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The experiences of social workers regarding occupational stress: a study in the department of social development, Capricorn District, Limpopo Province

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THE EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL WORKERS REGARDING OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: A STUDY IN THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, CAPRICORN DISTRICT, LIMPOPO PROVINCE.

A report on a research study presented to

The Department of Social Work
School of Human and Community Development
Faculty of Humanities
University of Witwatersrand

in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree Master of Arts in Social Work

by

MMAKOPA ANNAH SEKGOBELA

November2020

DECLARATION

Student no: 1771095

I hereby declare that the research report titled: “The Experiences of Social Workers regarding Occupational Stress: A study in the Department of Social Development, Capricorn District, Limpopo Province”, is my own work and it has never been submitted before for degree purpose or examination at any university and the work cited in this study was duly acknowledged.

_Sekgobela M.A 2020/11/25

Sekgobela Mmakopa Annah Date

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the following individuals;

- My parents, Mr Tsatsi and Mrs Raesibe Sekgobela.
- My son, Mr Tsatsi Sekgobela.
- My siblings, Mr Mokaakaa, Ms Modjadji, Ms Mabatla, Ms Kgahlego, Ms Khutso, and Ms Lesedi Sekgobela.
- My late sister (Mokgadi)
- My late brother (Lebati)
- My late niece (Ngwanamakgae)
- My late grandparents (Mr John and Mrs Manti Sekgobela, Pila Kgaume).

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I appreciate everyone's significant contribution to the successful completion of my study. I could not travel the journey alone. May God bless them. I hereby extend my gratitude to the following;

- I thank the Almighty God for the strength, wisdom, courage and perseverance to undertake the study.
- My parents, Mr Tsatsi and Mrs Raesibe Sekgobela for always supporting and encouraging me.
- My son, Tsatsi who always showed endless understanding, unconditional love and support.
- My siblings, Mr Mokaakaa, Ms Modjadji, Ms Mabatla, Ms Kgahlego, Ms Khutso and Ms Lesedi Sekgobela, thank you for unconditional love and support throughout my journey.
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ABSTRACT

The social work profession experiences significant occupational stress caused by the changing working environment. Research has indicated that social workers are faced with various stressors in the work environment, such as unsatisfactory working conditions, role conflict, inadequate salaries and high caseloads. Even though there has been studies looking at stress in the workplace there seem to be a gap on studies looking at stress among social workers thus this study has endeavoured to explore the experiences of social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Capricorn District, Limpopo regarding occupational stress. The study employed the interactive model of stress and the job demand-control model as a theoretical framework. The study used a qualitative approach and employed a case study research design. Purposive sampling was used to select 10 participants from social workers employed by Department of Social Development, Capricorn District, Limpopo. Data was collected using interviews, and one on one semi-structured interview method was used guided by interview guide. The study employed thematic analysis and the most important findings that emerged included poor infrastructure; lack of resources such as shortage of transport, telephones, printers and computers.

Among other findings were lack of organisational support, relatively low compensation, and work overload, lack of control and autonomy, and cases related to children found to be stressful due to lack of support, planning and implementation form the department. The main conclusion drawn from the study was that social workers experience high levels of occupational stress due to various factors. This affected the social worker's quality of work life and their interpersonal relationships as there is no adequate support provided by the department although there is Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) practitioner who does not afford services to all employees. Drawing from the participants' experience of occupational stress, the study has also revealed various strategies used by social workers to cope with stress. Social workers continue to view their profession as valuable to the lives of communities despite the challenges they face daily. Various suggestions have been conceived to curb occupational stress.

Keywords: Experiences, Social workers, occupational stress, Department of Social Development, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CPD	Continuing professional development
DSD	Department of Social Development
EAP	Employee Assistant Practitioner
EAP	Employee Assistant Programme
IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers
ILO	International Labour Office
MSW	Masters of Social Work
MOV'S	Means of verifications
NASW	National Association of Social Workers
SACSSP	South African Council for Social Service Professionals
SANDF	South African Defence Force
SW'RS	Social Workers
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
UMC	Unaccompanied Migrant Children

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Occupational stress has been receiving attention from different disciplines around the world. Stress has received global recognition for its association with occupational duties undertaken by employees become a socially recognized phenomenon, frequently linked to work and labour activities Herrero, Saldaña, Rodriguez and Ritzel (2012). Presently occupational stress is prevalent in research studies as it can negatively impact on the wellbeing of employees and the organisation itself Currently, occupational stress is the subject of frequent research as it may potentially affect both the individual and the organization (International Labour Office (ILO), 2012). Social workers have experienced significant occupational stress caused by the changing work environment (ILO, 2016). The researcher is of the view that most studies has indicated that social workers succumbs to dreadful work circumstances daily, among others include lack of adequate resources, inadequate salaries and high caseloads are faced with various stressors in the work environment, such as unsatisfactory work conditions, role conflict, inadequate salaries and high caseloads (Steyn & Kamper, 2007). Occupational stress is prevailing in our society and if not adequately dealt with will impact on physical and mental wellbeing of employees and lower their morale and productivity increasingly present in our society and usually is being detected too late, which results in physical and mental health problems for the worker, consequent absenteeism, and reduced staff motivation (Alberdi, Aztiria, Basarab & Cook (2018).

Herrero et al. (2012) mentioned that cardiovascular diseases including physical and emotional fatigue, inability to sleep are negative impacts of stress at an individual level. On the other hand poor work performance, increased absenteeism and sick leaves due to on duty injuries, can be the results of occupational stress on organizational level (Herrero et al., 2012).

1.2 Statement of the problem and rationale for the study

Social work is a profession that strives for betterment of individuals social functioning through provision of feasible and emotional assistance (Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002). On the other hand, the main concern of the profession is enhancing the well-being of the individuals regardless of their community status (National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 2008). Ross (1997) indicated that social workers experience occupational stress which emanate from the challenges they are confronted with within the social work profession. Social workers are among the professionals classified to be susceptible to risk of experiencing stress and burnout (Lloyd et al., 2002).

Woolen, Kim and Fakunmoju (2011) asserted that multiple conceptualizations described occupational stress in social work practice which included job stress, physical and mental fatigue emanating from high caseload and difficult cases. Occupational stress is reported to be the direct result of organisational stressors which can negatively impact on employee's health (Finney, Stergiopoulos, Hensel, Bonato, & Dewa, 2013). Lloyd et al. (2002); Akhtar, Hussain, Hayat and Bhatti (2016) added that occupational stress is a major hazard, and it is also viewed as a growing concern for the economy worldwide, where employees are continuously challenged with high caseload, low morale and lack of job control . NASW (2008) reported that 44% of social workers face safety concerns in their workplace. Due to occupational stress and burnout, social workers are at risk of professional behaviour, complaints by clients and malpractice, ethics accusations and litigations (Woolen et al., 2011). From the researcher's experience as a Social Worker, a client once reported a complaint of unsatisfactory service.

The complaint was due to other officers that the researcher submitted to them for further intervention and did not carry their duties as expected as a result of work overload. Hence Lloyd et al. (2002) asserted that majority of studies regards social work as being stressful with factors ranging from meeting the organisation's needs, and that of the community. In addition to Antonopoulou, Killian and Forrester (2017, p. 2), ''child protection social work is characterized by high demands in terms of service to clients and limited resources for interventions, and therefore, workers often experience a sense of conflict and anxiety between the moral and legal responsibility for each family and factors beyond their control''.

Lack of resources, high caseload, and limited time to meet deadlines faced by child protection social workers often lead to social workers feeling conflicted especially when they have to render services to communities.

South African studies conducted by various authors (Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015, Earle, 2008; Sithole, 2010) alluded that social workers vulnerability to organisational experiences often lead to occupational stress. In a study conducted by the NASW (2006), social workers reported that increased job control, supportive supervision, increased staff, adequate resources and positive work morale can lead to effective service delivery which their absentia resulted in their workplace stress. Social workers were among other human service professionals that are most studied in association to workplace stress.

In the light of the abovementioned factors of the occupational stress of social workers, the researcher focused on social workers employed by the Department of Social Development (DSD), Capricorn District, Limpopo Province regarding their experiences on occupational stress and strategies to deal with the stress. It was therefore the intention of the study to explore the experiences of social workers regarding occupational stress and strategies employed in dealing with the stress, with the perception that what one social worker perceives as being stressful, other social workers might not perceive as stressful. The researcher sought to find out to what extent social workers employed by the DSD, Capricorn District Limpopo experience occupational stress and what strategies they put in place to deal with stress.

From the researchers experience and observation social workers employed by the DSD are characterised by frustrations in their work due to a high caseload, lack of resources, and poor conditions of their office space. Dlamini and Sewpaul (2015) asserted that this is because various posts in the government sector are not filled due to finance and office space, which results in low numbers of personnel providing the necessary support for newly employed. From the experience and interaction with other social workers employed by DSD, social workers are stressed by their working conditions. Furthermore, Dlamini and Sewpaul (2015) added that within the DSD, lack of proper planning continues to be a dilemma. The study was conducted to provide insight into the effects of occupational stress on social workers and inform the DSD on possible strategies that could be employed to improve working conditions of social workers.

Purpose of the study

Occupational stress has been receiving attention from different disciplines of study around the world. The social work profession experiences significant occupational stress caused by the changing working environment 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. The study aims to explore the experience of social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Capricorn District; Limpopo regarding their occupational stress and strategies to deal with stress. The study will employ the interactive model of stress and the job demand-control model as a theoretical framework. The study will take a qualitative approach and will employ a case study research design. Purposive sampling will be used to select 10 participants from Social Workers employed by Department of Social Development, Capricorn District; Limpopo. Data will be collected using semi-structured interviews, guided by interview guide. The study will employ thematic analysis.

The study will contribute to the knowledge base in the field of social work and other related discipline. It will also contribute to the current understanding of the experience of occupational stress and strategies to deal with stress of Social Workers employed by Social Development in Limpopo. Furthermore the study will contribute to the knowledge base with regard to the strategies to improve the working environment and the reduction of occupational stress to improve productivity of Social Workers.

1.3 Research question

What are the experiences of social workers employed by the Department of Social Development, Capricorn District, Limpopo Province, with regard to occupational stress?

1.3.1 Primary aim

The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of social workers employed by the Department of Social Development, Capricorn District, Limpopo Province regarding occupational stress.

1.3.2 Secondary objectives

The secondary objectives of the study were formulated as follows:

1.3.2.1 To describe the experiences of social workers employed by Department of Social Development, Capricorn district in Limpopo in relation to their occupational stress.

1.3.2.2 To explore various factors that contribute to occupational stress of Social workers employed by Department of Social Development, Capricorn district Limpopo.

1.3.2.3 To explore the organisational support available for Social worker employed by Department of Social Development, Capricorn district, Limpopo regarding their occupational stress.

1.3.2.4 To establish the coping strategies utilised by Social workers employed by Department of Social Development, Capricorn District Limpopo when experiencing stress.

1.4 Anticipated value of the research study

Occupational stress has become a global workplace health hazard that affects almost every individual in any profession and organisations (Sharma, Kaur, & Sharma, 2011). Various studies have been conducted on occupational stress with little focus on occupational stress on social workers. Given the high level of stress faced by social workers in the line of their duties, like other professions such as teachers and nurses, researchers has not given this profession much of attention.' (Griffiths, Royse & Walker, 2018).

Manthosi and Makhubele (2016, p. 53) contend that ''in South Africa occupational stress is witnessed to be prevalent among social work profession, given shortage of staff, lack of adequate resources, increased workload especially with majority of clients living under impoverished condition". This is especially true as social work profession is manifested by high level of work stress due to lack of control, work environment, status which are beyond control of social workers (Lloyd et al., 2002). A study conducted by Woolen et al. (2011) posits that dealing with clients problems on a daily basis makes social workers to be susceptible to high level of stress.

The study has contributed to the knowledge base in the field of social work and other related disciplines. It has also contributed to the current understanding of the experience related to occupational stress and strategies used by social workers. Furthermore, the study has contributed to the knowledge base regarding strategies to improve the working environment, reduce occupational stress and increase productivity of social workers. Lastly, the research has made an analytical contribution by its recognition and appreciation of occupational stress, from a social work point of view and specifically with reference to the everyday lives of social workers.

1.5 Definition of key terms

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that enhance social change, development, social cohesion and the empowerment of people and liberation of people (International Federation of Social Workers, (IFSW) 2014). Furthermore, the "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, (IFSW) 2014, para. 1).

Stress is "a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances" (Oxford dictionary, 2020, para. 2).
The International Labour Organization (ILO) (2016, p. 2) defines "stress as the harmful physical and emotional response of an individual as a results of insufficient perceived resources versus available resources and their inability to cope with the perceived demands".

Occupational stress is referred to as the imbalance between the employees ability to cope with the organisational demands defined as ''the perception of a discrepancy between demands in the environment (stressors) and the employee's ability to cope with these demands'' (Beheshtifar & Nazarian, 2013, p. 648). Contrary to Bamboo HR (2020, para. 1) ''occupational stress is a continuous unpleasant organisational experience employees face in their workplace, which includes lack of job control, conflicted roles and responsibilities, unrealistic job demands and time lines, and is well known in the professional work setting.

Employee assistance programme is "a worksite-based programme designed to assist: 1) work organisations in addressing productivity issues and 2) 'employee clients' in identifying and resolving personal concerns, including, but not limited to, health, marital, family, financial, alcohol, drug, legal, emotional, stress or other personal issues that may affect job performance" (Blackadder, 2010, p. 8).

1.6 Overview of research design and methodology

The study employed a qualitative method in its approach. A case study research design, using semi-structured interviews was used to collect data via an interview schedule. Pre-testing of research tools was conducted with two social workers who were employed by the Department of Social Development, who were not included in the research. Ten social worker participants with more than two years working experience in the Department of Social Development were sampled. The data collected was analysed using Creswell's (2003) thematic data analysis for its flexibility to allow the researcher to interpret the data collected.

1.7 Limitations of the study

Although this research was carefully conducted and the research reached its aim, the researcher was confronted with unavoidable limitations. The researcher is of the opinion that even though some research studies can be well conducted and presented they all have limitations. The study presented the following limitations; Social workers have a very busy schedule and they spent most of their time attending to cases, ranging from abuse cases, and doing outreach programmes, and attending to court case. Time was a challenge which resulted in low response rate. Due to the participants' busy schedule, some of them were forced to reschedule and some never made it to the interviews again and forced the researcher to get other participants which prolonged the data collection period.

The other limitation was office space where participants preferred having interviews in their own offices but shared office space with other two or more social workers, that made privacy and confidentiality a challenge which prolonged the interviews as the researcher had to halt the interviews for participants to constantly attend to other colleagues and clients.

1.8 Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter focuses on introduction and motivation for the study. It also highlighted the methodology for the study, as well as the aim the study achieved.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter focuses on sources that are relevant and supportive to the proposed study phenomena. Literature on occupational stress and strategies to deal with stress of social worker and theoretical framework will be discussed.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter focuses on how the study were undertaken, the approach, research design, the population, sampling and sampling techniques, data collection and data analysis and ethical consideration employed in the study.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Research Findings and Discussion

The chapter focused on presenting the research findings, based on the themes that emerged during the analysis of data. The other focus was on presenting the outcomes of the objectives and how the aim of the study was met.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

The chapter discussed the conclusion and recommendations based on the data collected.

1.9 Summary of the chapter

This chapter represented a general overview of this study, which included the introduction, statement problem and rationale of the study. The rationale of the study was outlined in order for the study to answer the research question, which under the aim and objectives were presented. Furthermore, this chapter acquainted the reader with what the study anticipated to achieve, and clarified the key concepts used in this study. It also outlined the overview of the research design and methodology, together with structure of the study and what to expect in the next chapters.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Occupational stress has become a greater degree in our current society and sometimes went unnoticed Alberdi, Aztiria, Basarab & Cook (2018). Furthermore, occupational stress y is noticed after a long time, which results in physical and mental health issues for employees, consequent absenteeism, and reduced staff motivation; companies are also economically affected as a result (Alberdi et al., 2018). Alberdi et al. (2018) assert that stress has become prevalent in our work environment with the increased needs of the communities being served, given lack of adequate resources, lack of office space, lack of supervision and support as well as inability to meet deadlines due to high caseload.

Occupational stress, stem from collective factors in the workplace and occurs when the expected responsibilities from employees exceed their personal capabilities and social resources (American Institute of Stress, 2017). Travis, Lizano, and Mor Barak (2016) argued that such sources include among others, work overload, responsibilities not matching workers capabilities, inability to balance work and family responsibilities due to work stress, and lack of role ambiguity. In addition to Sonnentag, Pundt, and Albrecht (2014) sources of stress should be considered taking into account six categories which includes physical stressors, where employees are concerned with their personal health and safety, task-related job stressors, limited time allocated to complete tasks with limited resources, role-stressors, work overload without clear expectations from employer, social stressors, employees always in conflicts with service users, career-related stressors, lack of training and workshop for further career development and harmful cases for employees without visible emotional support.

High levels of stress experienced is linked with the physical wellbeing of individuals such as cardiovascular disease, weight gain, sleeping problems, and dependency to substance to cope with stress which have negative impact on the individual's ability to resist diseases (Stults-Kolehmainen, Tuit, & Sinha, 2014).

Among stressful professions, social work, has received limited research attention, taking into account that it is the lowest paid while their duty is complex and having to deal with the problems of others. (Lloyd et al., 2002).

Griffiths et al. (2018, p. 46) highlighted the paucity in literature on workplace stress and its impact on the health of social workers, particularly social workers in child services agencies.

2.2 Theoretical framework

Various theoretical approaches were discussed with the intention of highlighting a perspective with which to view stress as experienced by social workers employed by Department of Social Development, Capricorn District, Limpopo Province.

This research study used the interactional stress model and the demand control model. The interactional stress model addresses the stress which social workers experience in relation to their work with limited support they receive. On the other hand, the job demand-control model which was first developed by Karasek in 1979 assisted the researcher not to overlook the contribution of the demands and control aspects in the occupational stress of social workers.

2.2.1 The interactional stress model

This model stressed the fact that when considering stress, it is important to concurrently view individual and environmental factors affecting them including their reactions to stress as well as their reaction (Furnham, 2006). Another aspect of this model is the individual support within the environment, as stress occurs when the demand is high with limited support in relation to their experiences of stress. Storey and Billingham (2001) posits that this model identify the importance of support to an individual, because stress occurs when demands are high as compared to the support received. It was crucial for the researcher to incorporate all the aspects in considering stress of social workers employed by the DSD Capricorn District, Limpopo Province in order to make sense of the findings. The researcher is of the opinion that an individual's judgement of a problem and the availability of the resources to deal with the problem make it possible to determine the stress levels experienced. For this reason the researcher employed this model to understand the experiences of social workers regarding the study.

The researcher has explored the support which social workers receive in relation to their job demand and there is no balance between the demand and support received. The interactional stress model addresses the stress to which social workers experience in relation to their work with less support they received. Emotional support and assistance from sources outside of work may also be critical for alleviating work-related stress among social workers. Many officers do not share stressful aspects of their jobs or symptoms related to stress with their co-workers and supervisors for fear that they will be treated differently or experience some sort of reprisal (Armstrong, Atkin-Plunk, & Wells, 2015). It was of significance to explore what support social workers receives from their workplace apart from using colleagues and supervisors as the study revealed to be the only support to some social workers. This study is evident that social workers receive little to no support as compared to the demand of the nature of their day to day work.

2.2.2 The job demand control model

This model was used as a framework for understanding the role of job demand and control on occupational stress experienced by social workers. Karasek's job demand-control model of occupational stress has had a huge influence on the job design. In Karasek's model, occupational stress describe the extent to which person's job is demanding and the discretion and autonomy they have over their work responsibilities (Jones& Bright, 2001). Jones and Bright (2001) further discussed that job demands represented the psychological stressors in the work environment which included factors such as time pressure to complete tasks, conflicting and unclear work, work overload and lack of resources to complete tasks. Ntsoane (2017) and Demerouti et al. (2001) describes job demand as the physical, organisational, and social aspects of the job that are associated with physiological and psychological costs.

Job demands include having a lot of tasks to complete with limited time, mental load, dealing with lot of tasks that requires constant attention, and emotional load, having to deal with emotionally stressful cases daily, other job demand factors include unfavourable working conditions and emotionally demanding cases (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). Jones and Bright (2001) asserted that decision latitude implies the ability of individuals to exercise control and independence over their jobs. Furthermore, it consists of both skills and autonomy over ones job, which allows creativity and development of new abilities (Jones & Bright, 2001).

In their arguments, Demerouti et al. (2001) mentioned that job control is imperative; it allows employees job autonomy which provides opportunity to design and facilitate their own tasks how they see fit. The researcher employed this model as it fit into the phenomena being explored, and it assisted to provide more understanding into how social workers perceive their work as being stressful. In observations of jobs like social work it is deemed challenging to complete certain tasks within a specific time without adequate resources. As well being an expert in the field and not being in control is frustrating hence the model fit into the study. This model emphasise that individuals with greater job control persevere through the difficulties of job demands by exercising their authority to make work-related decisions and utilizing their personal skill set to accomplish job-related tasks (Hausser, J Mojzisch, Niesel, & Schulz-Hardt , 2010).

2.3 Literature review

Occupational stress has become a health hazard in almost every profession (Sharma et al., 2011). Employees are not only faced with stressors outside of the organisation such as family and individual related stressors an employee stress can be as a result of organisational factors (Luthans, 2002). Occupational stressors exists in every work environment and their ability to negatively impact on employees quality of work life, may vary from occupation and individual, although some stressors appear to be common to all occupation while other are unique it is of paramount important to explore and manage specific stressor in every occupation (Gignac & Appelbaum, 1997; Kang, 2005).

Woolen et al. (2011) asserted that occupational stress in social work practice can be sudden, gradual, acute, chronic or severe, and may negatively affect employee's personal and professional relationship. Realistically, social workers can be overwhelmed by occupational stress to an extent that their helping and coping capacities are impacted and their effectiveness as professionals is compromised (Lloyd et al., 2002). According to Finney et al. (2013), an individual's inability to cope with the job demand can lead occupational stress. Maudeni and Ntshwarang (2016) stressed that limited resources including transport, office space, stationary and amicable time to complete tasks are other contributing factors to stress among social workers.

At least 80% of social workers in the UK believe that their level of stress impacts on their job performance. (Schraer, 2015, para. 1). The experience of stress among social workers is also experienced in South Africa. A study conducted by Moyane (2016) highlighted that at the Department of Social Development in Mpumalanga, all the participants have indicated that they experienced several stressors in the work environment which leads to negative experiences and attitudes towards their work and clients. Manthosi and Makhubele (2016) contends that high caseload, low remuneration, lack of supportive supervision, resources and professional autonomy, results in occupational stress of social workers. Furthermore in the study conducted by Manthosi and Makhubele (2016, p.53) states that at the DSD in Limpopo, Capricorn District, and one participant has reported that "My stress is caused by cases which affect me even when I am at home". "Stress in my office is caused by lack of resources and supportive supervision'' (Manthosi & Makhubele, 2016, p. 53). In South Africa, Occupational stress is a pertinent issue in the social work profession. The profession is marginalised with its high caseload, lack of human resource, and unsatisfying remuneration (Manthosi & Makhubele, 2016, p. 53).

Lloyd et al. (2002) argues that the nature and demand of social work profession work increase the risk of social worker's occupational stress and subsequent low quality of work life. It is believed that conflicting roles and status of social workers are highly stressful factors within the profession. A study conducted by Woolen et al. (2011) has found that in social work, apart from high job demand, stress stem from exposure to dealing with clients stressful and traumatic cases brought to their attention. Hughes and Wearing (2013) further assert that social workers are required to be emotionally involved in their work hear other people expressing painful emotions, such as anger and despair.

In addition, Finney et al. (2013) and Leiter and Maslach (2009) various factors contribute to stress and burnout of social workers. These factors can be a combination of individual risk factors such as personality and family problems and workplace stressors such as, high workload; inadequate resources, increased time pressure, role ambiguity, staff conflicts and lower levels of autonomy that contributes to employee ill-health.

The social work profession has high expectations of service delivery from various stakeholders and communities at large which can negatively impact on the social worker's well-being (Graham & Shier, 2014). Organisational change has played a significant role in the work life on both organisational and personal level (Anderson, 2015).

This has shown significant number of social workers reporting organisational structure as contributing to their stress level (Lloyd et al., 2002). As a result, employees' sense of control over their work proves to be significant as it reduces the stress level (Kang, 2005). In addition, Hessels (2017) indicates that occupational stress as a result of lack of control could increase employees' health risk affecting productivity, and the increase in the use of sick leaves.

2.3.1 Working conditions of social workers

Rothmann and Jordaan (2006) asserted that, it is often impossible to achieve high work demand goals with the work environment that is potentially negative to productivity. Earle (2008, p. 31) contend that "the conditions under which social workers are expected to practice in South Africa are generally very poor". Furthermore Earle (2008, p. 31) argued that "social workers are frustrated with the overwhelming needs of the community in relation to their own relatively low numbers and their limited (or lack of) access to resources such as adequate supervision, stationery, office space, and furniture, information technology, administrative and language support, vehicles and supporting professionals and institutions such as places of safety".

A study conducted by Schenck (2003) has revealed that in the public sector, there are often inadequate resources which contribute to excessive level of occupational stress for social workers. Furthermore, Schenck's study also highlighted those resources significant to service delivery where insufficient such as telephone, access to fax and computers, which social workers are mandated to share one computer per five social workers.

The researcher has observed social workers sharing computers or using their personal computers and that impact on their effective service delivery and compromise the privacy and confidentiality of the clients. Schenk (2003) indicated that some social workers were expected to operate in offices without electricity and that is still the case as the researcher has observed some social workers office being cut off electricity.

In an interview carried out by Dlamini and Sewpaul (2015), social workers highlighted that with high caseload, inadequate resources has always been part of their daily challenges as they are forced to operate with seven cars, two printers and photocopy machine, and 15 computers while they are triple the number of available resources. Sithole (2010) added that the absence of critical tools for effective service delivery such as office space, stationery, telephone, computers and transportation are witnessed to be more prevalent to social workers placed in rural areas.

Studies have shown that this is a global struggle for social workers. It is evident that the struggle for social workers is not experienced only in the South African work context but in other countries too as discussed by (Kruk, 2016). This is evident in the study conducted by Kruk (2016) highlighting the Canadian social workers having challenges in the child care sector, as they have seen parents neglecting their parental responsibilities increasing their workload. Kruk (2016, p.78) further stated that this children are being removed from their parental care and brought to already burned system and with shortage of staff their stress level increases as they are caught between the best interest of the children. From interaction and observations with social workers working with children, they have experienced problems with space when having to place abused children in alternative care centres. Many social workers regard their job as being stressful while their poor work environment seen as one factor impacting on them being productivity (Rohling, 2016; Dillenburger's (2004). To some extent it also impaired services that social workers provided (Storey & Billingham, 2001). The researcher is of the view that social workers need internal and external support to cope with stress. Collins (2008) asserts that support within working environment is one important factor individuals can use to mediate the demand of stress. The research and literature in coping for social workers has not been given attention as compared to other disciplines which have been developing rapidly such as psychology. (Valtonen, Sogren, & Cameron-Padmore, 2006).

Rohling (2016) alluded that social workers can benefit a lot from workshops and trainings related to management of stress, and that can significantly reduce the level of stress. Feeling supported and increased training would also help (Coffey, Dugdill, & Tattersall, 2004).

In various studies conducted social workers have highlighted that increased supervision and support, working tools, and manageable caseload could reduce their occupational stress (Dillenburger, 2004). Anderson (2000) described that social workers also employ negative coping strategies such as ignorance, and social withdrawal.

The researcher has observed that social workers use ignorance as a coping strategy and in most cases, they render services with low quality to cope with the stress caused by lack of resources and support for the sake of reaching targets. Rohling (2016, p. 15) found that "planning and reaching targets as well as workload were the top stressors of the social workers they surveyed". Some issues identified included a feeling of being overwhelmed by cases due to low number of social workers (Coffey et al., 2004). The researcher has also experienced and observed colleagues having to deal with the pressures from service users and high case loads. The author argued that "Lack of resources and organizational restructuring were also found to be top stressors" (Rohling, 2016, p. 16). The study also revealed 60% of social workers to have increased level of stress as a result of their professional public image (Rohling, 2016). The researcher has also observed that there are those social workers who contribute to service delivery regardless of the organisational challenges, they do all they can to deliver quality service. This is supported by Hamama (2012) that some social workers believed they could improve the lives of their client's even if it means going extra mile; those were social workers who believed they are in the profession for making change regardless of challenges faced.

2.3.2 Sources of occupational stress among social workers

Janse van Rensburg (2009) argued that for every sort of stress experienced there is a starting point. Work characteristics, and psychological characteristics of an individual are viewed to be the most important dimension of occupational stress (Zeffane & McLoughlin, 2006). Among other challenges profiled in relation to social work profession includes; lack of human resources, increased workload, lack of resources and invisible professional support (Centre for Workforce Studies, NASW, 2006).

In the White Paper (1997), it is stated that generally all welfare personnel's working conditions are poor and their salaries are extremely low. Desouky and Allam (2017) assert that occupational stress is a direct result of imbalance between high demand and lack of autonomy within the working environment.

Furthermore, stress may also arise from unhealthy relationship between colleagues, supervisor and or management which may include factors such as disagreements (Desouky & Allam, 2017). Occupational stress can emanate from both individual and environmental factors such as family issues, and work overload (Van Wyk, 2011).

2.3.2.1 Work overload

Moyane (2016, p. 12) is of the view that "caseload, workload and unavailability of resources affected productivity in organisations and have been identified as contributing stressors among social workers". High caseload negatively affects social workers who are service providers and clients as the end users of the services a great deal (Beer, 2015). It is stated that increased workload and limited time to complete the tasks due have a significant impact on social workers (Munro, 2011. as cited in Beer, 2015).

In the study conducted by Schaer (2015. as cited in Beer, 2015, p. 3) it is mentioned that "caseload size has been recognised as the most common cause of stress among social workers". Work overload and shortage of resources and social workers are widely recognised to be main sources of stress among social workers (Cauvain, 2010. as cited in Moyane, 2016). Dillenburger (2004. as cited in Jensen van Rensburg, 2009) added that social workers experience workplace stress due to increased caseloads, with little time to complete them.
This was confirmed by Noblet's 2003 study (as cited in Jensen van Rensburg, 2009) who refer to work overload, lack of sufficient time to complete tasks and meet office deadline as the organisational main cause of stress. In Earle's 2008b study (as cited in Moyane, 2016) it is discussed that high caseload put pressure for available social workers as South Africa experience shortage of social workers. In the Framework for Social Welfare Services , (DSD,2013. as cited in Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015, p. 470) "recommended 80% of a social worker's workload be allocated to casework, involving travelling and court work, a caseload of 1:19 cases per month or 1:134 cases annually". Dlamini and Sewpaul (2015, p. 470) further asserted that the "average caseload of social workers in the agency 1:150 per year is a high number considering the complexity of cases, social workers do much more than casework, and have to manage these tasks with very limited basic resources".

There is also insufficient administrative support across social care, and that contributed to social workers increased administration tasks. Gibson (2016) found that when a social work focuses on administrative tasks, their 'capacity for empathy for the parents' is reduced.

Organisations need to simplify and integrate their procedures where this is possible or provide administrative support in order to give social workers more time to use their expertise with children and their families (Research in Practice, 2015). Integrated Service Delivery Model (ISDM, 2006) indicated that generic social workers should have manageable caseload of less than sixty files. Increased human resources, continues supervision and support, as well as increased resources, might lead to reduced caseload and can reduce stress (Gray-Stanley, 2011).

2.3.2.2 Bureaucratic control, hierarchical supervision and lack of professional autonomy

Another facet of occupational stress for social workers is the concept of "control". This concept is concerned with the lack of control one has in their workplace. Moyane (2016) contends that it is frustrating for social workers to practice under the control of the management who does not conform to the values and principles of the profession and as results their occupational stress level increases. Moyane (2016) contended that social workers are more susceptible to high level of stress, and decreased job satisfaction due to lack of control over their daily duties. . "It is ironic that the major thrust of new managerialism is professional control, as professionalism requires autonomy where professionals use their expertise, knowledge, skills, values and experience acquired thorough professional training, without undue prescriptions" (Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015, p. 471).

In their study Dlamini and Sewpaul (2015, p. 472) "it is reported that if a social worker needed to go out of the office, be it for a home visit, to respond to emergencies, attend meetings outside the office or attend court proceedings, they needed three people to authorize the trip before a car could be used". Furthermore, it was reported that social workers needed approval for their trips from three officials which negatively impacted on their effectiveness of service rendered to their clients as it is required of all members to be part of trip authorization (Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015). Furthermore, "programme coordinators struggled to fund awareness and training programmes because all funding was requested from a centralized head office, and the processes that the requisition had to go through for approval before it reached head office were cumbersome and filled with red tape" (Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015, p. 472).

In the study conducted by Moyane (2016) it is stated that human service sectors experience continues high caseload due to lack of autonomy and as a results they requested redesigning of their work to be more in control and manage their work more effectively and it seems very impossible for some employers to practice this. One of the management's responsibilities is to ensure that stress, trauma and burnout are managed for more productive employees.

Bureaucratic control, hierarchical supervision and lack of professional autonomy, somehow de-value the profession as social workers are forced to abide by the rules they do not conform to and such involves rendering and prioritising services not according to the needs of the clients served but by how and what the management regard as suitable. The researcher has observed that social workers were therefore obliged to render services in accordance with the management's terms and conditions.

(Young, 2004. as cited in Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015, p. 472) indicated "of how powerlessness contributes to diminished capacities and lack of participation in decision-making, and how the powerless are subject to humiliation and disrespect". Moreover, such situations social workers find themselves in, affect their professional value and integrity to an extent that they developed a feeling that their image is "like an ant" (Young, 2004. as cited in Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015). The core of the profession's identity is being eroded by neo-liberalism and managerialism, and that affect the practice and education of social work as governing and economic gain takes priority (Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2004. as cited in Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015). Furthermore, Dlamini and Sewpaul (2015, p. 473) their study revealed that "the bureaucracy in this department just demotivates you from wanting to advocate for people. It just makes you keep quiet; we do all the wrong things not because we want to but because we can't argue or question the superior's decisions".

2.3.2.3 Salaries

A salary is "a regular payment, typically paid on a monthly basis but often expressed as an annual sum, made by an employer to an employee, especially a professional or white-collar worker" (Oxford dictionary, 2020, para. 1). White Paper of (1997) reported that salaries of all welfare personnel are relatively low, and the circumstances to which they work under are undeniably poor.

Sithole (2010, p. 7) argued that "the social work profession is and has been marginalized over the years from different angles". Furthermore (Earle, 2008b; Schenck, 2004. as cited in Sithole, 2010, p. 7) added that "this is also applicable in South Africa where the profession has been unacknowledged and marked by low salaries". In addition Earle (2008) contended that the pertinent of social work profession within social development programme is questionable with special reference to low social work salaries, which motivates black social workers to seek greener pastures every now and then. In contrary to Maudeni and Ntshwarang (2016), social workers are not recognised as providing essential services to communities hence their low salaries and that also has a great impact on their professional status.

Dlamini (2017, para. 16) expressed her frustration in a letter she wrote to Minister Bathabile Dlamini which state that: "I am a social worker with an honours degree and according to my qualification; I have an NQF 8 but earn a salary at scale 7. As a social worker, I earn as much income as a personal assistant in all departments. I earn the same salary as sales consultants in the country and in most cases earn a better wage as they get commission". Ekman (2013) argues that employees who are most likely to experience disappointment in their workplace are those who expect to be compensated accordingly for their work done. It is further argued that employees should be motivated enough to render effective and quality service to their clients, rather than working with appraisal hope (Brody & Nair, 2013).

2.3.2.4 Social work supervision

In accordance with NASW (2013, p. 15), professional supervision is defined "as the relationship between supervisor and supervisee in which the responsibility and accountability for the development of competence, demeanour, and ethical practice take place". NASW (2012) emphasised the relevance of supportive supervision in social work. "Effective supervision requires knowledge of the principles of supervision and the ability to demonstrate necessary skills such as addressing both strengths and challenges of the supervisees, modelling and discussing ethical practice, and providing support and encouragement in the learning context" (NASW, 2012, P. 10). Hawkins and Shohet (2012, p. 149) states that "teachers, probation officers, social workers, and doctors reported that they did not receive support and supervision".

Kadushin and Harkness (2014) emphasised the pertinent of supervision and support within work environment which addresses the **administrative case management**, where supervisor provide support to social worker regarding the management of their cases, especially the challenging; **personal support** to provide emotional support to employees regarding emotional burden that comes with the profession and their duties; and **educational support**, to enable employees to learn new ideas, methods to help deal with clients cases.

2.3.2.5 Challenging cases

The researcher's view is that generally cases concerning children are considered stressful as social workers find themselves having to advocate for the rights of children and yet being faced with challenges that put their roles and responsibilities on hold such as lack of support from the department, parents failing to take their responsibilities and children without identities.

"Social workers have reported that dealing with difficult clients is one of the major challenges they experience that lead to increases in stress, this is especially true of social workers providing mental health services" (Whitaker & Arrington, 2008. as cited in Limon, 2018, p. 9). Acker and Lawrence's 2009 study (as cited in Limon, 2018) found that social workers working with severe and persistent mental illnesses clients showed symptoms of being burned out and felt that they lack ability in performing their duties. Furthermore, Limon (2018) reported that when dealing with challenging cases and difficult clients, it is likely for social workers to be caught in ethical dilemmas.

(Ulrich et al., 2007. as cited in Limon, 2018, P. 9) "Found that nearly two-thirds of social workers reported that they felt powerless, overwhelmed, and frustrated when there were presented with ethical issues that they could not do anything about". "This can negatively impact clients as it can lead to inadequate and unethical services to clients" (Ulrich et al., 2007. as cited in Limon, 2018, P. 9). Social workers often found themselves being challenged by cases related to unaccompanied migrant children due to factors such as their identification. South Africa has received large numbers of unaccompanied migrant children from different African countries, as intimated, Zimbabwean children are by far in the majority (Fritch, Johnson, Juska, 2010). Moreover, it is also established that there were 1500 unaccompanied/migrant minors in the Limpopo Province alone, and 25% of these children are said to have travelled on their own (Fritch et al., 2010).

Often, the difficulty to access documentation for the Unaccompanied Migrant Children (UMC) limits social workers' ability to helping the latter to access social services. This statement was based on the view that the starting point for any child to be recognised for welfare services is to have a valid form of identity documentation.

Contrary to Disabilitygauteng.org (2017, para. 4) due South Africa being an economic hub of the continent, there have been an increased number of legal and illegal immigrants flowing in the country. As a result the welfare services within the country become overwhelmed by the number of immigrants seeking help which keep unresolved cases at peak (Disabilitygauteng.org, 2017). In addition "social workers are facing challenges in cases of illegal people who do not have valid documents to enable them to have access to services provided by the government" (Disabilitygauteng.org, 2017, para. 4). The researcher has observed that UMC cases are very stressful to social workers as it is difficult even for South African children who are placed in welfare centers to resolve their cases.

Despite policies and legislation designed to protect the UMC in South Africa, UMC are still exposed to constant threats and decrease their opportunities to receive social services in accordance to their rights (UNICEF, 2015). This has increased frustrations among social workers who are rendering services to UMC, as they are confronted with limited or unavailable support receive little or no support from the government. UNICEF (2009) also indicates with concern that the shortage of staff has allowed an increase in workload especially with the global challenges the welfares has to deal with, such as HIV/AIDS and foster care cases already within the system.

"In many other cases, workers elaborated on specific sources of stress. One of the two most common of these was an inability to balance work and family life, whether literally in terms of tasks and time, or emotionally" (Mavridis, Harkness, Super & Liu, (2019, p. 239).

2.3.3 Impact of occupational stress

"Stress in the workplace continues to be a highly pervasive problem, having both direct negative effects on individuals experiencing it and companies paying for it, and indirect costs vis à vis lost productivity" (Dopkeen & DuBois, 2014. as cited in Glazer & Liu, 2017, p. 2).

Furthermore, stress is also seen to equally have an impact on both the employees and the organisation (Dopkeen & DuBois, 2014. as cited in Glazer & Liu, 2017). It is advisable that, organisations should take into cognisance that stress need to be prevented and managed to maintain the wellbeing of the employees (Žižek, Treven, & Čančer, 2013). Occupational stress is a strong thread for well-being of employees and increase employee's intent to leave their profession (Mosadeghrad, 2014). "High levels of occupational stress have been linked to an increased risk of physical injuries; cardiovascular disease; high blood pressure; depression; and increases in negative personal behaviours, such as anger, anxiety and irritability" (Mosadeghrad, 2014, p. 230).

"An estimate of €617 billion a year is what work-related depression costs to European enterprises, including costs of absenteeism and presenteeism (€272 billion), loss of productivity (€242 billion), healthcare costs (€63 billion) and social welfare costs in the form of disability" Alberdi, Aztiria, Basarab, Cook (2018, p. 3). Occupational stress is eligible to negatively impact the organisation and its employees which may be difficult to recover from it (Griffiths et al., 2018). Stress can impact on social workers judgements and their ability to perform tasks (Baginsky, 2013). Furthermore, occupational stress can put a strain on both employees and organisation which, organisation can be negatively impacted by the impact stress has on employees, such as health related issues, which will possibly affect productivity (Glazer & Liu, 2017).

2.3.4 Coping with occupational stress

Coping is an individual attitude or response towards a situation to reduce or avoid the stress it brings (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). For the purpose of this study two forms of strategies were discussed which are organisational and personal.

2.3.4.1 Organisational strategies

Studies have shown the prevalence of mental health among social workers due to stress and yet the effectiveness of coping strategies employed to deal with stress has received limited attention (Hernandez, 2017). Glazer and Liu (2017) argued that occupational stress the prevalence of occupational stress increases apart from technological improvements and employment rates. It can be argued that there are various approaches employees can use to deal with occupational stress.

There are personal and organisational approaches which authors have argued about. Žižek, et al., (2013) asserted that personal strategies to overcome occupational stress are revealed to be most effective, which includes physical activities such as jogging.

Organizations should ensure that employees have the opportunity to grow within their profession in order for them to upgrade their roles and responsibility to avoid stress and burnout and the organisation to take cognisance of their changing needs (Collins, 2008). The authors mentioned that "Organizational approaches are used for preventing and maintaining stress inside organizations" (Žižek et al., 2013, p. 364). Furthermore, there are ways in which organisations can assist to prevent and maintain stress, firstly, to establish a plan of action which will maintain element of sources of stress and secondly, with numerous programmes that will help to sustain the wellbeing of the employees and serve as precautionary measures (Žižek et al., 2013). Khamseh (2010) added that organisational structure, restructured of roles and responsibility, and giving employees an opportunity to participate in decision making can lower the stress level. Employees should be empowered and given reasonable and continuous time for counselling, to allow them to share their job frustrations (Khamseh, 2010). Žižek et al. (2013, p. 367) maintained that "employees, who are able to effectively handle stress, are in better health, this means less absenteeism due to illness and an increase in productivity".

2.3.4.1.1 Employee Assistance Programme

Employee Assistance Programme: "A worksite-based programme designed to assist: 1) work organisations in addressing productivity issues and 2) 'employee clients' in identifying and resolving personal concerns, including, but not limited to, health, marital, family, financial, alcohol, drug, legal, emotional, stress or other personal issues that may affect job performance" (Blackadder, 2010, p. 8).

Handrick (2018) maintains that an EAP helps employers because it makes for happier employees. Furthermore, it affords employees a confidential place to deal with their personal problems.

EAPA Standards and Professional Guidelines for Employee Assistance Programmes (2010) asserted that EA professionals and programmes become more beneficial to both organisation and its employees especially when they are effective to their needs. The following are criteria set out by EAPA (2010) in accordance with EAP:

- **Staffing levels standard:** “An adequate number of employee assistance professionals shall be available to achieve the stated goals and objectives of the employee assistance programme” (EAPA, 2010, p. 14).

- **Essential components:** there are factors to consider when employing practitioners for this programmes: a. “Size and distribution of the workforce b. Diversity of the employee population c. Type and structure of insurance and other benefits offered by the organization d. Scope and design of the EAP e. Consideration of the potential for unique events, such as catastrophes, major downsizing, plant closings, or other critical incidents, which may impact the organization” (EAPA, 2010, p. 14).

- **Staff and affiliate criteria standard:** The practitioner for the programme should be equipped with relevant education and experiences to enable professional and effective service delivery (EAPA, 2010).

- **Management and administration:** “Written procedures for employee assistance programme administration and operation shall be developed based on organizational needs, programme objectives, and the organization’s employee assistance programmes policy statement” (EAPA, 2010, p. 13). The intent should be clearly written and defined to ensure continuous and effective delivery of services (EAPA, 2010).

- **Essential components:** “The EAP procedures must describe all important programme processes, such as: a. Access routes to obtain EAP services b. The problem identification/assessment, referral, and short-term problem resolution processes c. EAP participation in treatment planning, liaison with treatment providers, termination of care, follow-up, monitoring, and reports of non-compliance d. EAP participation in the disciplinary process, if any, and procedures for supervisory referrals e. EAP interaction and communication with leadership f. Delivery of organizational services, such as training, consulting, and critical incident response” (EAPA, 2010, p. 13).

2.3.4.2 Personal strategies

2.3.4.2.1 Leisure coping strategy

(Caldwell, 2005. as cited in Kim & McKenzie, 2014, p. 2571) "Leisure which is a broader context than physical exercise is defined as an intrinsically motivating and self-endorsed activity in freer context in a person's life by pursuing enjoyment, self-expression, and meaningful engagement". Furthermore, "leisure also offers people an opportunity to be engrossed deeply in activity that they engage in due to the inherent nature of leisure, entailing self-determined and intrinsically motivated activity" (Kim & McKenzie, 2014, p. 2575).
Leisure provide opportunity for individuals to relax when they are confronted with stressful situations and provide them with opportunity to resolve their problems with a sound mind and builds autonomy and improve social relationships (Kim & McKenzie, 2014).

Leisure participation is known to enhance positive feeling in an individual and has been positive way to coping with stress (Lehto, Park, Fu & Lee, 2014). "Active leisure is characterised by requiring some degree of physical exertion while passive leisure is associated with restful, recuperative, and quite activity such as watching television and listening to music" (Joudrey & Wallace, 2009. as cited in Kim & McKenzie, 2014, p. 2571).

2.3.4.2.2 Social support coping strategy

This is one of the most employed strategies by social workers and it seems to be affordable. Social support refers to individual support arising from different people especially those of same circle (Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010. as cited in Du Plessis, 2018). Individual support system is essential as it provides emotional support, financial education, information and advice, and boosts their morale (Lepore, 2012. as cited in Du Plessis, 2018).
Studies have shown that individuals gain a lot from effortless social support system (Lepore, 2012. as cited in du Plessis). Perceived support available is sufficient enough for individuals to boost their morale and reduce the negative impact of stress.

Social support is enables individuals to develop a strong sense of belonging, and strengthen their self-esteem, and it is regarded as playing an important role in individual's relationships with significant others which assists in time of need (Kumar, Lal, & Bhuchar, 2014. as cited in du Plessis).

(Blum, Brow & Silver, 2012. as cited in Du Plessis, 2018, p. 129) therefore contend that "social support is recognised as one of the most productive or adaptive coping strategies". The researcher has observed that social workers utilise co-worker support to ease their stress emanated from cases and they also provide each other with emotional support and information to assist in resolving cases.

2.3.4.3 Cognitive coping strategy

2.3.4.3.1 Acceptance

Žižek et al., (2013) highlighted that acceptance is one crucial factor s of coping, regarded as practical coping response wherein individuals who accept their reality are seen as being eager to resolve their stressful situation. Collins (2007, p.6) maintained that "denial has been seen as a controversial coping strategy and it is sometimes seen as useful in minimizing distress and facilitating coping, or it can be argued that denial only creates additional problems, unless the stressor can be profitably ignored".

According to Aldebot and Weisman de Mamani (2009), individuals who accepts their situation as real as they are, are more likely to make informed decisions and minimise the negative impact and cope better with situations. McMurray and Clendon (2015) further concluded that acceptance has been regarded as positive way to assist individuals cope better with occupational and personal stress. The researcher has observed social workers striving to provide effective service delivery regardless of the challenges they face as they have accepted that there is nothing they can do about the situation.

2.3.4.3.2 Avoidance coping strategy

Avoidance is an individual means to ignore participation in an act, or situation (Stemmet, Roger, Kuntz, & Borrill, 2014, as cited in Du Plessis, 2018). Avoidance coping is therefore a person's attitude to keep away from situations they cannot resolve, or show no interest in participating in an act that will negatively affect them. Stemmet (2013, as cited in Du Plessis, 2018). Similarly, Ottenbreit and Dobson (2004. as cited in Du Plessis,2018, p. 126) define avoidance coping "as a defensive response that involves ignoring, distorting or escaping from stimuli that are perceived as threatening". Avoidance coping mechanism is thus utilized with the aim of not involving oneself in a circumstance that is stressful (Du Plessis, 2018).

Individuals who utilize this mechanism, do not engage themselves, are in denial and they use distractions to let themselves not getting involved in situation (Karekla & Panayiotou, 2011. as cited in Du Plessis, 2018).

2.4 The Organizational Culture of Social Service Organizations

The researcher is of the opinion that organisational culture has a significant impact on the quality of work life of the social workers. Social workers are governed by professional ethics which, depending on the organisational culture, they will be encouraged or discouraged to practice in accordance with or without them.

It is therefore crucial for organisational culture to contribute positively to the professionals in question. Vlaicu, Neagoe, Tîru and Otovescu (2019) stated that organisations should begin to invest in their employees as they are important to the success of the organisation. According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2017), professional ethics are very fundamental within the social work profession, as they provide guidance to their practice.

Majority of studies has given organisational culture attention in providing worthwhile contribution specifically to the analysis of social services organisations (Vlaicu et al., 2019). One such study is that of (Patterson-Silver Wolf, Dulmus, Maguin, & Cristalli, 2014. as cited in Vlaicu, 2019), provided analysis of the impact poor organisational culture have on their employees with special reference to effective service delivery and the communities they serve, which showed that employees who are negatively affected, have low morale, which service users are the mostly affected.

The authors further argues that "given the clear scientific evidence linking positive organizational culture to better outcomes for beneficiaries, organizations should make substantial efforts to improve poor working conditions" (Patterson-Silver et al., 2014, as cited in Vlaicu., 2019, p. 4).

Robbins & Coulter (2016, as cited in Vlaicu et al., 2019, p. 4) "have advocated the creation of a culture that is receptive to the service user and this approach is all the more important in social services".

One of the most positive specifications proposed by authors viewed as being client orientated culture are individuals with positive attitudes, good personality, listening and communication skills, have control over their jobs including decision making, as well as continuous organisational support. (Robbins & Coulter, 2016. as cited in Vlaicu et al., 2019). (Lohmann & Lohmann (2002. as cited in Vlaicu et., 2019, p. 4) argued that "social workers typically express their interest in a warm organizational culture, where service users feel welcome and employees are valued" (Goian, 2014. as cited in Vlaicu et., 2019, p. 4).

This is observed to be not practical to the department of social development as social workers do not have control over how things are done, and service users find themselves compromised in this regard. "It is thus possible to state that organizations operating in the field of social services or social work which have a strong culture will generally have greater consistency, while organizations with weaker cultures tend to be fragmented, have a low morale, and are prone to poor or inefficient communication" (Vlaicu et al., 2019, p. 4).

2.5 Summary

This chapter presented the literature review of the study and theoretical framework underpinning this study. Based on the literature supporting this study it was evident that occupational stress continues to be one global challenge that affects almost every individual in any profession and organisations. This chapter outlined the working conditions of social workers as the population of this study together with the sources of occupational stress.
Among other things this study identified sources such as work overload, Bureaucratic control and lack of professional autonomy, salaries, social work supervision, and challenging cases faced with.

Occupational stress does not impact only the employees but the organisation as a whole, as outlined by this chapter. In understanding the phenomena studied the researcher put in place theoretical framework, were the interactional stress model was employed, this model identify the importance of support to an individual, because stress occurs when demands are high as compared to the support received. The job demand control model was also employed which put emphasis on how employees are expected to carry their roles and responsibilities. While the job control stress the importance that employees should have control over their jobs and be part of decision making.

This chapter further presented what the coping strategies to which social workers employed in the midst of dealing with pressure of occupational stress, ranging from organisational, personal and cognitive strategies. The chapter also emphasised on the role organisational culture played in contributing to occupational stress of social workers.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The chapter presents a detailed discussion of research design and methodology; it also explains how the research was carried out. The discussion also includes in detail the study population, sampling, selection criteria, research instrument, data collection methods and data analysis, trustworthiness of the study and ethical considerations. The limitations of the study have also been considered in this chapter.

3.2 Research strategy

3.2.1 Research approach

For the purpose of this study the researcher has employed qualitative research approach. Qualitative research approach refers to exploration of social phenomena in an inherent environment (Teherani, Martimianakis, Hayes, Wadhwa & Varpio, 2015). Teherani et al. (2015, p. 669) asserted that "these phenomena can include, but not limited to, how people experience aspects of their lives, how individuals and or groups behave, how organizations function, and how interactions shape relationships". The researcher employed a qualitative research approach since the phenomenon under which investigation focuses on is the experiences, knowledge, views and opinion of the participants. The participants were able to express themselves genuinely during the interviews as the enquiry involved their everyday experiences and strengthens the findings. Although other participants felt that they did not express themselves enough as they felt overwhelmed and preferred that they had time to jot down their responses to interview schedule.

3.2.2 Research design

Fouché (2005) referred to the design as the option suitable for qualitative researcher to study certain phenomena and reach their research goal. Research designs are plans that guide the arrangement of conditions for collection and analysis of data (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).
For the purpose of the research endeavour the researcher employed a case study research design.

Creswell (2012) contends that a case study research is an investigation of a phenomenon in a real life context through one or more cases. In this regard the researcher employed a collective case study as a type of case study under the inquiry. The researcher intended to illustrate the phenomena using selected cases. The researcher found the design relevant as it enhanced goal attainment of the study. The design provided a bridge in enhancing the process to gather in-depth personal experiences of the studied individuals. Considering the fact that case studies are lengthy the researcher embraced the process taking into account the amount of rich information that comes from the design. On the other side since the design involved social workers with same experiences and taking into account their busy schedules it was almost difficult to secure appointments with them as it involved one on one data collection method.

3.3 Population, sample and sampling procedures

3.3.1 Study population

A population is defined by Wiid and Diggines (2013) as the total group of people from whom information is required. On the other hand, Seaberg (1988, as cited in Strydom, 2005, p. 193) "points out that a population is the total set from which the individuals or units of the study are chosen". Therefore, the study population for the intended study were social workers employed by Department of Social Development in the Capricorn District, Limpopo Province. The population of the study involved males and females with more than two years working experience within the department. The social workers were working with families, children, communities and groups; they were regarded as generic social workers.

3.3.2 Sampling, selection criteria and inclusion

"Sampling is the selection of research participants from an entire population, and involves decisions about which people, settings, events, behaviours, and or social processes to observe" (Terre Blanche et al., 2006, p. 133). The main concern in sampling is representativeness, with the aim of selecting sample that will represent the population about which the researcher aims to draw conclusions. The researcher employed purposive sampling as a type of non-probability sampling.

“Purposive sampling is based on the judgement of the researcher, in that a sample is composed of elements that contain the most characteristics, or represent attributes of the population” (Singleton, Straits, Straits & McAllister, 1988, p.153).

Sampling saturation was reached at ten participants. The social workers had two years of working experience at the Department of Social Development. They were stationed at the clinics, and hospitals from three clusters namely, Seshego cluster, Molepo/Maja/Chuene cluster, and Mankweng/Sebayeng/Dikgale cluster in Polokwane Municipality, Capricorn District.

3.4 Research instrument

Data are collected by using interviews, observation and writing down the participants how they conduct themselves within a specific environment (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).The researcher employed an interview guide as an instrument. The researcher facilitated interviews using a set of questions in an interview guide. The researcher ensured that the questions asked were open-ended and allowed participants to express themselves freely, and were in a logical sequence and cover the topic thoroughly (Greeff, 2005). Greeff (2005) further argues that it is crucial that the questions be non-judgemental in nature. Using an interview, the schedule included open-ended questions aimed at providing findings for the research endeavour.

3.4.1 Pre-testing of research tools

Terre Blanche et al. (2006) contend that in the research study interview schedule is tested to ensure smooth process data collection. Pre-testing of research tools is used to test whether the current data collection tool is suitable for proposed research study and, or identify possible problems, interviewing few participants before the commencement of the actual data collection (Creswell, 2014). In this research study, pre-testing of research tools was conducted with two social workers who were employed by the Department of Social Development, who were not included in the research. Babbie (2001, as cited in Strydom, 2005) noted that pre-testing research instrument can minimize any mistake that can arise when collecting data.

Therefore, pre-testing of the instrument in the study has assisted the researcher to test the reliability of the study tool, how long the interviews took and helped the researcher to make alterations to the study instrumentation which reduced the possible limitations of the study with two social workers whose data did not form part of the study.

3.5 Data collection

"Data collection process is essentially an accumulation of information with a view to gaining answers to research questions" (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché, and Delport, 2011, p. 359). Carey (2013) also asserts that data collection involves information gathering in relation to a specific phenomenon that afford researcher prospect to achieve the study goal. The researcher has used interviewing as data collection. Kvale (1996, p. 1) defines qualitative interviews as "attempts to understand the world from participant's point of view, to unfold the meaning of people's experiences". The semi-structured one to one interview was employed as a data collection method. According to Greeff (2005, p. 296) a semi-structured interview "is used in order to gain a detailed picture of a participant's beliefs about or perception of a topic". Greeff (2005) adds that with semi-structured interviews the researcher should have fixed questions to guide the interview.

Furthermore, the researcher was interested in the personal experiences of the participants regarding the phenomena and therefore was given an opportunity to express themselves freely with open-ended questions (Greeff, 2005). In this regard in-depth qualitative interviews have been conducted with social workers to understand their experiences with regard to occupational stress. Before conducting the actual interviews, the researcher developed an interview guide with open-ended questions ensuring that the questions asked would be within the scope of the study. Data were also collected through audio recording, with the permission of the participants which ensured that the data collected by the researcher reflected the true content of what participants said.

Baker, Edwards, and Doidge (2012) have shed some light on the importance of conducting interviews at a time and venue that fits participants to secure effective participation. This provided opportunity for participants to express themselves and freely share their own life experiences away from any form of intimidation and discomfort. It also allowed participants to make sense of their own experiences and reflect on how stress is affecting their lives.

This afforded the researcher opportunity to obtain detailed accounts of participants' personal experiences and allowed the researcher to use probing skills on complex and sensitive issues that sought clarification.

50% of the interviews were conducted in the participant's offices since it was a venue of convenience for them while the other 50% of participants conducted interviews at the central office where most resources are found as it was convenient for them, given their office space challenges. The interviews lasted for duration of between six minutes to twenty minutes.
For the participants whose interviews were conducted in their offices where constantly disturbed either by a colleague or client and it affected concentration and response level.

3.6 Data analysis

Carey (2013) referred to qualitative data analysis as providing significant interpretation of data collected. The researcher has used a thematic content analysis process and formulated themes to make sense of the studied phenomena (Braun & Clark, 2006). The researcher read the data collected repetitively to avoid misinterpretation during analysis to make sense of findings, themes and codes emerged out of the information that falls under the same category. The construct of the research were deductively obtained from the literature and the researcher used Creswell's (2003) thematic data analysis for its flexibility to allow the researcher to interpret the data collected.

An outlined below is the Creswell thematic data analysis process:

3.6.1 Planning for recording of data

The researcher planned for the recording of data that fit the participant's environment and facilitated data analysis before data collection commences (Creswell, 2003). The researcher used a tape recorder with the consent of the participants, which ensured that all information was recorded and it reflected what the participant had said. Creswell (2003) asserts that plans to use tape recorders should be delineated in research proposal and that will be used with participants' consent. The researcher transcribed the data collected which afforded an opportunity to critique and improve on the interview process. The researcher also colour coded the notes taken during the interview according to their categories so that data analysis for final report writing is properly concluded.

3.6.2 Data collection and preliminary analyses

De Vos, et al. (2011) indicated that during the data collection, analysis begin as the researcher work towards answering the research question. The process of data analysis involves understanding of data collected to provide a clear explanation of the data (Creswell, 2009).

During the interviews with the participants the researcher took notes based on the research questions in order to make sense of the data collected and to ensure that the data collected will answer the research question.

3.6.3 Managing and organizing the data

The researcher began analysing the data away from the research site, organise data into words and categories. The data collected was organised using computer and hand written field note and transcriptions were copied for backup. It is important for the researcher to have all data collected copied and backed up (Patton, 2002, as cited in Creswell, 2003). Researchers convert their data to be more manageable such as a word to make analysis easier (Creswell, 2003).

3.6.4 Reading and writing memos

Creswell (2003) maintained that after the organisationof data, the researcher will continue to analyse the data and get a feeling of the whole database. The researcher repeatedly read the data to get a sense of what it entails before breaking it into categories. Creswell quoted Agar (1980) as follows: “read the transcripts in their entirety several times. Immerse yourself in the details trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking in into parts.”

3.6.5 Generating categories, themes and patterns

The researcher classified the data into categories and themes to understand the data collected. Data was also organised into sub-themes so that no information is left out. Creswell (2003) contended that using categories to understand the data is very pertinent in qualitative data analysis. De Vos (2005, p. 338) indicated that “The process of category generation involves noting regularities in the settings or people chosen for study”.

The researcher familiarised herself with the data collected by transcribing the audio and read through the data repeatedly and taking the notes. The researcher then coded the data using different highlighters for phrases and sentences and identified patterns. From the codes themes emerged which were made of one or more combination of codes. The researcher also reviewed the themes by going through the data collected comparing against the themes ensuring accurate presentation of data.

3.6.6 Coding the data

The researcher coded the data collected using the numbers and coloured dots. This assisted the researcher to make sense of the data collected. Creswell (2003) highlights that during the coding of data, there is a possibility of new information arising which will lead to deviate from the initial plan.

3.6.7 Testing the emergent understandings

The researcher developed the usefulness of the data collected according to the questions the study seeks to answer. During this stage of data analysis the researcher assess the importance of certain data inclusion in the study (Creswell, 2003).

3.6.8 Searching for alternative explanations

The researcher referred to the theoretical framework of the study to find an alternative explanation of the data collected. Creswell (2003) contends that the researcher should find literature related to the findings to make sense of the data collected.

3.6.9 Representing, visualizing (writing a report)

The data collected was presented through a written report, and the data were critically analysed to make sense of it. The presentation of data in qualitative study cannot be isolated from the analytic process (Marshall & Rossman, 1999 as cited in Creswell, 2003) Data was presented in a way that participants would be proud of their contribution to the study. The researcher represented the data obtained using text and tables as Creswell (2003) indicated to be done in the final phase of the study.

3.7 Trustworthiness of the study

Lietz, Langer, and Furman (2006, p. 444) iterated that "trustworthiness is established when findings closely and possibly reflect the meanings as described by the participants". Williams and Hill (2012) emphasised that establishing data verification, in any empirical research, is of critical importance.

For the purpose of data verification of the study the researcher used Lincoln and Guba's model which is based on four aspects of trustworthiness, namely; credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability relevant to qualitative studies. Each aspect is briefly discussed to ensure validity of the study.

3.7.1 Credibility

Lincoln and Cuba (1985) argued that a researcher to should see to it that credibility is maintained as paramount in initiating trustworthiness. Credibility refers to the faith put in the research findings are the true reflection of participants experience (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). Credibility "establishes whether or not the research findings represent plausible information drawn from the participants 'original data and is a correct interpretation of the participants' original views" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). The researcher gave the participants an opportunity to agree or refuses to participate in the study which ensured that only those involved in the data collection session are those willing to part take at no cost to the researcher. Even though the researcher has observed social workers experiencing stress in their workplace due to various factors relevant to the study, she did not influence their participation. The researcher regarded the participants as expert in the study, and allowed them opportunity to share their own experiences.

The researcher addressed the biasness through asking open ended questions which allowed participants to response to the questions in relation to their own experiences. The researcher also maintained neutrality to avoid influencing participant's response (Shenton, 2004). In this way the researcher ensured credibility of the study. The researcher examined the previous research findings and assessed the degree to which the study results were congruent with those of past studies (Silverman, 2000 as cited in Shenton, 2004). The study had a prolonged engagement where the researcher was observant and had an hour session. Member check was also done by the researcher's supervisor as an experienced person in this field.

Shenton (2004) is of the view that member checking, may be offered by colleagues or peers who will give a second opinion to the researcher. The supervisor assessed all the aspects of the research report and provided a feedback suggesting further improvements.

The researcher took note during data collection to avoid biasness of the data and being familiar with the phenomena being studied assisted the researcher to allow participants to own their experiences. Lastly the researcher considered all the data obtained from interviews and ensured analysis with clear unbiased mind.

3.7.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability to transfer the qualitative study findings to a different environment using different participants (Bitsch, 2005). According to Bitsch (2005) to ensure transferability the researcher should provide a clear description of participants in relation to the nature of the study. The researcher's study provided a thorough description of participants' experience.

For the purpose of this study the researcher ensured transferability by providing precise description of demographic characteristics of the research participants, study context, sampling size of population, and research methodology to allow other researchers to have access to transferability of the study. Other researchers may relate to experience of the sample, given that the results of qualitative study since the findings of a qualitative project are specific to a small number of participants in a certain environment.

3.7.3 Dependability

Reliability or dependability of the study refers to the state where same results as the study conducted during previous period can be obtained when done repeatedly especially following the similar procedures as the previous study, such as respondents, approach and environment (Bitsch, 2005; Shenton, 2004). The researcher ensured reliability of the study through application of methods of data collection, sampling procedure and data analysis similar to those studies previously conducted. The researcher conducted pretesting that indicated the feasibility of the instrument which met the research question and was also used with all the participants.

3.7.4 Conformability

Confirmability refer to a state where the findings of the research can be corroborated by other researchers (Lincoln & Cuba as cited in Schurink, Fouche & De Vos, 2011) and ensure that the results are not influenced by the researcher (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

The researcher outlined the reason for selection of the approach and methodology for the study over others which ensured that confirmability maintained, as every section of the research was scrutinised by the supervisor to ensure that all the research processes conform to the acceptable standard.

3.8 Ethical consideration

"Research studies in the qualitative approach generally involve exploration of individual experiences which are personal in nature; therefore the researcher is obliged to be ethically aware" (Strydom, 2005, p. 17). The researcher was granted permission by the Department of Social Development to collect data. De Vos et al. (2011) confirm that ethics are referred to as regulations that govern the researchers in order to ensure safe participation on their studies. The researcher considered the ethics outlined below for the study:

3.8.1 Avoidance of harm

Babbie as cited in (De Vos et al., 2011) mentioned that participants are more likely to experience emotional harm as the natural part of social research while physical injury is not common yet it cannot be underestimated. Bak (2004) posits that it is the responsibility of the researcher to protect participants from any harm that can arise from the research and that remains the goal of the ethics. The researcher made arrangements to conduct interviews with the participants based on the time and venue that fits them. The participants were made aware that should they experience any emotional discomfort during the interview they might consult the counsellor organized by the researcher. Strydom (2011) contended that this can also be maintained by refraining from deceiving participants.

3.8.2 Informed consent

Detailed information regarding the research study was provided to by the researcher. This included the purpose and nature of the research, research process, expectations from participation, confidentiality clause, the potential risk and benefit and other finer details such as the requirement for audio-taping (Strydom, 2011, p.59).

In exercising this ethical principle, the researcher provided the participants with participant's information sheet which explained the aspects of the study thoroughly, thus avoiding confusion, and they understood that their participation was voluntary.

3.8.3 Voluntary participation

According to Strydom (2011) informed consent assures the researcher of what participants agreed to involve themselves in with regard to the study. Participants were informed about the aims of the research and that participation was voluntary which involved having the right to exit the study at any given time without accumulating fines penalties. The researcher acquired informed consent from participants beforehand by signing a consent form.

3.8.4 Autonomy, privacy and confidentiality

Strydom (2011, p. 119) defined it as follows "Privacy implies the element of personal privacy, while confidentiality indicates the handling of information in a confidential manner". Confidentiality was ensured during the research process. Participant's information was treated with confidentiality and it was conveyed to the participants and was also included in the informed consent form. Even though the researcher personally knew the participants, she ensured confidentiality and did not reveal their information (Babbie, 2011). The researcher used pseudonym such as not using the participants real names and ensured the participants' transcript' were kept in a password protected computer for 10 years after which they could be used for future research. The tapes are kept in a password protected computer for two years following any publications or for six years if no publication emanates from the study.

3.8.5 Deception

Terre Blanche, Durkheim and Painter (2006) assert that researchers should do away with deception as it is basically illegal. Further researchers must normalize conducting studies that their harm are very minimal and avoided at all costs.

The researcher did not deceive or provided false information to the participants in anyway regarding the real purpose of the study.

3.8.6 Debriefing and counselling

Strydom (2011, p. 119) defined it as follows: “Privacy implies the element of personal privacy, while confidentiality indicates the handling of information in a confidential manner”. ’The confidentiality was exercised during the research study in every step. The researcher ensured inclusion of confidentiality clause in the consent form and ensured that participant’s information is treated with confidentiality. Confidentiality of participants was ensured, as the researcher, refrained from revealing their information (Babbie, 2011).

The researcher used pseudonyms and ensured the participant’s transcript was kept in a password protected computer for 10 years which may be used for future research. The tapes are kept in a password protected computer for two years following any publications or for six years if no publication emanate from the study.

3.9 Publication of the study

The researcher ensured that all information obtained from the research was well presented. Participants were informed about the findings of the study and confidentiality and anonymity were still maintained. The release of the results occurred in a way that utilization by others was encouraged.

3.10 Summary of the chapter

This chapter provided a detailed presentation of how this qualitative study was carried out. Based on the nature of topic under the study the researcher employed a case study design which assisted with gathering in-depth personal experiences of the studied individuals.

The study also employed purposive sampling, where the researcher selected social workers as the study population with more than two years of working experience employed by the Department of Social Development in the Capricorn district, Limpopo province. Participants were stationed at the clinics, and hospitals from three clusters namely, Seshego cluster, Molepo/Maja/Chuene cluster, and Mankweng/Sebayeng/Dikgale cluster in Polokwane Municipality, Capricorn District.

The study employed an interview guide as an instrument and it was pretested to allow the researcher to test the dependability of the research tool. Semi-structured interviews were employed and the researcher gained detailed experiences of the participant's regarding the topic and interviewed were tape recorded. Data was analysed using Creswell thematic data analysis process and allowed the researcher to present the experiences of the participants. Lastly trustworthiness of the study was ensured and ethical issues were considered for protection of participants.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical data and findings from a sample of social workers employed by the Department of Social Development: Limpopo Province, in the Capricorn District. The presentation involves the analysis within the broad categories of the research aims, research question, objectives and the discussion thereof. The data were obtained from semi-structured interviews. Data collected were analysed to explore occupational stress experienced by social workers. Themes and sub-themes emerged were identified from interview transcripts of the participants.

4.2 Demographic profile of the sampled population

This section focuses on the demographic characteristics of the participants: age, gender, and cluster within the municipality and employment period within the department.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Race	Cluster
P 1	F	31-35	B	Seshego
P 2	F	40+	B	Seshego
P 3	M	31-35	B	Seshego
P 4	F	31-35	B	Molepo
P 5	F	31-35	B	Molepo
P 6	F	31-35	B	Mankweng
P 7	M	31-35	B	Mankweng
P 8	F	31-35	B	Mankweng
P 9	M	36-40	B	Mankweng
P 10	F	31-35	B	Molepo

4.2.1 Age of the participants

The data was collected from 10 participants of which eight were between the age of 31 and 35, while one was between 36 and 40 years and one other participant was above 40.

The majority of the participants were between the age of 31 and 35 which according to the findings of the study could be due to the department not recruiting new social work graduates between the ages of 20 and 30.

4.2.2 Gender of participants

Females presented a higher number of the study population while males where made of a smaller number 30%. Generally, the social work profession has been a profession dominated by women. Studies on profile of social workers has shown that social workers are predominantly female with 83% overall and 85% of Masters of Social Work (MSW) degrees and above, women are more likely to continue to dominate the profession as86% of MSW graduate in 2015 were female (Socialworkers.org, 2017) This depicts the mix-gendered nature of the social work profession, but with a predominance of females (Hicks, 2015).

4.2.3 Cluster where participants were based

The study was undertaken in the Capricorn District, Polokwane Municipality, Limpopo Province. Polokwane Municipality is composed of three clusters, namely: Seshego cluster on the north-west outskirts of the city, Molepo/Maja/Chuene cluster, approximately 20 km south of the city, Mankweng/Sebayeng/Dikgale cluster, approximately 20 km east of the city. Three participants were from Seshego cluster, three from Molepo cluster, and four were from Mankweng cluster. Interviews with five participants were conducted in their offices while the others were conducted in the central office where most of the resources are available. Interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient for participants. Baker, Edwards, and Doidge (2012) sheds some light on the importance of conducting interviews at a time and place suitable for participants for their effective participation. The researcher has also noted the importance of conducting interviews in the convenience of participants as it allowed participants to express themselves freely with minimum distractions during interviews. Some participants were able to relate to their office surroundings while responding to the interview questions which also added an advantage to the study.

4.3 Themes

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes

Themes	**Sub-themes**
Factors contributing to occupational stress	• *Poor infrastructure* • *Lack of resources* • *Lack of support* • *Compensation* • *Work load* • *Bureaucratic control* • *Cases related to children*
The impact of occupational stress	• *Impact on interpersonal relationship* • *Impact on attitude towards service delivery/ compromised service delivery*
Strategies for coping with occupational stress	• *Talking to colleagues* • *Use of office support group* • *Acceptance* • *Prioritising self and health* • *Consulting private practitioner* • *Engaging in leisure activities* • *Avoidance and ignorance*
Professional support services offered by the organisation	• *EAP*
Professional value	• *Professional worth*
Addressing occupational stress faced by social workers	• *Decentralisation of services* • *Improved remuneration* • *Improved working conditions (adequate equipment provided)* • *Employ bottom to top model* • *Increased EAP* • *Visibility of EAP* • *Copy best practice model* • *Invest in employees' well-being*

	• *Proper planning and strategy* • *Introduce compulsory debriefing session attendance* • *Reduced caseload/employ more social workers*

4.3.1 Theme 1: Factors contributing to occupational stress

This theme focuses on factors contributing to occupational stress as considered by the participants. The study revealed that social workers are highly stressed and there are various factors contributing to their stress. Various sub-themes emerged: poor infrastructure, lack of resources, lack of supervision and support, workload, compensation, and cases related to children.

4.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1: poor infrastructure

The study revealed that social workers occupy offices that are not well-furnished and some of those offices were borrowed from other departments such as Department of Health at various clinics and hospitals where they are placed. The Department of Social Development provided some social workers with mobile offices which were not good for social work practice; there is no ventilation, privacy and rails for elderly and disabled people. Four participants maintained that the infrastructure is very poor.

Participants shared their experiences as follows;

> *"*So we don't have offices and where we don't have offices we are crowded in one small office and then there is no ventilation, so that thing makes our work not to be clean and our work not to be professional because Uhm codes of ethics for our clients are violated. Like confidentiality, this park homes as our offices is not conducive for our client's privacy. When is sunny you cannot stay in this office like there is no ventilation*"*. Participant 3
>
> *"*Yeah like in our workplace, here at the clinic at Polokwane, you can see the, our office where our office is structured is not accessible to people with disabilities, see they cannot come into our offices, so the structure is problematic. So if the person with disability comes in the office, we have to, me as a social worker I have to go

outside and interview that person outside. So it means automatically the rights to confidentiality for that person with disability is going to be violated*"*. Participant 3

*"*I am working in a park home, which does not even comply in terms of value, confidentiality of South African Council for Social Service Professions is not relevant because when you talk, the person outside can hear what you are talking about inside the office and it also does not allow, does not have ramps for people with disabilities, when is raining it leaks, when is hot is hot, when is cold is cold*"*. Participant 9

*"*We are sharing an office sometimes when clients are coming some have to go out, so that they can reserve confidentiality space for the other clients*"*. Participant 10

*"*My office is not conducive, I was having three clients now, imagine how are we going to sit sometimes I'm asking extra office to my colleagues to say let me please use your office*"*. Participant 1

Earle (2008, p. 31) contends that "the conditions under which social workers are expected to practice in South Africa are generally very poor". Sithole (2010) added that the absence of critical tools for effective service delivery such as office space, stationery, telephone, computers and transportation are witnessed to be more prevalent to social workers placed in rural areas. Earle (2008, p. 31) argues that "social workers are frustrated by the overwhelming needs of the community in relation to their own relatively low numbers and their limited access to resources such as adequate supervision, stationery, office space, and furniture, information technology, administrative and language support, vehicles and supporting professionals and institutions such as places of safety".

4.3.1.2 Sub-theme 1.2: Lack of resources

The researcher is of the view that resources are part of the success story of every organisation; without them no organisation can survive. The findings of the study have revealed that even today social workers employed by the Department of Social Development are still experiencing occupational stress which emanate from lack of resources such as access to internet; scan, computers and transport. Seventeen years ago the same study was conducted by Schenck (2003) and revealed the same challenges in the DSD. Seemingly, within the DSD is either you do not have access to resources or, it has to be shared by quite a number of other social workers which creates a great deal of stress.

The findings are supported by Schenck's study (2003, p. 61) which has revealed that "resources like fax machines, access to faxing facilities, computers or access to any typing facilities was problematic, and this was in 2003 when fax was important".

Five participants interviewed lament that they are operating without resources:

> *"*We don't have internet, is one of the things that makes our work difficult because we do not have enough transport wherein we need to submit some of the things we should find vehicles to go submit, so we don't have internet that we can use emails to send things via emails, so that our work becomes simple, so that is the one of the things that causes stress here at work, so resources*"*. Participant 3
>
> *"* The issue of resources especially when coming to emails, sometimes documents that need to be scanned, we need to send some of the documents at a district level, they say we want document, that one is a stress to me, we want document that is signed, how am I going to email the document that is signed I need to scan, I don't have scan, I have to download on my phone, use my own scan and that is another thing so that what roughly I can say is frustrating*"*. Participant 1
>
> *"*The recent challenge we are currently facing is the shortage of toner and printer and now when we enquire about the toner they tell us they have changed the service provider and when we order for toner it takes time, this year we did not receive a toner*"*. Participant 4
>
> *"*The most stressful one is transport, because you find that there is serious and urgent case which does not require you to issue a call in note and does not require you to make a call to the client, al, it need is for you to immediately when they report take the car keys and go and assess the situation before the case turns somehow, because by the time you get transport you find that the case has escalated to other level.*"* Participant 4
>
> *"*The printer that is there, I have been working there for three years, there is no toner, they say, they can't get toner. The computer also, I don't have a computer I'm using my own laptop*"*. Participant 9
>
> *"*You don't have a car so it's a challenge, you don't have a phone, you don't have a photocopy machine, you don't have a printer, sometimes you share, you are sharing a computer and maybe we are three in an office, you have to queue in order to type or do something*"*. Participant 10

The study conducted by Schenck (2003, p. 62) revealed that those resources significant to service delivery where insufficient such as telephone, access to fax and computers, which social workers are mandated to share one computer per five social workers.

The researcher has observed social workers sharing computer with some using their personal computers and that impact on their effective service delivery and compromise the privacy and confidentiality of the clients. Schenk (2003) indicated that some social workers were expected to operate in offices without electricity and that is still the case as the researcher has observed some social workers office being cut off electricity. Earle (2008, p. 63) argued that social workers are faced with unpleasant working conditions manifested by high caseload, shortage of staff, lack of working tools, lack of supportive supervision and are not even compensated enough, and that increase their level of stress as they are unable to meet the needs of their clients. Compounding these challenges is inadequate supervision. Maudeni and Ntshwarang (2016) are of the opinion that social workers are not recognised as providing essential services to communities hence their low salaries and that also has a great impact on their professional status.

4.3.1.3 Sub-theme 1.3: Centralisation and lack of state vehicle

Lack of transport and centralisation of state vehicles has been one of the major frustrations that contributed to participants' stress. The views regarding transport were strongly echoed as social workers duties involve conducting home visits, outreach programmes, court attendance and other administrative work. Nhedzi (2014) argues that lack of transport could be due to the government's poor financial support to the relevant departments.

Three participants expressed their challenges on having to travel to access the state -owned vehicle to do field work as follows:

> *"*The other is the transport issue, I am stationed at the Clinic and then I am residing around the village. So when I need transport , it means I need to pop money from my pocket so that I travel to Magistrate to get state vehicle/transport after that when I return the vehicle it means I have to spent more money on transport*"*. Participant 4
>
> *"*The state vehicles are centralised, I have to travel more than 18 kilometres to come and access state vehicle and then to access printer, also a telephone*"*. Participant 9
>
> *"*I travel 60 kilometres from my office to pick up a car, in the central office where they park government vehicles*"*. Participant 10

Mathe (2018) highlight that transport turns out to be an essential resource for everyday functioning of all social workers. Without transport, a social worker's duty is inadequately performed and this often leads to less productivity and poor service delivery to the intended recipients. The outcome of the study was that social workers only have access to transport at least twice in a month which has to be shared with other two or more officers and their visits are often not planned.

4.3.1.4 Sub-theme 1.4: Lack of support and supervision

The study found that although the Department of Social Development has put in place EAP services, and supervisors to provide support to their employees, social workers have a different view on this matter as they do not feel there is support provided to them and this is due to ineffectiveness of the programme and supervisors not willing to support them. The views were strongly expressed due to the notion that social work requires an individual's positive emotional wellbeing as per its work nature. Biggart (2016) also asserted that social work is emotionally draining, especially without support.

Four participants shared their experiences of having to operate with no support on a daily basis as follows:

> *"*There is none, because there is only one EAP practitioner who is responsible for the whole district, it's practically impossible for that person to cater for all our needs, and then we are faced with stressful cases day in day out basically there is none*"*. Participant 7
>
> *"* You are just on your own, to me in social development I don't see any organisational structure supporting us so that we can deal with stress, even if you are admitted, you are sick, you will come back nobody will come to you and say are you fine now, are you coping with your work*"*. Participant 8
>
> *"*I would say there is no system in place to assist employees and can you imagine the whole district have only one EAP. Is every man for himself*"*. Participant 2
>
> *"*Uhm the factors that cause stress in my workplace, the first one is lack of support, and when I say lack of support is because we don't really have support from our supervisors, and when coming to maintaining our professional when you talk about certain things that are not going accordingly they will tell you that due to the fact that there are no resources or is not in their power and that is when you feel you do not have the support, because they don't normally stand up for us*"*. Participant 5

The study revealed that social workers operates without support and supervision and the findings were supported by Hawkins and Shohet (2012, p. 149) in their study "that teachers, probation officers, social workers, and doctors reported that they do not receive support and supervision".

While other participants felt that there were no support from the department, one participant felt her supervisor was supportive and assisted her with stress at work and she expressed herself as follows;

> *"*I received a lot of support from my husband and even my supervisor and I was given special leave for two weeks and then I came back and realised I still have paranoia so some of my wards were taken off, so that I can only deal with the light ones*"*. Participant 2

Kadushin and Harkness (2014) highlighted that supervision and support is pertinent within work environment which addresses the **administrative case management**, where supervisor provide support to social worker regarding the management of their cases, especially the challenging; **personal support** to provide emotional support to employees regarding emotional burden that comes with the profession and their duties; and **educational support**, to enable employees to learn new ideas, methods to help deal with clients cases.

4.3.1.5 Sub-theme 1.5: Compensation

Acknowledgement of employees with better compensation often increases productivity while employees who are lowly compensated get de-motivated to work hard (Moyane, 2016).

Ekman (2013) argues that employees who are most likely to experience disappointment in their workplace are those who expect to be compensated accordingly for their work done. It is further argued that employees should be motivated enough to render effective and quality service to their clients, rather than working with appraisal hope (Brody & Nair, 2013).

The study showed that social workers are lowly paid and three participants expressed their negative experiences in this regard:

> *"*Again the fact that we feel we are not compensated enough when it comes to our qualifications as we compare our qualifications with other professionals like pharmacy we have the same qualification but then remuneration is not the same*"*. Participant 3

*"*The salary, also because if you are not satisfied with the salary that you are earning then is a stress on its own. Joo you know the salary does not match the workload that is the challenging part*"*. Participant 6

" The low salary, I think is level 8, yeah not I think, it is level 8, it supposed to be level 8 and I was not upgraded*"*. Participant 10

Sithole (2010, p. 7) argued that "the social work profession is and has been marginalized over the years from different angles". Furthermore (Earle, 2008b; Schenck, 2004. as cited in Sithole, 2010, p. 7) added that "this is also applicable in South Africa where the profession has been unacknowledged and marked by low salaries". In addition Earle (2008) contended that the significance of social work roles within the department of Social Development is questionable with special reference to low social work salaries, which motivates black social workers to seek greener pastures every now and then. The issue of social workers salary levels has been one major challenge of this profession wherein in Dlamini (2017) expressed her frustration in a letter she wrote to minister Bathabile Dlamini that "I am a social worker with honours degree and according to my qualification; I have an NQF 8 but earn a salary that is at salary scale 7. As a social worker, I earn as much income as a personal assistant in all departments. I earn the same salary as sales consultants in the country and at times know they earn a better wage as they get commission".

4.3.1.6 Sub-theme 1.6: Work load

It is still evident that there is a shortage of social workers to fulfil the needs of those they serve on a daily basis, since the results of the study confirmed that social workers are still challenged with high caseload which contributes enormously to their stress. The participants mentioned that the caseload emanates from large areas and more numbers of wards they are managing and their cases are generic which makes it more difficult to manage. In the study conducted by (Schaer, 2015 as cited in (Beer, 2015, p. 3) it is mentioned that "caseload size has been recognised as the most common cause of stress among social workers". Three participants shared their testimonies as follows;

" Okay because in my workplace I think the most factor that stress me is workload, like I am doing health care social worker and I am managing four wards in a tertiary hospital which is very busy, there is no time to rest you are always working*"* . Participant 8

*"*Workload, large areas that I am serving and again problems faced by the communities that I am serving*"*. Participant 6

*"*Workload that is having challenges, maybe you find that there are more cases of Zimbabweans that needs lots of record that are not available, that are where the stress comes*"*. Participant 1

Moyane (2016) discussed that work overload; shortage of resources and high turnover of social workers have received tremendous attention as the core source of stress among the helping professionals. (Dillenburger, 2004. as cited in Jensen van Rensburg, 2009) adds that social workers experience workplace stress due to increased caseloads, with little time to complete them. Manthosi and Makhubele (2016) also support the findings that high caseload, low remuneration, lack of supportive supervision, resources and professional autonomy, results in occupational stress of social workers. Integrated Service Delivery Model (ISDM, 2006, p. 39) indicates that "a social work supervisee who works with a variety of welfare cases should not have more than sixty files at a given time".

4.3.1.7 Sub-theme: Bureaucratic control/lack of autonomy

Moyane (2016) asserts that it is frustrating for social workers to practice under the control of the management who does not conform to the values and principles of the profession and as results their occupational stress level increases. As per study results participants have shown that they have no control over processes, plans and implementations to enable them to undertake their daily duties. Even their professional opinion is not considered as they are obliged to work as per management schedule. Young (2004. as cited in Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015, p. 472 indicated "of how powerlessness contributes to diminished capacities and lack of participation in decision-making, and how the powerless are subject to humiliation and disrespect". Furthermore such situations social workers find themselves in, affect their professional value and integrity to an extent that they developed a feeling that their image is "like an ant"(Young, 2004. as cited in Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015, p. 472. The findings have showed that social workers are forced to practice in accordance with management principles, not those of social work which do not benefit their clients, and their situation is equated to that of a 'yo-yo'.

Three participants iterated that;

> *"*The other thing there is no clear structure, sometimes you don't know where to move from A to B right, sometimes the information just come from the top management downwards, which you cannot question, when you need clarity or the next person to talk to*"*. Participant 7
>
> *"*I think for me it becomes worse especially Social development because there is no planning, and they just want something here and now, when you are still busy with something they want this, when you busy with this they sent you to the workshop*"*. Participant 8
>
> *"*And with the transport when we have allocation, they will call you in the morning to come and fetch the vehicle and I don't have my personal car it means I have to use public transport and when I get to where the state vehicle is stationed is already 09H00 and transport officer already went out and those who are supposed to assist regarding transport they don't give us attention*"*. Participant 4

Dlamini and Sewpaul (2015, p. 472) "it is reported that if a social worker needed to go out of the office, be it for a home visit, to respond to emergencies, attend meetings outside the office or attend court proceedings, they needed three people to authorize the trip before a car could be used". Furthermore it was reported that social workers needed approval for their trips from three officials which negatively impacted on their effectiveness of service rendered (Dlamini and Sewpaul, 2015). According to the researcher's observations as a social worker, all trips undertaken by social workers are deemed authorised provided three officials have signed the trip sheet, and it makes it difficult to respond to urgent cases.

4.3.1.8 Sub-theme 1.8: Cases related to children

It is noteworthy to highlight that identity is important when rendering services to the children in need of care and protection, as identity is the starting point for any child to be recognised by social workers to effectively receive services. The study revealed that social workers generally find all cases of children stressful as at times some challenges prohibit them to advocate for them. Furthermore, undocumented immigrants' children make it difficult for the system to resolve their cases.

The findings are thus supported by the research study conducted by Fritch, Johnson, Juska (2010), into UMC in SA, also established that there were 1500 unaccompanied/migrant minors in Limpopo Province alone, and 25% of these children are said to have travelled on their own.

Three participants expressed their frustrations with regard to dealing with children cases as follows:

> *"*The issue of children cases, when coming to children's in need of care and protection, who need to be reunited with their families, children who are at Polokwane complex is a stress to me, I have a case from 2015 even now, there is no direction about it, it's all about tracing, they say ISS will help us but we have been trying to submit the cases and reports but I don't know if next year something will come out of that*"*. Participant 1
>
> *"*Even the issues of Zimbabwean cases most stressful cases, because sometimes they don't have documents and they like to say I don't want this child, but you find that they don't have documents and it is going to be very hard to assist them without documents, is not easy things actually roughly all Zimbabwean cases stresses us, truly speaking sometimes they will want pauper burial and they don't have documents, is stressful to deal with them*"*. Participant 1

In addition "social workers are facing challenges in cases of illegal people who do not have valid documents in order to have access to services provided by government" Disabilitygauteng.org (2017, para. 4). The study shown that all cases of children the social workers engage with daily are stressful and what makes them more stressful is the inability to fully advocate for the clients due to the nature of the cases; some clients are generally challenging to the system. "Social workers have reported that dealing with difficult clients is one of the major challenges they experience that lead to increases in stress, this is especially true of social workers providing mental health services" (Whitaker & Arrington, 2008. as cited in Limon, 2018, p. 9). The researcher has also observed social workers and experienced challenge of case related to children without documentation who needed to be placed in school and that was stressful and difficult to render services to such children. Two participants reported that:

*"*All cases of children it's always severe stress, cases of child abuse, severe malnutrition wherein the child's developmental milestones are delayed, services, case of rape children who are raped and bought to the hospital, services of, issues of children which are, which have an illness which can be managed immediately but the parent delay to bring them to the hospital when is too late and the child die, sometimes in our hands*"*. Participant 2

*"*Lastly it will be the cases that I deal with, that will be the rape case and mostly cases of children who are witnesses to murders that happened before them*"*. Participant 6

*"*Most of the cases is when the child is in the hospital and they are receiving treatment and the parent are refusing for the child to get treatment and they are fighting with everyone in the hospital because they want to take the child to traditional healers, so those are the stressful cases because you want to advocate for the rights of the child and try to save the child's life*"*. Participant 2

This proves to be difficult for social workers who need to advocate for the rights of the children on a day to day basis, especially due to lack of organisational support. The researcher has observed medical social workers struggling to advocate for the child whose case was referred to them as the child was suppose to be on chronic treatment and yet his family did not believe in western medication and wanted to go the traditional route.

4.3.2 Theme 2: The impact of occupational stress

The study has shown that occupational stress has a great deal of impact on social workers especially on their personal relationships and on service delivery at large. It is however not surprising that stress has much impact on social workers within the department because their main support for stress relief is EAP and yet it is deemed dysfunctional. The study has explored stress as impacting social workers in two ways daily. The theme focuses on two subthemes namely, impact on interpersonal relationship and the impact on service delivery.

4.3.2.1 Sub-theme 2.1: Impact on interpersonal relationship

The study has found out that social workers are affected by occupational stress on a daily basis and the stress has taken over their personal lives. This is due to the demanding nature of their roles and responsibilities together with limited to no support.

The findings revealed that social workers are at a great risk of losing themselves to occupational stress and their families are at the receiving end as a result.

Five participants echoed that they operate daily with stress, witnessing themselves negatively transforming as follows:

> *“* Hmm, I will say cases of child abuse, I think those are cases that affected my personal life, because like now truly speaking I do not trust anyone around my children, simply because of the child sexual abuse cases that I have dealt with since I have started working as a VEP social worker*”*. Participant 6
>
> *“* You know when I am stressed neh, I'm in a relationship with the significant others and if I am emotionally not there, they are affected and sometimes you find that you are emotionally drained because of high case load and you are not there for them , so it affect our relationship*”*. Participant 7
>
> *“*It affect me because when I get home I am tired and stressed, like I don't know, I can't manage most of the things at home because I'm tired and stressed, I can't maintain my daily routine, I have to cook, I have to do washing, I have to iron and everything and also have to engage people who are at home*”*. Participant 8
>
> *“*Sometimes when I have to do things as expected of me as a wife I'm not able to do those things and sometimes I just cannot sleep and when I have to perform, when I have to, I used to help my son with his homework and I couldn't and he doesn't like it when his father is helping him*”*. Participants 2
>
> *“*Sometimes because I am a human it affect me, the relationship with the significance others because I cannot separate myself from the professional that I am, I am a professional 24 hours, so whatever is the same person who is experiencing the difficulties so it just that sometimes, my significant others they are at the receiving end of the stress that I have accumulated from my workplace so it does affect me and my significant others*”*. Participant 7

The researcher has also observed social workers more often leaving the offices during working hours to finish their chores as during weekends they trying to rest and being away from work reduces their stress hence they leave early. Some resort to hiring home assistance to cope with the demand and stress of their work. Mavridis, Harkness, Super & Liu (2019) adds that Most of the social workers are unable to balance their work and family responsibilities.

4.3.2.2 Sub-theme 2.2: Impact on service delivery

The study revealed that social workers are unable to undertake and complete some of their duties which impact on the service delivery. Some of the services are compromised and the clients are reported to be at the receiving end. What is found to compromise the service delivery is said to be factors contributing to occupational stress such as, unavailability of resources and support, workload and poor infrastructure. These compromise productivity and effectiveness of quality service delivery and the morale of employees. To social workers this means practicing will little passion to avoid disappointments, some feel useless for not rendering quality service to clients.

Seven participants had to say the following in relation to how they were impacted;

> *"*If the employer is not taking you serious, why should you take the work serious because you keep on complaining about the same problem with regards to resources and there is no improvement*"*. Participant 3
>
> *"* It will affect how I am going to handle the case, if it was supposed to take one week, maybe it will take two weeks to handle the case and you find its and emergency case". Participant 4
>
> *"* Well because stress causes burnout , at the end of the day when clients come you see like you know what I can help but with not opening your heart fully because as I said you are not compensated for your work and at the end of the day it affect how you provide your service and completing other responsibilities*"*. Participant 5
>
> *"*When I am stressed as an employee, the quality of service that I am rendering is compromised and then the clients service beneficiaries they are deprived of their constitutional rights to social services, so it affect me as an individual, it affects also the clients who are the most vulnerable*"*. Participant 7
>
> *"*So stress delay most of the working things that you are doing, you no longer reaching targets, you just get confused every now and then, so your responsibilities you no longer completing them, and once you miss one responsibility you can't complete all". Participant 8
>
> "It sometimes actually compromises the rights of the clients because at some stage we have to attend cases immediately and some clients are just coming +/- 2kilometers away from social workers office but you have to travel 18 kilometres so that you can help a person who is staying 2 kilometres*"*. Participant 9

*"*As you will be assisting the clients in different problems, so you will just feel useless, because if you cannot fulfil your responsibilities, then why are you here! So is tough*"*. Participant 10

Glazer and Liu (2017) shared the same sentiment with the findings of the study that, both employee and organisation are susceptible to the pressure of stress, organisation can be negatively impacted by the impact stress has on employees, such as health related issues, which will possibly affect productivity. The researcher has observed social workers deliberately not attending to cases due to stress that emanate from lack of adequate resources to enable service delivery and that is the direct results of the impact stress have on service delivery.

4.3.3 Theme 3: Strategies for coping with occupational stress

Coping mechanisms are employed to deal with certain situation that exceeds one's abilities. The study has revealed that in the event where social workers experienced occupational stress within their organisation, they have to utilize various strategies to assist in coping with occupational stress the best way possible in order for them to undertake their day to day responsibilities. Participants have reported that since there is nothing they can do to change their work situation, strategies to cope with stress are the only mechanism that assists them to keep on going in order to survive. The following sub- themes emerged as strategies utilised by social workers to cope with stress: Talking to colleagues and support groups; coping through acceptance; coping through avoidance and ignorance; prioritising self and health; leisure coping strategy/ engage in leisure activities.

4.3.3.1 Sub-theme 3.1: Talking to colleagues and support groups

Engaging with colleagues to deal with stress is explored as a way to be effective in coping with stress for most social workers as they engaged formally and informally so. One participant is found to engage formally with her colleagues as they have a support group that meets on specific days.

The other three participants reported that they engage informally with their colleagues. Three participants reported that engaging with colleagues helps ease stress and expressed themselves in this way:

*"*When I am at work I have colleagues during lunch we discuss different topics then by doing that I also forget about the problem and sometimes I feel relieved with what I do*"*. Participant 4

*"*What I normally do when I have dealt with a case that is so traumatizing I will talk to colleagues about it, you know talking to colleagues about it, I think reduces the level of stress of that particular case had on me*"*. Participant 6

*"*Hmm aah other officers actually we do share the challenges that are the only support that I am having, I am having other officers which I'm working with but beside those officers there is nothing that is helping us with the stress*"*. Participant 9

One participant has echoed that in coping and making sense of the stressful working environment she has to face on a daily basis she will also put office support group to use. Thus she expressed herself as such;

*"*I talk to my colleagues, we have a support group, the office support group were we will meet every Friday morning and we sit and drink tea and we talk about the cases we have seen during the week, sometimes what I really found helping is when I actually go to the wards and I talk to the nurses and doctors*"*. Participant 2

Studies have shown that individuals gain a lot from effortless social support system (Lepore, 2012. as cited in Du Plessis, 2018). Perceived support available is sufficient enough for individuals to boost their morale and reduce the negative impact of stress. (Blum, Brow & Silver, 2012. as cited in Du Plessis, 2018, p. 129) therefore contend that "social support is recognised as one of the most productive or adaptive coping strategies". The researcher has observed that social workers utilise co-worker support to ease their stress emanated from cases and they also provide each other with emotional support and information to assist in resolving cases.

4.3.3.2 Sub-theme 3.2: Coping through Acceptance

Although social workers are working under poor and uncontrollable situation, the fact remains there are situations they are fully aware they cannot do anything about them.

Findings in this regard are that the participants choose to accept their work situation seeing that there is nothing or little they can do, as a result, accept the situation. This is how participants have lamented:

*"*I can say the coping mechanism, the one that we normally use of acceptance, because so many things we really cannot change but we can only try*"*. Participant 5

“ Hmm I sometimes tell myself that I’m just in the office to assist the client, actually that is the only coping mechanism , if I can just complain about toner, I won’t help the client I just tell myself that I want to help the communities where I’m working in, that’s the only way I am coping with the stress*”*. Participant 9

Aldebot and Weisman de Mamani (2009), support the findings that individuals who accepts their situation as real as they are, are more likely to make informed decisions and minimise the negative impact and cope better with situations. McMurray and Clendon (2015) further concluded that acceptance has been regarded as positive way to assist individuals cope better with occupational and personal stress. Žižek et al., (2013) is in agreement with Aldebot, Weisman de Mamani, McMurray and Clendon (2015) highlighted that acceptance is one pertinent factor of coping, regarded as practical coping response wherein individuals who accept their reality are seen as being eager to resolve their stressful situation .

4.3.3.3 Sub-theme 3.3: Coping through avoidance and ignorance

It can be argued that different people respond differently to similar situations, which can be the same as coping with the same situation. The study has revealed that some social workers employed by the DSD faced with the same challenges use avoidance and ignorance as coping mechanism. Avoidance coping is therefore a person’s attitude to keep away from situations they cannot resolve, or show no interest in participating in an act that will negatively affect them. (Stemmet, 2013, as cited in Du Plessis, 2018). Similarly, Ottenbreit and Dobson (2004. as cited in Du Plessis,2018, p. 126) define avoidance coping “as a defensive response that involves ignoring, distorting or escaping from stimuli that are perceived as threatening”.

Individuals who utilize this mechanism, do not engage themselves, are in denial and they use distractions to let themselves not getting involved in situation (Karekla & Panayiotou, 2011.as cited in Du Plessis, 2018).

The researcher has observed that social workers use ignorance as a coping strategy. The researcher as a Social worker has observed that in most cases Social workers render services with low quality to cope with the stress caused by lack of resources and support for the sake of reaching targets as expected by the Department. Participants shared their way of coping as follows:

*"*Uhm, I ignore, I most of the time just have to ignore everything that is happening and you just have to have a strong character and take responsibility for what you have to do, just do what you can, that is most effective do what you can, while you can, because others if you cannot you cannot kill yourself, certain things you cannot*"*. Participant 10

*"*Mainly like yeah, I can say that, but you see in my office how it is, but it is not stress for me, I just come and do my work where I can, and where I cannot is fine*"*. Participant 1

4.3.3.4 Sub theme 3.4: Prioritising self and health

The study also found that social workers realised the important of prioritizing their health as one of the strategies to cope with stress. They reported to take initiate realising that the Department of Social Development is not looking after their health by putting in place effective way to deal with their stress.

The study also explored that when social workers had engaged in a very traumatic case they are forced to carry on with their duties the next day as if nothing happened. Three participants iterated that;

" I normally go for spa massages often, when I feel I am stressed I will go for spa and book for massages then after that all the stress will be gone*"*. Participant 6

*"*The best strategy that I utilize is to take care of myself, my health and just let something go and be myself you know; sometimes I must make time to go out and have fun and forget about work and my responsibilities*"*. Participant 7

*"*I personally received psychological assistance, personally I paid for myself psychological services and I think to some degree they helped because now I'm okay*"*. Participant 2

Some social workers were observed by the researcher to use the wellness day every Wednesday to engage in exercises to care for their wellbeing and some take sick leaves to rest.

4.3.3.5 Sub theme 3.5: Leisure coping strategy/ Engaging in leisure activities

With the stress experienced within the department of social development participants also echoed that leisure afforded them time to relax and be relieved from stress. This is what they said;

> *"*Sometimes when, let's say for instance I have handled a very traumatic case I try by all means to forget about it, have fun, go play, and go do something that I enjoy like watching soccer, driving away, you know just like that, just to forget about work*"*. Participant 7

> *"*Sometimes I feel relieved with what I do or when I am home on face book when I am free, I read novels, they help relieve stress*"*. Participant 4

Leisure participation is known to enhance positive feeling in an individual and has been positive way to coping with stress (Lehto, Park, Fu & Lee, 2014). The researcher has observed that social workers more often organise trips they use as their debriefing for the stress they accumulate in their workplace. Some social workers were observed by the researcher to utilise internet in the workplace to download and watch funny videos during office hours to assist with coping with stressful cases and environment.

4.3.4 Theme 4: Professional support services offered by the organisation

Organisational support is very essential for social workers as their services are regarded as being emotionally demanding but the study has established that social workers struggle with occupational stress due to lack of organisational support. The study also found that EAP services are said to be the support put in place by the department for their employees.

4.3.4.1 Sub theme 4.1: Employee Assistance Programme services

Participants were sharing the same sentiment with regard to feeling of being disappointed and discouraged to consult with the EAP due to ineffectiveness and inaccessibility of the service. Some of the participants did not regard support being available for them due to disappointment of the EAP service and that compromise their productivity. Handrick (2018) maintains that an EAP helps employers because it makes for happier employees. Furthermore, it affords employees a confidential place to deal with their personal problems.

Six participants shared their negative experiences as follows;

*"*This is the problem we feel reluctant to go and consult at the practitioner because we feel that the practitioner is also having the same problem, she was once working as a social worker and the bottom line complaining about the same, so when you go there to consult I don't think I will find solution because the person is also stressful, how can a blind person show the blind person a way, so that's how we feel*"*. Participant 3

*"*EAP service, though is not accessible, we do have EAP service but then to access it is a challenge, you don't just go straight to the person and say you know what I need your services, you have to via your supervisor first, to your manager so it will even takes time to access those services, though they are there but they are not accessible so I don't see their use anyway*"*. Participant 6

"When you have stress it means you have to find a way to cope with stress*"*. Participant 4

*"*I don't have anybody to support me in that work, actually I am just on my own*"*. Participant 8

" For the past five years I have been working I don't know any support, I cannot pinpoint it and say there is support for us as professionals, they say there is employee health and wellness but is not within our reach*"*. Participant 5

*"*There is none, because there is only one EAP practitioner who is responsible for the whole district, it's practically impossible for that person to cater for all our needs, then we are faced with stressful cases day in day out basically there is none*"*. Participant 7

*"*It is impossible to secure an appointment because she is all over and even the services that she is providing, the quality is questionable because there are more employees and she is the only one person*"*. Participant 7

*"*I was referred to employee assistant personnel in the district of which I didn't find effective, I think I ran the session, I didn't take anything out of the EAP and she didn't, we only had one session we were supposed to have the second session and she was too committed for me, I never went for follow up until I decided to terminate the service*"*. Participant 2

EAPA Standards and Professional Guidelines for Employee Assistance Programs (2010) assert that the adequate number of practitioners for the programme should be equipped with relevant education and experiences to enable professional and effective service delivery.

“Furthermore, whether the EAP is internal or delivered by external contractors, the number and qualifications of EAP professionals should match program needs (EAPA” (2010, p. 14). The intent should be clearly written and defined to ensure continuous quality service delivered (EAPA, 2010). Employee Assistance programmes is meant to bridge gap for the stress accumulated by employees in the workplace and enhance their coping abilities but within the Department of Social Development is not the case. The researcher has observed that in the years of service as a social worker within the Department there was never a day where the practitioner was introduced and informed the social workers of the services she renders. The EAP services existence are discussed along the corridors and are not accessible thus far.

4.3.5 Theme 5: Professional value

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that enhance social change, development, social cohesion and the empowerment of people and liberation of people (International Federation of Social Workers, (IFSW) 2014).

Furthermore the “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, (IFSW) 2014, para. 1). Notably, this is relevant to the study with regard to the profession under which the study is focused; especially in the caring profession were social workers care for the clients.

4.3.5.1 Sub theme 5.1: Professional worth/ Social work services

The study has shown that although social workers experience occupational stress in their workplace day in and day out, they still feel they are worth and still consider their services to be exceptional to the communities they serve. When questioned if their services are off value, participants expressed themselves as follows;

*"*Yes! Coz they are many families that we preserve, each and every day. We are assisting children who are vulnerable, we are assisting people who are addicted to substances, so and then we are working closely with schools whereby they have problematic child, they refer the children or student or the learner to our offices and then we are trying to assist and then that on its own it shows that our services is still taken serious in the community*"*. Participant 3

*"*Yes! Because at the end of the day regardless of the factors , social work is our calling and we have so much value in our communities that we shall do, if it was not for us so many people would suffer, we have so much value and our profession have so much weight and our profession make a difference into communities*"*. Participant 5

*"*Yes, I definitely perceive my role as a social worker to have value because the hospital cannot function without a social worker, we have a lot of unknown people, lot of child abuse cases, lot of patients that does not have support system and social worker has to go and assess their home circumstances and establish support system for them to assist them to cope with their illnesses, to cope with the treatment that they are getting, to cope with a lot of things*"*. Participant 2

4.3.6 Theme 6: Addressing occupational stress faced by social workers

Of significance is the fact that almost all the factors the participants find contributing to their stress are of employers responsibilities. The participants have suggested various strategies to which the department of social development can employ in addressing their occupational stress. Generally all the factors which the participants have mentioned hinder them to perform their daily duties which do not only have strong impact on them but also on the lives of the service users and the organisation itself.

Participants feel like the department is not investing on their wellbeing which determines the success of the organisation and their feeling emanate from having one centralised EAP practitioner which the department put in place as measures to deal with their stress.

4.3.6.1 Sub Theme 6.1: Decentralisation of services

Participants were of the view that if the services are decentralised it will be one effective way to addressing their occupational stress as experienced by them on a daily basis. Those interviewed expressed themselves as follows;

*"*They must just stop compromising the profession and make sure that there are tools of trades and then decentralisation of vehicles must also be in place*"*. Participant 9

*"*If they can bring down the services to us and not put them up there, services of the employee assistance personnel should come down where the incidences are happening*"*. Participant 2

This study shows that social workers believe that decentralisation of services will contribute positively to service delivery as every community has its own designated social worker with own challenges that some need social worker to respond immediately. The researcher has observed that some social workers placed in the clinics experience challenges with regards to other resources such as transport as they are limited and centralised far from all clinics.

4.3.6.2 Sub-theme 6.2: Improve remuneration

The study has made it evident that low remuneration plays a crucial part in contributing to occupational stress of social workers.

Participant 10 reiterated that;

*"*Mostly which is they have to work on our salaries, that is the most important*"*.

Ekman (2013) argues that employees who are most likely to experience disappointment in their workplace are those who expect to be compensated accordingly for their work done. It is further argued that employees should be motivated enough to provide quality service delivery to their clients, rather than working with appraisal hope (Brody & Nair, 2013).

4.3.6.3 Sub-theme 6.3: Improve infrastructure and provide adequate resources

It is very important to say conducive working environment allow employees to flourish and be productive and be less stressful. Judging from the finding of the study participants iterated that having improved working condition will work at their advantage in addressing their work stress as they have to deal with the social demand of the communities. This is what the participant had to say;

*"*I think first of all they need to improve the infrastructure for the department, we think professionally we know it is not possible for a social worker to worker in one office being three or five is practically impossible, the infrastructure must be in a way that it is accessible to any kind of people, people with disabilities, older persons, they should be able to access our office*"*. Participant 3

*"*Firstly give us full resources, give us good salary, and build us structure where the support system is there so that we can do or work effectively*"*. Participant 5

*"*The setting does not allow people with disabilities actually but they expect you to help them. How are we going to help those people whereas the environment does not allow that*"*. Participant 9

The authors sees the importance to address the stress experienced by the participants that, "given the clear scientific evidence linking positive organizational culture to better outcomes for beneficiaries, organizations should make substantial efforts to improve poor working conditions" (Patterson-Silver et al., 2014, as cited in Vlaicu., 2019, p. 4).

4.3.6.4 Sub-theme 6.4: Employ bottom to top model

Majority of the participants reported that the issue of employing bottom to top model in addressing their issues should be put in place, as the department does not consult with them they just implement and most plans do not address their issues at hand. Participants expressed their experiences as such;

*"*They don't even know where we are situated, they don't even know if we have toilets, if we have water, wherever you are month end they just need work that is what they want, so they have to come to our level and understand our challenges*"*. Participant 10

*"*I think the first strategy the department can use is to come down to our level to get to understand our daily duties, you know so that they can know how to support*"*. Participant 2

*"*And they don't know what is happening in the offices actually what they are concerned about is numbers, means of verifications (MOV's) nothing more, nothing less*"*. Participant 9

(Lohmann & Lohmann, 2002. as cited in Vlaicu et., 2019, p. 4) argued that "social workers typically express their interest in a warm organizational culture, where service users feel welcome and employees are valued" (Goian, 2014. as cited in Vlaicu et., 2019, p. 4).

This is observed to be not practical to the department of social development as social workers do not have control over how things are done, and service users find themselves compromised in this regard.

4.3.6.5 Sub-theme 6.5: Increase Employee Assistance Programme human resources

The participants strongly expressed that the department of social development has EAP services at a district level which does not meet all their need due to inadequate number of EAP practitioners therefore they should immediately address it.

One participant felt that;

> *"*The man power, they must increase, it must not be one person. Imagine the municipality having 35 people and 10 of them want services at the same time, so it end up compromising the quality of the services, so if they can invest on employing more employee assistant personnel and bringing them down to municipalities where the work is done in the grassroots things will be less complicated*"*. Participant 2

"An adequate number of employee assistance professionals shall be available to achieve the stated goals and objectives of the employee assistance programme" (EAPA, 2010, p. 14). Furthermore "whether the EAP is internal or delivered by external contractors, the number and qualifications of EAP professionals should match program needs" (EAPA 2010, p. 14)

4.3.6.6 Sub-theme 6.6: Accessibility of Employee Assistance Programme services

Participants has alluded that having access to EAP services will assist in elevating their experienced day to day stress at work therefore their views is that the department should take immediate measures with ensuring accessibility of the service.

Participant 6 and 8 said;

> *"*Since the department already has the EAP service, I would advise them to make the EAP services more accessible to all employees*"*. Participant 6

> *"*We should see the role of the wellness every day, if is Mankweng we should know there is office where we go there and then discus our frustration and then see how they can help us*"*. Participant 8

One of the essential components of the EAP services outlined in the EAPA is that "procedures must describe all important program processes, such as the access routes to obtain EAP services" (EAPA, 2010, p. 13).

Handrick (2018) asserts that EAP within the organisation serve multiple purpose which benefit both the employer and employee, wherein it assist employees deal with personal related issues that might impact the employee's wellbeing and coping capabilities, which in turn will impact their productivity. Furthermore EAP affords employees opportunity to be assisted together with their families which works at the benefit of the employer too (Handrick 2018).

4.3.6.7 Sub theme 6.7: Copy best practice model

The department of social development should copy good practice models in relation to EAP service offered to their employees as their practice model is not effective as alluded by the participants throughout the study.

Participant 2 felt that;

> *"*If they can benchmark what other departments are doing like Roads and transport, Economic developments, South African Defence Force (SANDF), their EAP programmes are excellent, even if they can see what other department are doing just once a quarter if they can divide us per district or per municipalities to say this month there is an outing for Polokwane Mankweng, next month, up until, I think even if is once a year is better than nothing*"*. Participant 2

"Organizations also have a responsibility to ensure that staff have appropriate appraisal and staff development opportunities, such as opportunities to build upon and expand special interests, to change work roles, if necessary, after a prolonged period in one post, to regularly review career development in order to consider the changing needs of the individual social worker in the organization" (Collins, 2008, p. 10). "Organizational approaches are used for preventing and maintaining stress inside organizations" (Žižek et al., 2013, p. 364).

4.3.6.8 Sub theme 6.8: Invest in employees' well-being

This is a very important element for every organisation to be successful, prioritizing the health of those that they serve to serve others. Social worker's needed to be motivated and encouraged to engage in their daily duties since social work profession is known to be a very demanding profession emotionally which impact the health of the employees. Participants are of the view that the department of social development should have their interest at heart to alleviate stress.

Participants expressed themselves as follows;

> *"*The other thing they should develop the systems that will assist us as employees because there is only one EAP practitioner which is not enough right, and this systems must be worker orientated and must be in the best interest of workers, because we are the core of the services that have been provided by the employer*"*. Participant 7
>
> *"*Also take care of the people who are assisting other people because we are really dying, I am dead inside of social work, I don't want to lie because I don't see any hope anymore concerning this thing is just demoralizing, our department has tom take care of us and help us to deal with this stress and then reduce it instead of increasing it*"*. Participant 8
>
> *"*I think the department is not investing much on our wellbeing all they care about is what we produce at the end of the month and disregarding the fact that the person who has to produce this has to be off sound mind*"*. Participant 2

There are ways in which organisations can assist to prevent and maintain stress, firstly, to establish a plan of action which will maintain element of sources of stress and secondly, with numerous programmes that will help to sustain the wellbeing of the employees and serve as precautionary measures Žižek et al., 2013).

Employees should be empowered and given reasonable and continuous time for counselling, to allow them to share their job frustrations (Khamseh, 2010).Žižek et al. (2013, p. 367**)** maintained that "employees, who are able to effectively handle stress, are in better health, this means less absenteeism due to illness and an increase in productivity".

4.3.6.9 Sub theme 6:9: Proper planning and implementation

It can be argued that every organisation need planning and implementation for its own good, therefore the department of social development should put in place planning and implementation to alleviate stress of social workers.

> *"* I think planning, planning , implementation, I am talking about specifically to ISS cases, because the others I don't know how to do it, planning and implementation because this has been five years struggling to find a help from ISS and they are saying ISS is the only thing that can assist us, but we are not getting assistance*"*. Participants 1

Proper planning within the Department of Social Development is not always done especially on matters affecting service delivery. The researcher has observed that in most cases things are done abruptly and affect service delivery, as one problem can run more than three years without being improved or dealt with it differently due to lack of planning.

4.3.6.10 Sub theme 6.10: Introduce policy for compulsory use of EAP

Participants strongly stated their views of introduction of compulsory policy to enforce social workers to consult with EAP at a given time to relieve the pressure of stress.

Participants suggested that;

> *"*Maybe twice in a year if they can make it compulsory to introduce us to EAP and consult to discuss our work challenges*"*. Participant 4

> *"*If is possible maybe let it be a must, don't let it be a service where it will only be accessed by someone who feels like I need to access these services, let EAP services be a must to all employees, if it should be, then at least once a month every employee must go and see an EAP service provider*"*. Participant 6

Introduction of this policy will assist in enhancing healthy working environment for all employees as they will be obliged to seek help when the need arises and that will also give the supervisors opportunity to refer employees for services.

4.3.6.11 Sub-theme 6.11: Reduced caseload and employ more social workers

Social workers can only function effectively with relatively low or manageable caseload, because allocating work that exceeds their abilities compromise the quality of service delivery.

> *"*If you are saying you having a caseload, they not reducing workload instead they just increasing more workload to you, I think the department should come down and check and also employ more social workers*"*. Participant 8

“More support, a reduced work load, and more resources were top answers when social workers were asked what could alleviate stress” (Dillenburger, 2004. as cited in Rohling, 2016 p. 18). Calitz, Roux, Strydom (2014, p. 153) assert that social work has been classified as a scarce profession which it has resulted in a continuous low number of social workers employed.

“This has the obvious implication that the current demand for social workers within South Africa is not being met in terms of the numbers of social workers currently practising within the country” (Department of Social Development, 2009. as cited in Calitz, Roux, Strydom, 2014, p. 153). Stress is a direct result of high caseload, and challenging cases, social workers are overwhelmed by their de-motivating work environment which plays a crucial role **(**Disabilitygauteng.org, 2017). Integrated Service Delivery Model (2006, p. 39) supports the frustrations of social workers revealed by the study that “a social work supervisee who works with a variety of welfare cases should not have more than sixty files at a given time”.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the data collected through semi-structured interviews. Firstly, the chapter provided insight into where the study was conducted, the demographic information of the sample of the study population. This is generally important to provide the overview of the study setting. Secondly, this chapter presented the key contribution of the study being the contributory factors to occupational stress, and the impact it has thus far, the support provided by the department as well as strategies social workers use to cope with stress and ways in which occupational stress can be addressed by the department to ease the stress of social workers. Furthermore, the study contributed to the knowledge that despite the challenges faced by the professionals studied, they continue to view their profession as being of value and having a great significance to the communities they serve. The findings were organised in six themes where several sub-themes pertaining to the study emerged. This study revealed the view of social worker’s in what they perceived as occupational stress.

Occupational stress still continues to be the challenge facing organisations today. Thirdly, the study utilised the interview transcripts to draw suggestions in which the participants suggested to the Department of Social Development to assist manage their stress.

The management of occupational stress was highly recommended and was therefore presented according to the views of the participants in that the department should invest in their well-being. It is anticipated that effective and accessible EAP service should be part of the stress management measures employed by the Department of Social Development in addressing the stress, since the department was confirmed to have EAP in place. Lastly, proper planning and implementation of the measures illustrated by the study should be taken into consideration.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter illustrates how the goals and objectives of the study were attained. It presents the key findings of the study in accordance with the objectives and the conclusion made and the recommendations thereof.

5.2 Summary of the study

The study intended to explore the experiences of social workers regarding occupational stress employed by the Department of Social Development The focus was on contributory factors perceived as occupational stressors, coping strategies of social workers experiencing occupational stress, its impact on social workers, effectiveness of support provided by the organisation, and the suggestions of the social workers to address the occupational stress. The findings drawn from the study provided insight into understanding the experiences of the social worker's regarding occupational stress. It is anticipated that the recommendations made will contribute to improving the working environment of the social workers and the lives of the communities they serve.

The study employed a qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews to collect data. The study populated on the social workers employed by the Department of Social Development: Limpopo Province, Capricorn District. Purposive sampling was used to select 10 participants with two years working experience within the Department of Social Development. The data collection tool was pretested using two participants who were not included in the main findings of the study. Data were analysed using thematic analysis process. The findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study contributed to the knowledge base in the field of social work and strategies to improve the working environment of social workers and the reduction to occupational stress through employees and the employer working together.

5.3 Main findings of the study

The findings of the study are as follows:

Objective 1: To describe the experiences of social workers in relation to their occupational stress employed by Department of Social Development, Capricorn District in Limpopo Province. The study has revealed that all the participants experience occupational stress in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities as social workers. The stress experienced was found to emanate from essential factors of the core functioning of every organisation. As a result of these experiences, participants shared the same sentiments of negativity within the department accompanied by disappointment at not being valued.

The study has also established that social workers found themselves being unable to perform their roles and responsibilities to their best as a result of stress. Social workers are change agents; they aim at changing the lives of communities so that they can develop themselves. This was especially difficult for them to accomplish on a daily basis, at times they would render themselves useless to their clients. The participants' stressors are found to be organisational, financial, infrastructural, departmental, institutional and human resource-related challenges.

Furthermore, due to occupational stress, the impact has been on service delivery where clients' right to social service is being compromised. Moreover, their personal relationship and well-being suffer. Social workers have lost passion; their work circumstances limit them in performing their responsibilities to their best.

Objective 2: To explore various factors that contributes to the occupational stress of social workers. The study has found that there are numerous factors that contribute to occupational stress as experienced by social workers. Social workers have negative experiences governed by various factors within the Department of Social Development. Their negative experiences are strongly linked to lack of resources, poor infrastructure, poor compensation, lack of support and supervision, workload, cases related to children, lack of control and centralisation of resources and services. One of the most recognised roles of social workers is being enablers; hence all those identified factors are regarded as stressors as they are not enabling their roles and responsibilities as social workers.

Resources are known to be enablers in every organisation. Social workers find it difficult to carry out their responsibilities as a result of challenges referred to.

Some social workers dealing closely with cases related to children find their cases very stressful especially with the excessive lack of support and lack of proper planning and implementation by the department. Furthermore, centralisation of the few resources they have make carrying out their responsibilities difficult on a daily basis as they are expected to travel 20 kilometres or more to access those resources. Workload was also perceived as stressors which they also receive neither supervision nor support with the majority of cases they deal with, and it negatively affects the completion of cases and quality of service. Lastly, lack of professional autonomy, continues to confront them with problems, their professional opinions and abilities are overlooked.

Objective 3: To explore the organisational support available for social workers regarding their stress. Firstly, the study has established that the department has EAP in place for social workers as a strategy to help deal with stress and increase productivity. All participants shared the same sentiments with regard to ineffectiveness of the EAP within the department. The experiences were negative, ranging from inaccessibility of the service due to centralisation, ineffectiveness due to inadequate human resource. Furthermore, two participants who consulted with the EAP practitioner, found the service to be useless and the practitioner incompetent.

Secondly, all the participants interviewed were confirmed to have supervisors in placeto provide support in their line of duty and yet the study has revealed that social workers do not receive supervision as part of organisational support. Out of 10 participants interviewed only two participants indicated that they once received support from their supervisors. The study has proved that it had been difficult for them to execute their roles and responsibilities in the face of massive challenges without the supervisors' support. Participants indicated that receiving EAP services was not helpful as their work was emotionally demanding.

Objective 4: To establish the coping strategies utilised by social workers in the Department of Social Development who were experiencing stress. The study has revealed that social workers have put in place various strategies to cope with the stress.

Some of the strategies implemented are not limited to personal strategies; they use some of them while at home. Some participants shared the sentiments on engaging in leisure activities out of their workplace; this revealed some benefit for their well-being. According to the findings, the participants who opted for speaking to their colleagues and use support groups with regard to their challenges have found this effective. Acceptance of the stressful working conditions have been revealed to be a coping strategy since they had learned that there was not much they could do to change their situation. Others opted for ignoring and avoiding the situation which limited them to fully demonstrate their potentials as professionals. Some participants opted for taking care of their well-being by consulting with private psychologist and going for massage.

Although participants have established coping mechanisms, the study has shown that they are greatly impacted by occupational stress which can be effectively dealt with by EAP; in alternative cases where such services are available, most of them cannot afford the costs.

5.4 Conclusion

The conclusion was drawn from the empirical findings of the study:
It has become evident that social workers employed by the Department of Social Development experience occupational stress. Various themes have emerged and were discussed in relation to the findings; they are as follows: factors contributing to occupational stress, the impact of occupational stress; strategies for coping with occupational stress; professional support services offered by the organisation; professional value and addressing occupational stress. Under the themes various sub-themes emerged and allowed the researcher to present the findings in a manner which reflect what the participants have experienced.

Social workers indicated various factors that contribute to their occupational stress within the Department of Social Development. The researcher assumes that a happy work environment is productive.

This was not the case for social workers employed by the Department of Social Development. The study has revealed that their working conditions are not conducive to quality performance. This is caused by poor infrastructure. Elderly and people with disabilities cannot reach the offices as a result their privacy and confidentiality was insecure. Adequate ventilation as most of them is accommodated in mobile offices with air conditioners that are not functioning.

The findings are supported by the literature found in chapter 2 of the study. Secondly, lack of transport, telephones, printers, and computers compound the challenges. In instances where these resources are available, they are being shared amongst social workers and this hamper service delivery. Social workers have confirmed that they travel more than 20kilometres to access resources which are shared with more than 10 other social workers. Most of the social workers use their own resources to fulfil their responsibilities. Thirdly, social workers reported lack of support from the organisation in executing their responsibilities. EAP as one of the support service unit offers inadequate services. Fourthly, there have been negative experiences shared by social workers regarding compensation and dissatisfaction with regard to lack of recognition of performance. Compared to other professionals, this has contributed to more stress. To date social workers are still considered as the lowest paid professionals. Fifthly, workload was reported to take a toll on social workers as it was not manageable and impacted negatively on performance. Sixthly, there is a low level of control and autonomy experienced by social workers; the Department of Social Development is said to plan and implement without consulting social workers. The procedure is first to establish with the social workers whether the strategy implemented is in line with social workers' principle of practice. This malpractice increases stress. Lastly, social workers who work closely with children cases found that very stressful as they are at times unable to advocate for those children due to lack of support from the department.

As part of the study, the impact of the occupational stress on social workers has been explored and generated the following conclusion:

Firstly stress was found to impact on the interpersonal relationships of the social workers wherein they struggled to balance work and family life as they are often disorientated and their significant others were always at the receiving end. Secondly, the impact on service delivery was negatively experienced as the quality of service rendered was compromised due to increased levels of stress at work. As a result, service users are often compromised.

The study revealed a significant number of strategies employed by social workers to cope with stress experienced at work. Some strategies were used concurrently and proved to be effective for the survival of social workers. Talking to colleagues has been the most used and effective coping strategy as they found their colleagues to be readily available for assistance whenever they were in need.
One social worker considered herself fortunate to have created a support group to share support weekly. Acceptance, avoidance and ignorance have also been found to be one effortless coping strategy for social workers in the midst of occupational stress as they found themselves not having much of power to change their situation. Some social workers opted for prioritising their well-being through consultation with private practitioners as in the case of booking for massages and yet not every social worker afforded that. Engaging in leisure activities afforded most social workers with a relief and refreshed mind to focus on their families and work.

The study also established that EAP service is the only measure put in place as support provided by the Department of Social Development to its employees. EAP was reported to have been established yet there were negative experiences attached to the service provided. Social workers found EAP to be ineffective and inaccessible due to centralisation of its services. Human resource in this regard is found to be challenging to meet the needs of social workers.

On the positive side the study has revealed that social workers regard their profession as valuable to the communities they serve despite the challenges they face within the department.

Lastly, the study has established ways to address occupational stress as experienced by social workers employed by Department of Social Development: Capricorn District, Limpopo Province.

It is hoped that by employing the effective EAP services, copying best models , consultation with employees during planning and implementation, improving working condition, increasing salary levels and reducing caseload their dissatisfactions will be addressed and productivity will improve, thus improving the quality of their work life. The department should prioritise decentralising EAP services, make it more accessible, and increase human resource to make it effective.

This can be made possible through copying best models utilised by other departments. Furthermore, by so doing the department will be investing in the well-being of their employees. Social workers wish for the development of a policy enforcing compulsory consultation with EAP services division. The department is expected to consult with their employees to gain an understanding of their needs at ground level to enable effective planning and implementation. It should also prioritise improving the working conditions of the social workers, ensuring standardised infrastructure and availability of computers and transport to facilitate quality service delivery.

Social workers feel marginalised with the low salary and hope the department will focus on implementing the correct salary levels that are in line with their workload and qualifications. In addressing the workload, social workers have a strong belief the department should implement a good retention strategy and employ more social workers to help deal with the demand of the social needs of the communities they serve.

5.5 Recommendations

The following recommendations were made for consideration by the Department of Social Development to address the stress as experienced by the social workers when completing their roles and responsibilities. Recommendations were made based on the findings to also address organisation, social workers, and the practice and for future research.

5.5.1 Recommendation for the organisation

- The department should employ more qualified EAP practitioners to address the needs of the employees.

It should ensure that every cluster has their own EAP practitioner within their reach to enable accessibility and effectiveness of service as the study revealed shortage of practitioners

- The department should employ more social workers to allow them to manage the caseload ratio of 1:19 cases per month or 1:134 cases annually. The department should also implement field specialization to relieve the pressure of workload and allow social workers to focus on their major responsibilities. The study revealed that social workers are overwhelmed with caseload.
- The department should ensure implementation of correct salary levels as recommended by South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) to social workers according to their qualifications as it was found evident that social workers are underpaid
- The department should give social workers mobile phones to enable them to complete their duties especially when they conduct home visits.
- The department should also make it compulsory for every social worker joining the department to have a driver's license in order to compulsorily apply for subsidized government vehicle to enable effective service delivery.
- The department should invest in building proper and user -friendly offices for social workers in every cluster to allow them to exercise privacy and confidentiality while assisting clients. Some social workers emphasised that their offices are not user friendly for clients with disabilities.
- The department should also give every social worker a laptop and internet connection for research and sending emails. Computers are still shared amongst more that ne social worker.
- Each and every office should be equipped with printing, faxing, copying machine together with a scanner and flexible service providers be appointed for management of equipment. The study has shown that most of social workers stress emanate from inadequate resources in their workplaces.

5.5.2 Recommendation for practice

- SACSSP should ensure that the department has a budget to sponsor social workers to further their studies in the field of social work to boost their morale and grow the profession.

- The department should develop a supervision policy that will be abided by all supervisors with implications of non-compliance. The South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) should also charge the department for not abiding to supervision policy and SACSSP should make the application process for continuing professional development (CPD) points not to be tiresome.
- Supervisors should also be afforded an opportunity to be given support by the department through training and workshop.

5.5.3 Recommendations for social workers

- Social workers should invest in creating support groups whenever they would meet on a weekly basis to discuss cases that are challenging to them. This would afford them an opportunity to exchange ideas and learn more on how to handle different cases. The study found that social workers do not use support groups to cope with stress at work as one of the effective methods.

5.5.4 Recommendations for future research

- The future research should focus on exploring the challenges faced by supervisors in providing supervision to their supervisees, as it is expected of them to provide supervision yet their challenges to render supervision are not considered. It was evident that supervisors do not render supportive supervision to their subordinates.

5.6 Concluding comments

The study positively revealed that social workers are very dedicated to doing their job and they get satisfaction from bringing change to and developing communities. This was confirmed when some social workers said that they used their personal resources to ensure that quality service was delivered. Some social workers go an extra mile and unfortunately at times it becomes difficult when their hard work goes unnoticed; even that little support they are hoping to get is nowhere to be found, for them the journey continues as their professional significance to communities cannot be replaced in any way.

5.7 Summary of the chapter

This chapter presented outlined the summary of this study, to provide the reader with the overview of this study, together with the main findings of the study. The findings of the study were presented through the objectives of this study to ensure attainment of every objective outlined. This chapter furthermore presented overall conclusion of this study. It also outlined the recommendations based on this study, focusing on the organisation, the practice, social workers as well as for future research.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participants Information Sheet



THE EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL WORKERS REGARDING OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN CAPRICORN DISTRICT, LIMPOPO PROVINCE.

Good day,

My name is Mmakopa Annah Sekgobela and I am a post graduate student registered for the degree in MA in Occupational Social Work at the University of the Witwatersrand. As part of the requirements for the degree, I am conducting research topic: ***The experiences of Social workers regarding occupational stress: A study in the Department of Social Development, Capricorn district, Limpopo province.*** *I therefore wish to invite you to participate in my study. If you accept my invitation, your participation would be entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty. There are no consequences or personal benefits of participating in this study. If you agree to take part, I would arrange interview with you at a time and place that is suitable for you. The interview will last approximately one hour. You may refuse to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering. If you decide to participate, I will ask permission to audio-record the interview. No-one other than the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the tapes. The tapes will be kept in a password protected computer two years following any publications or for six years if no publication emanate from the study. A copy of your interview transcript without any identification will be scanned and kept in a password protected computer for* ***10 years*** *and may be used for future research.*

In the event that you experience discomfort during the interview you may consult Ms Anastasia Tlhapane, a registered counselor. Address; 614 A University Street (DrManthata's), P.O Box 888, Sovenga 0727, Tel: 076 552 5320.

Please be ensured that your name and personal details will be kept confidential and no identifying information will be included in the final research report.

The findings of the research may also be used for academic purposes (including books, journals and conference proceedings) and a summary of findings will be made available to participants on request.

Please contact me on (061 483 2054) or email (mamahlogi2010@gmail.com), or my supervisor (Laetitia Petersen) on (011 717 4474/4472) or email(laetitia.petersen@wits.ac.za) if you have any queries regarding my study. We shall answer them to the best of our ability. If you have any concerns and complaints about the study, please contact ***Human Research Ethics Committee (Non Medical) Contact Details:*** *Chairperson: Jasper.Knight@wits.ac.za or the administrator: Mrs. Lucille Mooragan Tel: 011 717 1408 or Lucille.Mooragan@wits.ac.za.*

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

Kind Regards

Sekgobela Mmakopa

Appendix B: Informed consent form

THE EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL WORKERS REGARDING OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN CAPRICORN DISTRICT LIMPOPO PROVINCE.

I hereby consent to participate in the research study titled "The experience of social workers regarding occupational stress: A study in the Department of Social Development, Capricorn district, Limpopo province." I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I may refuse to answer some of the questions or withdraw from the study anytime without facing negative consequences.

The purpose and procedures of the study have been explained to me and there are no foreseeable benefits or particular risks associated with my participation in this study. A copy of my interview transcript without any identifying information will be stored permanently in a locked cupboard or password protected computer and may be used for future research. I understand that my responses will be used in the write up on a master's study and may also be presented in conferences, book chapters, journal articles or books.

Name of participant: ----------

Date: ----------

Signature: ----------

Appendix C: Consent form for audio taping of the interview

THE EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL WORKERSREGARDING OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN CAPRICORN DISTRICT, LIMPOPO PROVINCE.

I hereby consent to tape recording of the interview.

I understand that:

- *The recording will be stored in a secure location (a password protected computer) with restricted access to the researcher and the research supervisor.*
- *The recording will be transcribed and any information that could identify me will be removed.*
- *When the data analysis and write-up of the research study is complete, the audio recording of the interview will be kept for two years following any publications or for six years if no publications emanate from the study.*
- *Transcript with all identifying information directly linked to me removed, will be stored permanently and be used for future research.*
- *Direct quotes from my interview, without any information that could identify me may be cited in the research report or other write-ups of the research.*

NAME OF PARTICIPANT……

DATE……

SIGNATURE……

Appendix D: Interview schedule

Part A: Demographic details

Sample	***Race***	***Gender***	***Age***				
			20-25	***26-30***	***31-35***	***36-40***	***40 +***
Social workers	***Black***	***Male***					
		Female					

Part B: Interview guide

Identify and describe the factors that cause stress in your workplace?

Can you identify and explain which stressful experiences are worse than others?

How does stress in your workplace affect you in offering services and completing responsibilities at work?

What organizational support is available in your workplace to assist with your stress?

Do you perceive your role as a social worker having value for service delivery in your service area? Please elaborate on your answer?

How does stress experienced in your workplace affect you in your personal life?

Highlight strategies that you are using to cope with stress? Which strategies do you feel is most effective?

What suggestions can you give to the Department of social Development to help minimize stress in your workplace?

Thank you for participating in the research study

Sekgobela Mmakopa

Appendix E: Ethical clearance

SOCIAL WORK
THE SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (SHCD)

DEPARTMENTAL HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (SOCIAL WORK) CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

PROTOCOL NUMBER: SW/18/11/70

PROJECT TITLE: The experiences of social workers regarding occupational stress: A study in the Department of Social Development, Capricorn District, Limpopo

RESEARCHER/S: M A Sekgobela (1771095)

SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT: SHCD Social Work

DATE CONSIDERED: 22 November 2018

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE: Approved

EXPIRY DATE: 31 December 2019

DATE: 3 March 2019

CHAIRPERSON: Dr E Pretorius

Cc: Supervisor: Ms Laetitia Petersen

DECLARATION OF RESEARCHER(S)

To be completed in **DUPLICATE** and **ONE COPY** returned to the Administrative Assistant, Room 8, Department of Social Work, Umthombo Building Basement.

I/We fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorised to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the committee. **For Masters and PhD an annual progress report is required.**

SIGNATURE

14/03/2019
DATE

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

Appendix F: Approval to conduct the study

CONFIDENTIAL

LIMPOPO
PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE PREMIER

Office of the Premier

Research and Development Directorate

Private Bag X9483, Polokwane, 0700, South Africa

Tel: (015) 287 6564, Email: mokobij@premier.limpopo.gov.za

LIMPOPO PROVINCIAL RESEARCH ETHICS

COMMITTEE CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

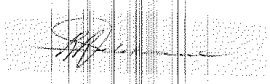
Meeting: **09th September 2019**

Project Number: LPREC/14/2019: PG

The Experiences of Social Workers Regarding Occupational Stress: A Study in the Department of Social Development, Capricorn District Limpopo Province

Researcher: Sekgobela MA

Dr Raymond Raselekoane



Deputy Chairperson: Limpopo Provincial Research Ethics Committee

The Limpopo Provincial Research Ethics Committee (LPREC) is registered with National Health Research Council (NHREC) Registration Number **REC-111513-038.**

Note:

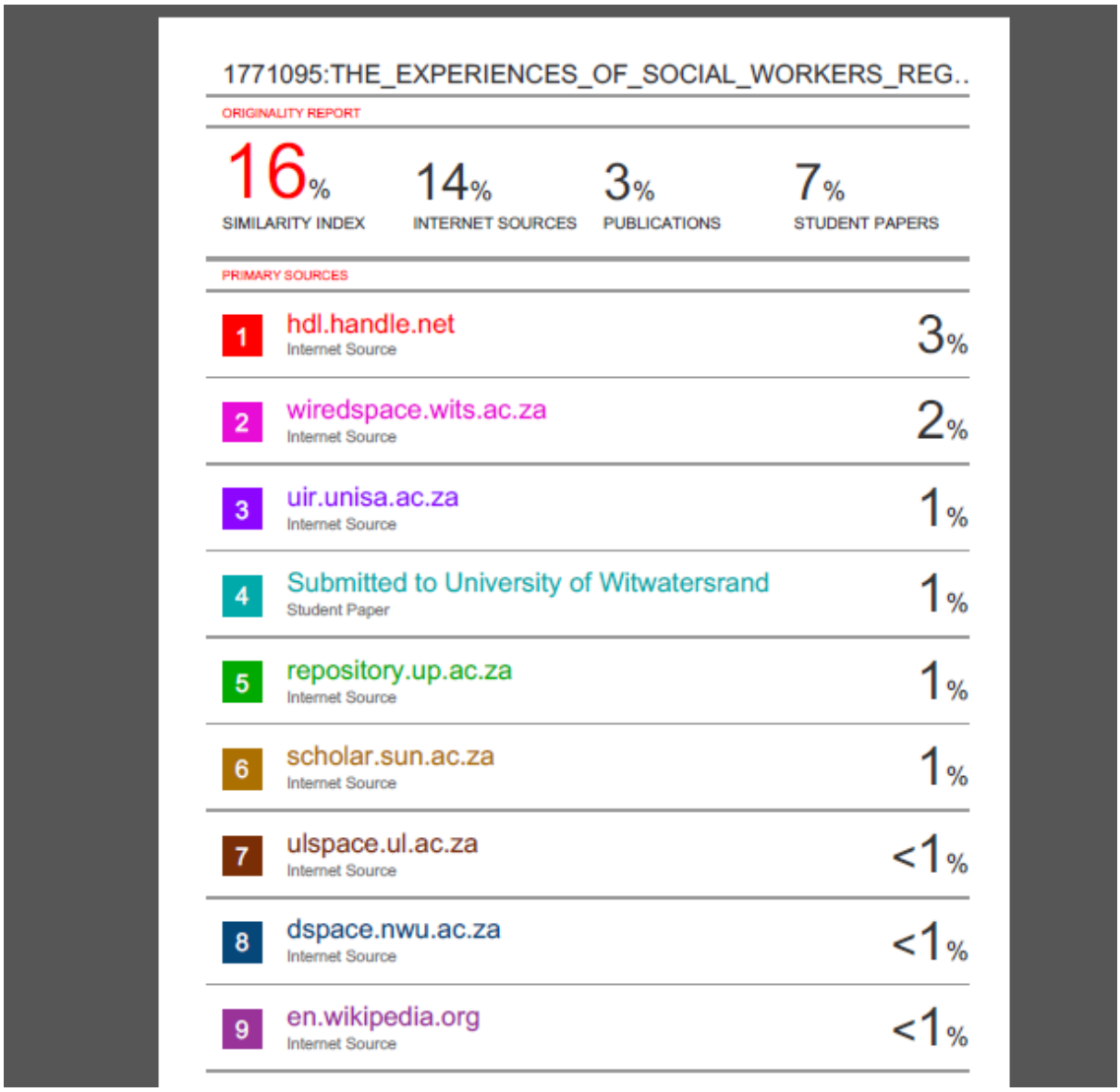
i. **This study is categorized as a Low Risk Level in accordance with risk level descriptors as enshrined in LPREC Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)**

ii. **Should there be any amendment to the approved research proposal; the researcher(s) must re-submit the proposal to the ethics committee for review prior data collection.**

iii. **The researcher(s) must provide annual reporting to the committee as well as the relevant department.**

iv. **The ethical clearance certificate is valid for 12 months. Should the need to extend the period for data collection arise then the researcher should renew the certificate through LPREC secretariat. PLEASE QUOTE THE PROJECT NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES**

Appendix G: TURNITIN report



1771095:THE_EXPERIENCES_OF_SOCIAL_WORKERS_REG..

ORIGINALITY REPORT

16%	14%	3%	7%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	hdl.handle.net Internet Source	3%
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4	Submitted to University of Witwatersrand Student Paper	1%
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