4.5 shows the perceived home-work interface. For the WRQoL factor home-work interface indicated the level at which employees are able to balance work and family life.

Thirteen of the 40 participants (33%) felt that they seldom or never had any time to pursue games and leisure activities, seventeen of the participants (43%) felt that they had time and nine of them (23%) were neutral. Eighteen of 40 participants (45%) did not agree that work interfered with their family life however twelve of the participants (30%) indicated that work

did interfere with family their life, ten of them (26%) were neutral. Nineteen of the 40 participants (48%) felt that they were not able to maintain a good work-life balance whereas ten participants (25%) were able to keep a good work-life balance and seven (18%) of the participants were neutral. Twenty-four of the 40 participants (35%) indicated that they have no time for my family, five of the participants (13%) indicated that they were able to make time for family and six of them (18%) were neutral.

According to Bird (2006) most organisations use the systems approach to deal with employee work-life problems. Organisation policies, benefits, and procedures are left to solve the work-life-balance problem whereas work-life balance is more an individual concern that affects the organisation more than it is an organisational problem that affects the individual.

Kreiner, Hollensbe and Mathew (2009, p. 704) mentioned that employees do take work to their homes as a result compromise their family and personal lives. Results shown in Table 4.5 indicate that work can be so demanding that social workers fail to fulfil their social responsibilities at home and the failure to balance the work and household life can affect employee productivity and result in occupational stress. Hence there is need for flexibility and strategies to cope with a demanding work-life and social life. However, it should be noted that balancing work and family life should not be mixed and be an exception for poor service delivery compromising the beneficiaries. Moreover; incompetence and poor time management can be a contributing factor to the inability to balance work and family life.

4.3.2.1 Impact of occupational stress on relationships with co-workers

The responses of participants regarding the impact of occupational stress on their relations with co-workers were similar. Twenty participants (50%) stated that they have good working and interpersonal relationships with their co-workers. In the open-ended questions less than 15 participants stated that they do not have good working relationship with their co-workers. Most of the strain in the relationships was between the social workers and their superiors.

> I always try to make sure that I have good, sound and mutually beneficial relationships with my co-workers. We tolerate each other and understand each other and colleagues a source of support and provide me with a shoulder to lean on in times of distress ... we treat each other with respect, dignity and worth (Participant 29).

It is important to note that not everyone can handle occupational stress well. Ten respondents (25%) said that they do let out some of the anger on their colleagues which then causes conflict in the workplace but most of the participants (75%) indicated that they do not let out anger on their colleagues. Two examples are:

> Due to high stress levels, some colleagues tend to take out their stresses on others and this causes conflicts and a strain on the work relationships. Supervisors and managers are selfish, lack people skills and also lack good communication skills. In fact they are the ones to be blamed for the stress that we are having, so we don't like them (Participant 1).

> The relationships are not good, some have no respect and treat others as if they are children, some colleagues, especially supervisors have very bad attitude, when you do something good they don't complement you, all they know is to complain when you have done something bad (Participant 9).

According to Kendall, Murphy, O'Neill and Bursnall (2000) conflict at work is a major source of stress for some workers because of mismanagement of conflict at work, negative personal relations with co-workers, and negative reactions to management decisions.

4.3.2.2 Impact of occupational stress on attitude and feelings towards work and clients

Ten participants (25%) maintained that due to occupational stress, they felt very tired and exhausted such that they just do their jobs for the sake of doing them and no longer cared about the quality of work and services that they rendered to clients and families. Some attributed this to the high caseloads, which deny them the opportunity to self-reflect in order to see whether their intervention methods are effective. It should be noted that a high number of 13 participants (33%) indicated that they are able to maintain a good work-life balance.

Twenty-two participants (55%) stated that their moral obligation to service users is degraded from day to day due to the stressful environment they operate under. These participants stated that at times they feel like avoiding, not attending to and helping clients which as a result affects the values and principles of social work of social work negatively. This is because they are stressed and are not in a position both psychologically and emotionally to take in and listen to the clients' cases.

> Sometimes I get so de-motivated with the lack of support from the department such that I don't care about my work and my clients... The various stresses that I

> experience discourage me a lot. And at times I am not motivated to improve the quality of my work, if good work was acknowledged and recognised, at least l would have been motivated to be the best social worker in the field. Improving the quality of work cannot be done in the absence of resources. (Participant 4).
>
> It is impossible to improve the quality of work due to high caseloads and high numbers of clients that you have to see on a daily basis. In the process, quality is compromised, in favour of quantity ... Not at all, in fact I feel like changing a career, this is not what I expected social work to be about. Caseloads are ever increasing. As such, there is no time to reflect on intervention methods in a bid to make improvements and adjustments (Participant 16).

Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen and Christensen (2005, p. 197) discuss work-related burnout and client-related burnout. Work-related burnout is "the degree of physical and psychological fatigue and exhaustion that is perceived by the person as related to his/her work" and client-related burnout is "the degree of physical and psychological fatigue and exhaustion that is perceived by the person as related to his/her work with clients". As a result occupational stress in this study comes to be because most participants fail to strike a balance between the demands of their clients and the demands of their work. Failing to strike a balance in essence can mean one part (either work or home life) suffers though it could also simply explain lack of dedication to the other because one of the two receives more attention. Striking a balance should not be confused with either neglecting family responsibilities or work responsibilities.

4.3.3 Control at work dimension

The respondents' perception concerning control at work was measured by three questions in Table 4.6. "The Control at Work … factor reflects the level at which an employee feels they can exercise what they consider to be an appropriate level of control within their work environment. That perception of control might be linked to various aspects of work, including the opportunity to contribute to the process of decision making that affect them" (Easton & Van Laar, 2012, p. 21).

Table 4.6: Control at work (N=40)

Q No.	Description	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
		F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
11	I am able to exercise control in the position that I am in	2	5.1	6	15.4	14	35.9	11	28.2	6	15.4
18	I am able to voice opinions and influence changes in my area of work	3	7.7	5	12.8	11	28.2	8	20.5	13	33.3
	AVERAGE		6.4		14.1		32.5		24.35		24.35

Table 4.6 reflects control at work which indicates the participants' perceived control of their work situation.

Eight of the 40 participants (20%) indicated that they were able to voice opinions and influence changes in their area of work, twenty-one of them (52.2%) disagreed with the statement and thirteen of them (33%) were neutral. Seventeen of the 40 participants (42%) indicated that social workers were not in control in their positions they were in, eight of the participants (20%) felt that they were able to exercise control in their positions and fourteen of them (35%) were neutral.

This table shows low control for social workers wherein more of them indicated that they were unable to voice their opinions and felt not in control in their positions ate work. According to Spector (1986, p. 1013-1014) employees becomes committed and more motivated when they are involved in decision making. Moreover, De Witt (2001) echoes to say that for positive organisational goals, employees should be allowed to participate in decision making process.

4.3.4 Working conditions dimension

The working conditions dimension was measured by two items shown in

Table 4.7. “The extent you agree that you are happy with conditions in which your work Working Conditions (WCS) assesses the extent to which the employee is satisfied with the fundamental resources, working conditions and security necessary to do their job effectively. Dissatisfaction with physical working conditions such as health and safety and work hygiene, for example, can have significant adverse effect on employee WRQoL” (Easton & Van Laar, 2012, p. 22).

Table 4.7: Working conditions dimension (N=40)

Q No.	Description	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	F	%
4	The job incentives in my organisation are fair	19	48	9	23	4	10	3	8	5	13
5	My salary matches up with my work responsibility	21	53	7	18	3	8	5	13	4	10
07	My organisation experts me to complete tasks with limited resources	8	20	2	5	5	13	11	27.2	14	35.0
10	I am happy with the working conditions in my organization	20	50	12	30	3	8	3	8	2	5.0
12	We often have team building	19	48	12	30	3	8	3	8	3	8
28	I focus on the quality of work not quantity	17	43	15	38	3	8	3	8	2	5
29	I find my working environment comfortable	21	53	6	15	6	15	5	13	2	5
	AVERAGE		40.6		21.8		11.9		13.8		13.3

Table 4.7 shows the working conditions dimension which measures the extent to which social workers are satisfied with the available resources and working conditions to carry out their duties.

Twenty-eight of the 40 participants (70%) indicated that their job incentives in the organisation were not fair, eight of the participants (20%) felt that they were happy with the incentives and four of them (10%) were neutral. Moreover, twenty-eight of the 40 participants (70%) indicated that their salary did not match up with their work responsibility, nine of the participants (23%) felt that their salary matched with responsibility and three of them (8%) were neutral. Ten of the 40 participants (25%) felt that they had enough resources at work to complete tasks at hand, twenty-three of them (8%) indicated that their organisation expected them to complete tasks with limited resources and five of them (13%) were neutral. Thirty-two of the 40 participants (80%) were not happy with the working conditions in organisation and focused on the quantity of work rather than quality, five of the participants (13%) were happy with the working conditions and they focused on the quality of work not the quantity and three of them (8%) were neutral. Thirty-one of the 40 participants (78%) felt that they often did not have team building, six of them (15%) felt that team building was held often in their organisation and three of them (8%) were neutral. Twenty-nine of the 40 participants (73%) felt that their working environment was not comfortable, seven of them (17%) did not complain about their working environment and felt that it was comfortable, six of them (15%) were neutral.

Their perceptions are substantiated by Earle (2008) and Brown and Neku (2005) who state that South African social workers' working conditions are mostly poor. Furthermore, Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk (2012) indicates that social workers face various challenges related to working conditions mostly in rural areas. Workload control, managing daily tasks and being in control can be caused by various factors such as massive workload, backlogs and shortage of staff. But it should be noted that the inability of an employee to plan, procrastination, incompetence and poor time management can also be a contributing factor to occupational stress.

Despite facing different challenges at work, 23 participants (58%) as per the responses derived from the open-ended questionnaire indicated that what motivated them as social workers were the healing and restorative aspects of their positions and roles as social workers. They referred to themselves as *change agents* and as people who make a huge impact and contribute enormously to the well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities. These participants indicated that their duty was to restore humanity in the communities so that every individual lives a healthy life. It cannot be disputed that inadequate resources and unfavourable working environment can impact negatively on service delivery and cause occupational stress; conversely the availability of resources cannot guarantee good service delivery as determination to make a difference and the ability to do so lies within each employee. Below are some of the participants' experiences in the workplace expressing positive work experiences.

> I joined this profession with a passion. I enjoy interacting with my clients and helping my own community. For the years that I have worked in this district I have changed a number of people's lives ... meet some in the malls and streets and they always tell me I have changed their lives, I have a lot of testimonials of people whose life has changed because of my help (Participant 11).

> I enjoy and have a positive experience of being able to alleviate clients from distress; to instil a sense of hope, resilience and adequate coping skills to enable them to be better citizens in the society... I enjoy changing lives of the poorest of the poor and of the most vulnerable groups in the society (Participant 26).

> I enjoy bringing light to communities; social work is indeed a calling i have passion for this job, I want to serve people...the social work profession motivates and challenges me to think out of the box (Participant 5).

4.3.5 General well-being dimension

The general well-being dimension was measured by two items shown in Table 4.8. "The General Well-Being (GWB) factor assesses the extent to which an individual feels good or content with their life as a whole. General well-being is conceptualised as influencing and being influenced by work" (Easton & Van Laar, 2012, p. 23).

Table 4.8: General Well-Being (N=40)

Q	Description	Strongly	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly

No.		Agree								Disagree	
		F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1	My work interests me	5	13	4	10	7	18	17	43	7	18
26	I consider changing my job	18	45	12	30	5	13	3	8	2	5
27	I do advice and encourage people to join my organisation	3	8	5	13	6	15	7	18	19	48
	AVERAGE		21.8		17.7		15.1		22.8		24

Table 4.8 shows the participants' perception of their general well-being guided by the WRQoL scale of general well-being.

Nine of the 40 participants (23%) indicated that their work interests them, twenty-four of the participants (60%) felt that their work does not interest them at all and seven of them (18%) were neutral. Moreover, half of the participants (50%) considered changing their job, five of the participants (3%) did not want to change their job and five of them (13%) were neutral. Nine of the 40 participants (23%) indicated that they do advice and encourage other people to join their organization, Twenty-six of them (65%) did encourage other people into the organization and six of them (15%) were neutral. There is a low number of social workers who felt good and content with their general well-being.

There has been much discussions about measuring an individual's well-being. Kahneman (1999) argues that direct questions on well-being are biased by an individual's present situation and what they remember at that moment. Emotional, physical and psychological well-being can be affected by work-related issues, family issues and personality traits. Moreover, there is a difference between employees who experience unsatisfactory well-being because of over-engagement and commitment in their work and those that have fewer tasks to do or feel that they are in wrong profession. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

There are a number of aspects that need to be focused on as discussed above to improve the quality of work-life for social workers. The GWB: General Well-being factor which is the physical and the mental state of an employee was rated at 20%, Home-Work Interface factor which is the degree to which the employer supports employees to balance work was at 17.8%; JCS: Job-Career Satisfaction factor which is the extent of feeling content with the job as result of what the employer provides was at 20.1%; CAW: Control at Work factor which is about employees' involvement at work was at 20.3%; WCS: Working Conditions factor which is the satisfaction in terms of basic resources, conditions at work and security was at 19.96%, SAW: Stress at Work factor which is the perception of each employees towards stressful conditions was at 18.3% and was the lowest of all factors. All the factors were basically on average rating as per the WRQoL scale. The six factors on the WRQoL scale can be used as an action plan in the Department of Social Development for each employee, included in an on-going individual development plan.

4.3.6 Strategies for coping with occupational stress

In the midst of the challenges, participants pointed that they have devised many strategies to help them cope with occupational stress and enable them to make sense of all that is happening around them and continue working and rendering services as expected of them. The way one copes with stress has a major impact on how an individual accomplishes some control over the demands placed on them.

Findings on the open-ended question indicated that in order to cope with stress, 10 participants (25%) said they just do whatever is humanly possible for them to do; they prioritise work according to urgency and emphasised the importance of proper planning and time management. Five participants (13%) stated that they cope with multiple work responsibilities by delegating less important tasks to social auxiliary workers. Not everyone is able to cope with occupational stress, according to Netmeyer (2000) who argues that at times some people are susceptible to negative thoughts and as a result tend to have fewer coping resources or fail to use effective coping strategies.

Participant 2 who has more than five years working as a social worker said:

> The workload is too much for one person, so instead of stressing about doing everything, I just do what is humanly possible, I cannot perform magic … In such

> cases I always give the social auxiliary workers some of my caseloads. I give top priority to urgent and important tasks (Participant 2).

Participant 8 reiterated that:

> I sharpen my planning and a time management strategy. I start with the older cases and finish off with the new ones; hence I have learnt not to stress too much about work, work is work and it will always be there, l just take one activity at a time. I mostly prioritise the most important cases and then give my supervisor to check whether she agrees with my grading of tasks (Participant 8).

The above sentiments are a reflection of the ingenuity of the participants in trying to cope with the enormous pressure faced in the day-to-day running of work. It is particularly important to them because it gives them ample time to deal with cases which require more attention, thereby improving the quality of work.

Most participants indicated how they have stopped worrying about what is beyond their control; they have accepted that they cannot do everything. One participant stated that she objected to stressful tasks, five participants (13%) said they try to suppress the stress by not thinking about it. It also came out strongly from the participants that they handle stressful work situations by consulting their colleagues and sharing the issues with them. They reasoned that a problem shared is a problem half solved.

Table 4. shows the participants' coping mechanisms (1 = the least important and 5 = the most important).

Table 4.9: Coping mechanisms: Avoiding Stressful Situations

Rank of importance ↓	Coping Mechanism
1	- Debriefing other colleagues at work and seek advice - Taking off-days to relax
2	- Putting aside tasks that cause stress - Taking annual leave to rest and gain strength to confront workload
3	- Ignoring and suppressing of Stressors - Visiting psychologist to offload
4	- Postponing of cases which are stressful - Taking sick leave
5	- Calming and relaxing myself through music and entertainment

All the participants echoed the importance of debriefing, ventilating, sharing feelings, thoughts and views with colleagues. Ten participants (25%), however, stated that they preferred doing cathartic activities as a way of coping with work-related stress. Fifteen participants (38%) said that whenever they were stressed, they took time off to rest, rejuvenate and refocus. According to McGowan, Gardner and Fletcher (2006), the way employees use different coping mechanisms depends on whether they view the work demands as a threat or a challenge. Thus in dealing with challenges they either become task focused or emotionally focused. According to the systems theory for an individual to deal with occupational stress, the challenges faced have to be dealt with at both individual and organisation level. In this case looking at the coping strategies the participants had, they are only tackling the challenges at an individual level, and thus the challenges will continue; there needs to be a balance between the effort put in by the participants in their work and the reward for the work done.

4.3.7 Professional support services offered by the organisation

Twenty participants (50%) stated that they would consider getting professional help from an Employee Assistant Wellness Practitioner (EAWP) when they feel stressed. Specifically, they would prefer getting help from an independent practitioner as opposed to an institutional wellness program due to the concerns regarding confidentiality and anonymity. These participants felt that although they have employee wellness programmes within the department, the services are invisible and fail to be responsive and to meet the needs of employees.

Participant 10 expressed the following sentiments:

> The employee wellness practitioners are not visible in this department, since my appointment in 2008, I have not met one employee wellness practitioner. Even if I want to have counselling services, where do I find these people? There is nothing here; employees who are depressed have to consult their own doctors on their own costs (Participant 10).

4.3.8 How to address occupational stress faced by social workers

The participants recommended various proposals for addressing occupational stress that they experience when undertaking their duties and roles as employees of the Department of Social

Development. Generally, the proposals were multifaceted and form a multi-sectoral point of view. However the common denominator in all the proposals was to overhaul the whole department in terms of social work recruitment and retention strategy, salaries, office equipment and attitudes of supervisors and managers. The following are the views of participants regarding how their occupational stress can be addressed. There were also strong views about the immediate visibility of EAP services in the department. It should be mentioned that the Department of Social Development has EAP services from a district level. However, the EAP section did not participate in this study and therefore their views are not reflected. Closely linked to that was the idea of establishing support groups. These voices basically speak to addressing the situations and circumstances that lead to occupational stress.

> Supervisors need to be sensitive and to upgrade their supervision skills. We need counselling and debriefing sessions. The department should recruit and train more social workers so that we do not need to deal with a lot of cases for months without finishing one case. The social worker-client ratio should be looked at (Participant 3).

> EAP services should be implemented as soon as possible. This environment should be made stress free for us to survive also support groups should be initiated where social workers meet on a quarterly basis to discuss issues that are stressful to them (Participant 12).

> Employee wellness services should be visible to employees. The Department of Social Development should restructure to make it more efficient and responsive in meeting the needs of service users (Participant 18).

4.4 Conclusion

The empirical chapter has laid out the data collected through WRQoL scale and the self-administered schedule. It was organised into three main topics although several sub-topics emerged within those topics. The chapter firstly commenced by providing a situational analysis of where the study was conducted. This is important in providing the overview of the research setting. Secondly, the chapter uncovered data generated by the study. Occupational work stress is one of the major challenges that organisations face today. This study has uncovered social workers' views about what they perceive as stressors, the impact of stressors and their coping strategies. The results and conclusions of the study were derived from the WRQoL scale (measuring six dimensions) employed in eliciting research data. Data revealed that most social workers are particularly negative about their work-life. The

questionnaire was the most appropriate tool to elicit the various percentages and frequencies as reported by the respondents.

Thirdly, the chapter utilised the interview records to provide a platform for elaboration of their views about their work-life. It is important to manage occupational stress as it de-motivates workers, thereby reducing their productivity and passion for their profession. Views of the social workers were captured in detail. However, the management was not part of the study which is a limitation to generalising the results.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews how the goals and objectives of the study have been achieved. It presents the key findings and conclusions of the study, and finally makes recommendations derived from the conclusions.

5.2 Summary of the study

The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of occupational stress among social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province, Ehlanzeni District. The focus was mainly on the contributory factors that led to occupational stress, the social workers' coping strategies with occupational stress and the effectiveness of organisational support offered to employees experiencing occupational stress as perceived by social workers. The findings will assist in understanding and identifying the social workers' views on occupational stress, conclusions will indicate what social workers employed by the Department of Social Development at Ehlanzeni District experience as occupational stress; and recommendations will hopefully cultivate a healthy working environment for the social workers and for the clients they serve.

The study used a mixed methods approach, utilising questionnaires consisting of open-ended questions jointly with the WRQoL scale, consisting of closed questions to 40 social workers, employed at Ehlanzeni District offices. The qualifying criterion was one year working experience as a social worker in the Department of Social Development in order to be included in the study. Thematic content analysis and descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study will hopefully bring to the fore views and experiences of social workers, and assist in establishing an evolving relationship between the employer and the employees, as a result improving quality of work-life for all.

5.3 Main findings of the study

The main findings of the study were as follows:

Objective 1: To understand the experiences of occupational stress among social workers employed for the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province. The study found that a majority of participants experience occupational stress in their implementation of different social work functions and roles in the Department of Social Development. Because of this, very few of the participants had positive experiences to share about their role as social workers; most of them shared negative sentiments which showed a lot of dissatisfaction and negativity. Of the participants, 17.5 % experienced the most satisfaction from, and were motivated by the healing and restorative aspects of their positions and roles as social workers. They saw themselves as change agents and as people who make huge impact and contribute enormously to the well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities. However, 32.5 % of the participants failed to answer the question about their positive social work experiences.

The study established that a number of participants experienced several stressors in the work environment and these stressors made them succumb to occupational stress and developed negative experiences and attitudes towards their work and clients. It further revealed that these stressors included institutional, infrastructural, organisational, departmental, financial; and human resource challenges and stresses that social workers in the Department of Social Development face.

The study also established that most participants had been negatively affected by the impact of occupational stress. A significant number of participants felt that they had been affected by occupational stress in their relationships with colleagues. However, there seemed to be fewer effects on the relationships between colleagues as compared to the relationship between social workers and their immediate supervisors.

The study also established that due to occupational stress, some social workers feel exhausted so that they just do their jobs for the sake of doing them and no longer care about the quality of the work and services that they render to clients and families. One could attribute this to the high caseloads, which denied social workers the opportunity to do self-reflection exercises to see whether their intervention methods are effective. The study also found that

70% of the participants handled stressful work situations by not worrying about things they could not change and accepting that they cannot do everything. Consequently some of them even went to the extent of stating that they object to stressful tasks, while some of them try to suppress the stress by not thinking about it. What also emerged strongly from the participants was the fact that they handle stressful work or stress situations by consulting their colleagues and sharing the issues with them.

Objective 2: To explore what the social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province consider as contributory factors to occupational stress. The study revealed that a significant number of participants have extremely negative experiences of being social workers. They linked their negative experiences with shortage of resources, high caseloads, high work demands, poor salaries, lack of supervision, lack of recognition of effort and disorganisation in the Department of Social Development due to a lack of proper structure. Additionally, high and ever-increasing caseloads result in social workers having very high workloads, which then can result in burnout and fatigue. The increasing need for social assistance caused by poverty, HIV/AIDS, social change and influx of undocumented immigrants results in social workers working in rural areas for the Department of Social Development having a high workload.

Objective 3: To measure the level of work-life quality using the WRQol scale by Easton and Van Laar (2012), among social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province. It shows low quality of work-life among social workers when rating the six factors (general well-being; home-work interface; job-career satisfaction; control at work; working conditions; stress at work) on the WRQol scale.

The job and career satisfaction factor on the WRQol scale found that organisational support, opportunity and favourable environment to grow and develop new skills at work are lower than expected and needed attention for greater quality of work-life. Furthermore; social workers in this study indicated that they experience stress at work. They felt that heavy caseload and workload, limited resources, poor salaries, burnout, lack of acknowledgement and incentives, lack of supervision and support are the main contributory factors to stress and most social workers considered changing their job in order to reduce their stress levels. It should be noted, however, that some social workers indicated that they get fulfilment in their career as social workers when they have brought change in people's life besides the unfavourable working conditions. The home-work interface factor indicated low quality of

work-life for social workers in this study. Less than half of the participants (30%) felt that work-life interfered with their family life and was affecting their relationships with colleagues and co-workers. Conversely 45% of the participants indicated that they were able to strike a balance between work and social life, particularly with family. The control at work factor measured the participants' perceived control of their work situation. There were more participants who felt that they were not in control of their work situation than those who felt that they were in control. The working conditions factor measured the extent to which social workers are satisfied with the available resources and working conditions to carry out duties. Half of the participants strongly disagreed with being happy with the work environment, being comfortable or being happy with the working conditions, resulting to low quality of work-life for these social workers. The general well-being factor indicated on average a low perceived quality of work-life on the emotional, psychological and physical well-being dimensions for social workers in this study. However, the open-ended question revealed that there are social workers who agreed that they had enough leisure time, but only with their families, and therefore were able to strike a balance between work and social life. This in essence can mean that the social workers have an effective coping mechanism despite the unsatisfactory general level of well-being.

Objective 4: To explore the coping strategies that social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province utilise when experiencing occupational stress. It was revealed in the study that participants implement several stress coping strategies. Some of them seem to implement these strategies when they are not at work, so they can be regarded as personal coping strategies. Most of participants (82.5%) reiterated the importance of debriefing, ventilating, sharing feelings, thoughts and views with colleagues. However, 25% of the participants stated that they prefer to do cathartic activities as a way of coping with work-related stress, while 5% of the participants stated that whenever they are stressed, they cope by taking some time off to rest, rejuvenate and refocus.

Participants indicated that they would consider getting professional help from an EAWP when they feel stressed. Specifically, they would prefer getting help from an independent practitioner as opposed to an institutional wellness program due to the concerns regarding confidentiality and anonymity.

The following section presents the conclusions of the study, based on the findings of the study.

5.4 Conclusions

The following conclusions were derived from the empirical research findings of the study:

- The occupational stress faced by social workers in the employment of the Department of Social Development is a multifaceted and multi-dimensional phenomenon. There is therefore a need for a conducive platform of communication between the employer (Department of Social Development) and employees (social workers) in enhancing quality of work-life. The literature review in Chapter 2 indicates that there is a direct link between the working conditions of social workers and occupational stress. There are various factors that lead to occupational stress for social workers in this study, moreover, the empirical study findings in Chapter 4 confirmed what is stated in the literature review in Chapter 2 that the majority of social workers in the employment of the Department of Social Development consider poor working conditions, high caseloads and inadequate salaries, shortage of resources, inadequate supervision and lack of an adequate structure in the Department of Social Development to be contributory factors to occupational stress.

- Social workers in the employment of the Department of Social Development, regardless of gender, age, years of experience and centre of deployment, are vulnerable to occupational stress. A study by Bakker et al. (2006) indicated that personality traits impact level of occupational stress amongst employees. It should be noted that social workers as employees and people view and react differently to stress; therefore what one views as stressful might not be stressful to the other. Moreover, personality traits, passion and personality fit are vital when choosing a career to avoid occupational stress.

In Chapter 4 of this study 21 of 40 participants (53%) have considered changing their job in order to reduce their stress levels as a result of the stress faced at work. Most employees leave

a job because of poor job satisfaction. Holland's job fit theory indicates that poor job fit leads to occupational stress (Kristof-Brown, 2007). The WRQoL scale measured the level of job and career satisfaction which the workplace provides; the question of passion was catered for in the open-ended question wherein social workers in the study indicated that they have passion for the job, feel fulfilled when interacting with people and see themselves as change agents. This encourages them besides the challenges of unfavourable working conditions. In essence, some of the social workers in this study felt the need to change the job because of less job satisfaction.

The main reasons for the lack of work satisfaction, which in turn causes occupational stress, revolved around the unavailability of resources with a high caseload. Social workers felt that they are expected to complete tasks with limited resources which would then result in social workers being unable to render proper developmental and holistic social work services. Furthermore, high workloads, in conjunction with low salaries, make social workers experience occupational stress. High and ever-increasing caseloads can then lead to burnout and fatigue. Therefore measures to assist social workers in coping effectively with high caseloads is vital. The Department of Social Development should prioritise making available basic required resources such as computers to do day-to-day duties.

The study conducted by Whitaker et al. (2006) indicates that social workers still experience workloads that leads to burnout and occupational stress and adversely affect the quality of work and ability to complete task on time. Work overload and underload can result in stressful symptoms for employees. Overload is caused by time pressure and deadlines whereas underload is as a result of less work available for an employee. Both experiences can be stressful (Willowick, 1993). When employees have too much work to do within a short space of time or have very little to do at work might result in to burnout, demotivation and stressed. Maslach et al. (2001) highlighted that workload is likely to decrease the quality of work and service to clients mostly because the focus is on the quantity.

Social workers have a responsibility to service users but this is being degraded from day to day due to the stressful environment that social workers operate in. The Department of Social Development, involving all employees, should not only focus on the organisational goal but also ensure that its employees are well cared for, for increased productivity. Sharing challenges at work is one coping strategy but becomes a problem when employees only complain and do nothing to improve the situation and as a result disadvantage their clients.

Social workers would not consider getting professional help from an internal EAWP, but would be receptive to such assistance from an external source. To a degree, they would prefer getting help from an independent practitioner as opposed to an institutional wellness program. Conversely, the social workers have devised techniques for coping with occupational stress in coping with multiple priorities which include techniques for handling stressful work situations such as taking time off from work, participating in other activities, postponing of cases which are stressful, ignoring and suppressing of stressors, and debriefing with other colleagues at work. The findings in Chapter 4 confirm the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 by showing that coping strategies can be divided into internal or psychological resources and external or environmental resources (Billings and Moos, 1981; Seiffge-Krenke, 2013). External or environmental resources refer to the social support from families, colleagues, friends and supervisors. Internal resources refer to personality traits such as hardiness (Ross, 1997).

Not all stress is bad; there is positive and negative stress. Stress is only caused by external situations but can be caused by internal factors such as thoughts, feeling and habitual behaviours. Moreover there is a difference between dealing positively with stress and supressing or repressing it. Whether suppressed or repressed the stressor remains intact and unresolved and continues to influence behaviour and thoughts. A problem-focused coping strategy as identified by Folkman and Lazarus is important as it is based on dealing with the cause of the problem, and avoiding distractions. Postponing work, overlooking cases, handling easier tasks and leaving out the most challenging cases can be one coping mechanism; however, planning and prioritising work will be a positive coping mechanism that will not disadvantage clients being served. Negative coping mechanisms can be a disadvantage to the social workers as employees, personally and to clients. For the employees negative coping strategies decrease performance and productivity at work, as a result failing the clients they serve. Good time management, prioritising work, increased creativity and increased self-esteem would be positive coping strategies for social workers in this study. Negative outcomes of stress can also be caused by poor attitude towards the stressor therefore it is vital for the employer to establish the different causes of stress as this study tries to do in order to make calculated decisions and interventions.

Other than the effects on the interpersonal and inter-professional relationships at work, another issue revealed by the study is the negative impact of occupational stress on the

attitude of social workers towards their work. The social work profession requires passionate and dedicated employees. However, support structures are vital in an organisation to enhance productivity to revitalise employees.

Unfavourable working conditions contribute to occupational stress and can affect both social workers as employees on the ground and managers as well. It should be noted that the study did not investigate how unfavourable working conditions also affect managers. As much as it is the responsibility of the employer to ensure job satisfaction, the employees also have a responsibility to participate or contribute in bringing positive change to the organisation.

Workload control, managing daily tasks and being in control can be caused by various factors such as massive workload, backlogs and shortage of staff, but it should be noted that inability of an employee to plan, procrastination, incompetence and poor time management can be a contributing factor to occupational stress.

The Department of Social Development has acknowledged the challenges among social workers and has therefore hosted the first Social Work Indaba held in March 2015 under the theme “Revitalizing the social work profession” giving a platform for open discussion and resolutions in tackling challenges facing the profession. One of the limitations of this study is that it is cross-sectional, not longitudinal; therefore changes and developments made thus far were not studied.

The conclusions of the study, based on the study findings and literature review, have been presented. The following section will present recommendations for addressing the occupational stress faced by social workers, based on the conclusions of the study.

5.5 Recommendations

The following recommendations are made for consideration by the Department of Social Development for addressing occupational stress that their social workers experience when undertaking their duties and roles as employees of the Department of Social Development. Generally, the recommendations are multifaceted and from a multi-sectoral point of view.

5.5.1 Recommendations for the practice

- ✓ The Department of Social Development together with the SACSSP should continue to strengthen the rewards and incentive system in acknowledging the hard-working and dedicated social workers. However, this system should be transparent and scores used should be standardised and reachable when identifying and determining the deserving employees, so that it is not prone to bias and subjectivity.

- ✓ The social worker to client ratio should be looked at to determine caseloads and work allocation. This would go a long way in allocating manageable caseloads to social workers, which would make them effectively and efficiently focus on their clients and would go a long way towards reducing their occupational stress.

- ✓ Continuous support and training for supervisors should be prioritised for professional development, effective supervision and increased productivity.

5.5.2 Recommendations for the organisation

- ✓ The Department of Social Development should employ more social workers to address the shortage of social workers in the department. Further to that, the SACSSP should make it mandatory for new graduate social workers to undertake a one year rural service/work, prior to and as a condition for registering with the council in order to address the high caseload in rural areas. The government response to the issues is a process therefore it is of paramount importance that the government as the employer and employees do forge a way of handling and containing the situation.

- ✓ The Department of Social Development should consider putting in place an effective and efficient EAP service. They should contract an independent provider of the service in order to promote utilisation of the service by the employees. This can significantly contribute in making the working environment stress free for social workers.

- ✓ Review of organisational structure and involvement of the staff members at a lower level in decision making is vital to promote positive goal attainment and job satisfaction.

5.5.3 Recommendations for social workers

- ✓ Support groups should be initiated where social workers meet on a quarterly basis to discuss issues that are stressful to them. Social workers also have a responsibility to mobilise themselves for support. Furthermore; social workers should keep the goal of the organisation in mind when executing their duties which are to serve mostly the poor and the marginalised.

5.5.4 Recommendations for the future

- ✓ Further research could be conducted to find further mechanisms that could be put in place to help social workers cope with occupational stress.

Should the Department of Social Development consider the abovementioned recommendations and address the situations and circumstances that lead to occupational stress, the impact of occupational stress on social workers will decrease significantly.

5.6 Concluding comments

Social work is a noble, professional and academic discipline aimed at bringing positive change and development to individuals and communities. It would be wrong to generalise that social workers are not doing their job as expected, with the rapid changing world and ever-increasing demand to handle complex social issues social workers are prone to occupational stress mainly because of the nature of their work. This study explored what social workers employed by the Department of Social Development at Ehlanzeni District, in Mpumalanga Province viewed as stressors, the contributing factors and their coping strategies. The findings and conclusions will hopefully assist in improving the working environment of social workers and to help reduce occupational stress among social workers in order to promote increased productivity and wellness.

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APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE PART 1

SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, EHLANZENI DISTRICT, MPUMALANGA PROVINCE

QUESTIONNAIRE

Identification Particulars

1. Name of the Department: ……...
2. Name of office in a District: ……
3. Work experience: ☐ years
4. Gender : Male ☐ Female ☐
5. Age: ☐

Work-Related Quality of Life Scale

SA= Strongly agree A= Agree N=Neutral D=Disagree SD=strongly disagree

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS? PLEASE TICK ONE ANSWER.

		SA	A	N	D	SD
1.	My work interests me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.	I am able to communicate work-related issues with my supervisor	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.	I have fair opportunities to progress within the organisation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.	The job incentives in my organisation are fair	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

5.	My salary matches up with my work responsibility					
6.	My workplace encourage innovation and rewards achievements					
7.	My organisation experts me to complete tasks with limited resources					
8.	My environment is encouraging and incites learning					
9.	I work for longer hours and I do not get compensated for					
10.	I am happy with the working conditions in my organisation					
11.	I am able to exercise control in the position that I am in					
12.	We often have team building at work					
13.	I often argue and quarrel with my colleagues					
14.	My work interferes with my personal life					
15.	I am able to maintain a good work-life balance					
16.	I have time for my family					
17.	I have time to pursue games and leisure activities					
18.	I am able to voice opinions and influence changes in my area of work					
19.	I am satisfied with the career opportunities available for me					
20.	I feel satisfied with the training offered to me in order to perform my job					
21.	I often feel excessive levels of stress at work					
22.	I feel encouraged to develop new skills at work					
23.	I get acknowledgement when i have done well in my job					
24.	My work load is manageable					

25.	I am able to carry out daily duties at work as expected	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
26.	I consider changing my job	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
27.	I do advice and encourage people to join my organisation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
28.	I focus on the quality of work not quantity	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
29.	I find my working environment comfortable	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
30.	There is organisational support available for me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE PART 2

SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, EHLANZENI DISTRICT, MPUMALANGA PROVINCE

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Section A: Contributory factors to occupational stress

1. What do you enjoy about your employment as a social worker? Please elaborate.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

2. What are the positive experiences for you as a social worker? Please elaborate.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

3. What are the particular stressors that you experience at work? Please elaborate.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

4. What do you perceive as causing stress at work, if any?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Section B: Impact of occupational stress

5. Describe the teamwork between you and your co-workers indicating the positive and the negative aspects.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

6. What motivates you to do better at work?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Section C: Coping strategies

7. What do you do when you have multiple priorities at work? Please explain.

_____
_____

_____

_____

_____

8. How do you handle stressful situations at work? Please explain.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

9. How do you cope with work-related stress, if you do experience any?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Section D: Organisational support to employees

10. Would you consider getting professional help from your Institutional Employee Wellness or from an independent practitioner if you feel stressed? Please motivate your answer.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

11. Describe organisational support that is available in your organisation.

_____

_____

_____

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12. Any other comments you would like to make?

_____

_____

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APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, EHLANZENI DISTRICT, MPUMALANGA PROVINCE

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Dear Social worker

My name is Ntombenhle Brenda Moyane employed by the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province. I am registered for Master's degree in occupational social work at the University of the Witwatersrand. As part of the requirements for the degree, I am conducting a research titled "the experiences of occupational stress among social workers employed by the Department of Social Development: A study of the Ehlanzeni District. The results of the study will hopefully alleviate occupational stress, develop effective coping strategies for social workers and better the service to the clients. I therefore kindly invite you to participate in my study. Your participation is entirely voluntary and refusal to participate will not be held against you in anyway. The questionnaire has open-ended questions which allow you to elaborate your responses. The questionnaires will approximately take about 45 to 60 minutes. You may withdraw from the study at any time and you may also refuse to answer any question that you do not feel comfortable answering. The participation form will be separated from the consent form to increase confidentiality and anonymity.In a case where some of the questions are sensitive to you and as a result you become stressed, there is support and counselling arranged for you free of charge. The counsellor is Ms Sarah Gondwe from a private practice and her contact number is 082 450 9082. Feel free to consult should a need arise.Please feel free to ask questions regarding the study. I shall answer your questions to the best of my ability. I may be contacted on 078 0791 286 and my supervisor Ms Francine Masson can be contacted on 011 717 4480. Should you wish to receive a summary of the results of the study; an abstract will be made available on request.

Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in the study.

Yours sincerely_____

N.B. Moyane

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, EHLANZENI DISTRICT, MPUMALANGA PROVINCE

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY

I hereby agree to participate in research titled "the experiences of occupational stress among social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga Province: A study of the Ehlanzeni District". I understand that my participation is voluntarily and that I may refuse to answer some of the questions or withdraw from participating in the study should I not want to continue without any negative effects posed to me.

The purpose of the study has been explained to me and I understand what is expected of my participation. I understand that the consent form will not be linked to the questionnaire and that my answers will remain confidential.

Name of Participant:.....	Name of Researcher ……
Date:.....	Date……
Signature:.....	Signature……