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**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL FACTORS THAT PREDICT
SUSCEPTIBILITY TO COMPASSION FATIGUE, BURNOUT AND INTENTION
TO LEAVE IN SOUTH AFRICAN TRAUMA COUNSELLORS**

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A dissertation submitted to the department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Industrial Psychology).

Johannesburg, 2001

Declaration

This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Industrial Psychology) in the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. I declare that this research is my own work and that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university.

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Date:

Abstract

An exploratory approach to the study of the individual factors which influence susceptibility toward compassion fatigue and burnout in South African trauma counsellors has been undertaken. This was owing to the capacity of these syndromes to compromise the well-being of trauma counsellors as well as the ability of trauma counselling organisations to offer a successful counselling service. As such, these syndromes have been argued to merit attention in the South African context for the purposes of prevention. Firstly, the relationship between the two syndromes and intention to leave, was explored. Secondly, the individual factors investigated were sense of coherence, job involvement, prior trauma, organisational commitment and social support. In addition, the effects of several biographical variables on these relationships were investigated. Seventy-eight trauma counsellors participated in the study by completing questionnaires, the findings having been quantitatively analysed and theoretically discussed. According to the findings, sense of coherence and age appeared to operate as resiliency factors against susceptibility toward compassion fatigue. Conversely, prior trauma, job involvement and hours spent counselling were found to be positive predictors of susceptibility to compassion fatigue. With regard to burnout, only sense of coherence and age emerged as significant predictors. Similarly, while sense of coherence acted as a resiliency factor, age appeared positively related to susceptibility toward burnout.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my supervisor, Karen Ortlepp, for her unwavering support and encouragement. I can honestly say that your professionalism, interest and willingness to spend time listening to ideas made all the difference to my experience of research this year. Your calm approach and insight really helped me grow through the research process...and prevented me from losing my mind during the difficult times!

I am also exceptionally grateful to Peter Fridjohn who was always willing to help when my statistics appeared to be an unconquerable mess. No matter how busy, he was always there with a smile and a detailed explanation to enlighten this stats-phobic student!

I would also like to express my thanks to my family and boyfriend for enduring yet another year of frenzied research highs and lows. Your patience in listening to crises and in accepting less time and attention than you both needed and deserved, did not go unnoticed.

Special thanks are also due to the counsellors who participated in this study for their kindness and their time, without which, this research could not have been realised.

Finally, the financial assistance of the National Research foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the National Research Foundation.

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa is currently a country riddled with a high incidence of crime, the perpetration of which frequently involves aggravated assault, physical injury and victimisation (SAPS, 2000). Given the violent context of crime, a multitude of South Africans are exposed to traumatic events daily, the frequency of posttraumatic stress disorder thus being rife in South Africa (Straker, 1993). Owing to the potentially damaging and debilitating impact of trauma for individuals, there is a great need for trained counsellors who are equipped to provide the emotional and tangible support necessary to assist survivors of crime to cope with their experiences. It is owing to this need that the well-being of trauma counsellors and the factors which threaten this resource in South Africa necessitate investigation.

Trauma counsellors, owing to their continuous exposure to trauma-related facts and consequences, are equally at risk of experiencing negative outcomes associated with traumatic exposure (Figley, 1995). It follows that the impact of involvement in such counselling work may be damaging for trauma counsellors, especially within the South African context where the nature and incidence of criminal violence places an immense demand on trauma counselling resources. Accordingly, compassion fatigue and burnout are syndromes that have been accepted as characteristic to individuals confronted with an excessive demand within such supportive roles (Cherniss, 1980; Figley, 1995). While compassion fatigue constitutes a form of emotional exhaustion that incorporates the experience of secondary trauma, burnout is an extreme form of emotional exhaustion that results in the loss of interest in vocational work (Cherniss, 1980; Figley, 1995). Both

syndromes, having negative physical and emotional consequences, compromise both the well-being of individuals working in such a capacity and, it follows, the organisations that rely on them to provide a counselling service.

Consequently, this study sought to explore the individual factors that act either as resiliency or precipitating antecedents of the susceptibility to the syndromes of compassion fatigue and burnout within a specifically South African context. The role of the sense of coherence, prior exposure to trauma, organisational commitment, job involvement and social support were, therefore, investigated in conjunction with various biographical variables. In addition, the impact of compassion fatigue and burnout in relation to intention to leave in trauma counsellors was also investigated. This was in order to establish a potential relationship between the incidence of these syndromes and counsellor turnover. It is asserted that the importance of understanding the factors which increase susceptibility in this group lies in the potential of this knowledge to assist in the prevention of these syndromes within the trauma counselling population. This is because, by understanding the individual factors that are related to resiliency or susceptibility, more resilient individuals may be selected to occupy the trauma counselling role. In addition, by understanding what constitutes resiliency in this group, measures may be taken to improve it where necessary.