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The relationship between work environment, sense of coherence and compassion fatigue amongst employee assistance programme (EAP) practitioners

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2008-05-16T08:53:07Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/4835

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are a relatively new workplace service in South Africa, in contrast to many other 'western countries' such as the United States of America (Vosloo and Barnard, 2002; Harper, 1999; Maiden, 1992). Hence, various authors have argued that there is a need for research in this area, especially in the South African context (Beard, 2000; Berridge and Cooper, 2000; Malatji, 2000). Furthermore, existing research in this area has largely focussed on either the EAP service itself or the EAP clients, and not on the wellbeing of EAP practitioners. The current research contributes to a larger body of knowledge on the impact of the work environment on secondary trauma and wellbeing at work. In addition, the current research also adds to the scant literature on employee assistance programmes and the impact of the EAP role on the practitioners in South Africa.

Researchers such as Maiden (1999) state that within the South African workplace context, EAPs are a growing workplace service, but they still remain few and far between. This point further indicates the lack of a coherent body of literature in the area. Similarly, Ortlepp (1998) argues that previous research has not addressed the role of personality characteristics, such as sense of coherence, in experiences of trauma, especially secondary trauma in the organisational literature. Thus, the current research addresses this gap in the literature and previous empirical research.

To counter the negative impact of stress and other life conditions, organisations have introduced services such as Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs). An EAP is designed to assist in alleviating negative conditions and enable employees in the workplace to realise their full potential for the benefit of their organisation and themselves. It is a tangible and practical employee benefit (Daniels, 1997). Nonetheless, organisations do not realise that such programmes could have a negative impact on the same employees who are attempting to assist troubled workers in the organisation. Thus, this research addresses the issue of the wellbeing of the EAP practitioners and possible negative impact of their role. However, research on the wellbeing of EAP practitioners in the South African workplace context is scant.

The primary aim of the current research is to investigate the relationship between the EAP practitioner's work environment (WE), sense of coherence (SOC) and levels of compassion fatigue (CF) as an outcome experienced by practitioners working with traumatised clients in an organisation. Furthermore, it also aims to explore whether sense of coherence (SOC) has a moderating effect on the relationship between work environment variables and compassion fatigue. Work environment variables are job control, workload and collegial support, and senses of coherence components are manageability, comprehensibility and meaningfulness.

Research shows that people act in different ways when it comes to stress, trauma and secondary trauma. This research has attributed this to individual's psychological characteristics, such as their level of sense of coherence, hardiness and locus of control, which are related to employees' health and well-being (Bell, Kulkami and Mauno, 2000; Sexton, 1999; Feldt, Kunnunen and Mauno, 2000) and in South Africa several researchers have found similar results (Levert, 1999; Ortlepp, 1998; Levert, Lucas and Ortlepp, 2000; Ortlepp and Friedman, 2001). Research by Levert et al. (2000) and Ortlepp and Friedman (2001) motivated the current research to test the role of sense of coherence on the relationship between work environment variables and compassion fatigue.

Previous research in the area of sense of coherence, compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress and burnout has focussed on other health professionals, such as trauma professionals (Nkosi, 2002, Ortlepp, 1998), psychiatric nurses (Levert, 1999), and counsellors (Wilson, 1998), predominantly employed in a hospital setting. The current research focuses on EAP Practitioners employed in organisational settings. In addition, previous research has conceptualised work environment at an organisational level (Levert, 1999), which requires a comparison of different organisations. Thus, the current research conceptualises work environment at an individual level, which requires comparison of different individuals.

Until recently, it was thought that trauma workers, because of their special training, were immune to traumatic stress reactions and symptoms. However, professionals are susceptible to developing traumatic stress symptoms from being empathetically engaged with victims of traumatic events. Thus, researchers in the field of secondary

trauma argue that traumatic stress symptoms are contagious and can produce similar effects in those who work with trauma victims (Figley, 1995c).

Figley (1995) defined compassion fatigue as a secondary traumatic stress reaction resulting from helping or desiring to help a person suffering from traumatic events. Caregivers experiencing compassion fatigue may develop a preoccupation with their patients by re-experiencing their trauma, and may exhibit symptoms of avoidance of reminders, numbing in response to reminders, anxiety, and persistent arousal. Symptoms of burnout and compassion fatigue are similar; however, the latter has a more sudden and acute onset than the former, which manifests by a gradual wearing down of caregivers who are overwhelmed and unable to effect positive, change.

Furthermore, compassion fatigue has traditionally been studied in the area of trauma and trauma counselling (Figley, 1995; Ortlepp, 1998). Other research has shown that counsellors working with clients, who are not traumatised in terms of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) classification, show symptoms of secondary traumatisation (Catherall, 1995; Pearlman and Man Ian, 1994; Sexton, 1999). The current research studies compassion fatigue outside the traditional perspective and argues that EAP practitioners are ‘broad brush’ or generalist, which implies that they provide services in a wide range of areas including but not limited to trauma. Thus the current research both challenges and adds to literature from studying compassion fatigue outside the traditional trauma perspective.

The sample of EAP practitioners was distributed in all provinces of South Africa, namely Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Limpompo, North-West, Northern Cape, Free State, Kwazulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, and Western Cape (refer to Table 1 and Table 2). Nonetheless, most EAP practitioners who participated in the present study were from the Gauteng province.

The research report outline is as follows: Chapter 1 is the introduction and overview of the research report. Chapter 2 is the literature review on each of the key variables in the current study; it provides the theoretical review, background literature and previous empirical research in the area. In addition, this chapter also provides a background section on employee assistance programmes and the role of the employee assistance programme practitioners. More importantly, chapter 2 provides a review and

discussion of each of the key variables in the current study. Work environment, includes job control, workload and collegial support. With reference to compassion fatigue the various conceptualisations of secondary trauma, Figley (1993; 1995) trauma transmission model and empirical research are discussed. Finally, the chapter presents sense of coherence with its components of manageability, comprehensibility and meaningfulness. Chapter 3 explains the methodology of the current research; it states how data was collected, the measures used, sample demographics and different statistical methods used. Chapter 4 presents the results of various statistical analyses conducted, such as descriptive statistics, correlations, stepwise linear regressions and multiple moderated regressions. Chapter 5 is the discussion and synthesis of the current research with previous similar results in the literature. Finally, chapter 6 presents the limitations of the current research report, implications for organisations and recommendations for future research in the area.