

Burnout amongst Generalist and Forensic Social Workers: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Forensic social work poses obstacles that can increase the risk of burnout among practitioners. Prior research studies have explored burnout among generalist social workers; however, there is a noticeable deficiency in the literature regarding burnout among forensic social workers, as well as the absence of comparisons between these two professions to discern variations in burnout patterns. The aim of this study was to compare burnout patterns among generalist and forensic social workers using a quantitative approach and a comparison group design. Qualified generalist and forensic social workers from an accredited South African university participated in an all-inclusive willing participation sample approach. The study found that, while both groups had moderate degrees of emotional exhaustion, forensic social workers experienced higher levels. There were also significant disparities in depersonalisation, with forensic social workers suggesting higher levels. This study contributes to understanding burnout patterns in forensic social workers, highlighting the need for targeted efforts to mitigate their effects.

Keywords: burnout; comparison; forensic social work; generalist social work

Introduction

Burnout is a growing problem in the field of social work, impacting both generalist social workers (GSWs) and forensic social workers (FSWs). Social work is a challenging profession, which, regardless of expertise, plays a critical role in assisting individuals and families in overcoming difficult situations while also protecting vulnerable populations from various types of harm (Moriarty, Baginsky, and Manthorpe 2015). The field of social work has a high risk of burnout, with Martinez-López et al. (2020) estimating a 39% burnout rate over the course of their working life. Ntsoane (2017) confirms that social workers who are repeatedly exposed to emotionally excruciating situations are more likely to experience burnout.

Previous research by Dima, Schmitz, and Simon (2021), Fansher, Zedaker, and Brady (2020), Schaal (2018), Starcher and Stolzenberg (2020), Staudt and Williams-Hayes (2019), and Wu et al. (2022) investigated secondary traumatic stress, well-being, negative emotions, burnout, and occupational stress in GSWs. However, these areas are largely neglected in the realm of forensic social workers in South Africa, where there is a paucity of research investigating burnout among FSWs, particularly in terms of comparing burnout patterns between GSWs and FSWs. According to Schaufeli, Maslach, and Marek (2017), this constraint impedes our capability to effectively assess and treat burnout in specialised professions such as forensic social work. Fransher, Zedaker, and Brady (2020) argue that FSWs have unique responsibilities that include the assessment of sexually abused children and participating in emotionally taxing court proceedings. As such, it is critical for them to recognise and address burnout patterns. The aim of this study was to fill this gap by comparing burnout patterns among GSWs and FSWs. The objective was to use items from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to examine differences in burnout patterns between the two groups of social workers.

Contextualisation and Literature Review

Social work, according to the International Federation of Social Workers (2014), is based on fundamental values such as social justice, human dignity, and competence. As stated by Denne, Stevenson, and Petty (2019), this commendable goal inevitably exposes them to traumatic and emotionally challenging situations making them vulnerable to burnout. The World Health Organisation (2019) defines burnout as “a syndrome conceptualized as the result of chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It has three dimensions: feelings of exhaustion or exhaustion, increased mental detachment from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism about one’s job, and diminished professional efficacy.” Burnout has developed as a major concern in the challenging profession of social work, affecting both GSWs and FSWs (Dima, Schmitz, and Simon 2021). This could result from the pressures and difficulties that come with dealing with complicated social issues and helping those in need both individually and as a community. The combination of heavy caseloads, scarce resources, and ongoing exposure to societal issues makes for a challenging work

environment (Rohling 2016). Therefore, the cumulative effect of these stressors could result in burnout in this profession.

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2015, 11) defines generalist social work as:

a practice to promote human and social well-being, with diverse individuals, families, groups, organisations, and communities based on scientific inquiry and best practices. The generalist practitioner identifies with the social work profession and applies ethical principles and critical thinking in practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Generalist practitioners engage diversity in their practice and advocate for human rights and social and economic justice.

Gasker (2023) argues that GSWs are vital to the field because they frequently handle problems involving vulnerable populations focusing on satisfying basic needs in a variety of settings with the objective of improving the well-being of individuals, communities, and families. Their multifaceted approach includes handling crisis situations, providing support and counselling to those in need, negotiating emotionally taxing circumstances, and reflecting the range of their responsibilities. Burnout is a topic of concern in this diverse field due to the emotionally exhausting nature of their work.

In contrast, as stipulated by the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) (2017, 2), “Forensic social work is a specialised field of social work that focuses on the interface between the legal system and the secondary client (the individual, family, organisation, or institution being assessed) and is characterised by the primary function of providing expert testimonies in courts of law.” The contradictory nature of judicial procedures, cross-questioning in challenging situations, and the emotionally charged situations they face may result in emotional exhaustion and, ultimately, burnout (Barker and Branson 2014). Despite their professional disengagement and unavailability to provide emotional support, their role as expert witnesses during court proceedings exposes them to distinctive pressures (Slack 2020). Although disengagement is required to ensure impartiality in forensic social work, it does not exempt practitioners from the psychological impact of their responsibilities. Markham (2023) contends that FSWs are under pressure to offer information without providing therapeutic support. Therapy is frequently coupled with social work, which may heighten their risk of burnout. The negative consequences of burnout for FSWs may extend beyond their own personal well-being, potentially lowering the quality of evidence given in court, and undermining the judicial system’s effectiveness.

Given significant variations in the tasks and responsibilities of GSWs and FSWs, research and comparison of burnout patterns within these different professional groups are necessary. Becoming aware of, recognising, and managing burnout in forensic social work is essential not only for the psychosocial health of professionals but also for the effectiveness of the contributions they make to the legal system. By deliberately dealing with burnout and promoting the long-standing goals of social justice, human rights, and

diversity within the field of social work, we can defend the interests of individuals and communities supported by these dedicated professionals.

Theoretical Framework

The study investigated burnout patterns among GSWs and FSWs within their professional contexts using an ecological framework based on Bronfenbrenner's (2005) model. The ecological framework enabled a thorough investigation of the many factors that cause burnout in their respective professional contexts. Bronfenbrenner's concept emphasises the dynamic interaction between individuals and their surroundings at numerous levels, ranging from the immediate microsystem of the individual's workplace to the broader macrosystem of social influences. In the context of this study, the ecological framework enabled researchers to examine burnout patterns through a comprehensive lens, emphasising not only the analysis of individual, environmental, and societal factors but also the examination of support systems (Eriksson, Ghazinour, and Hammarström 2018). By adopting an ecological perspective, the study investigated the intricate dynamics of burnout experienced by GSWs and FSWs, acknowledging that it is influenced not only by personal characteristics or workplace environments but also by the interplay of these elements across different levels of the ecological system. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of burnout and informed the development of targeted interventions and support strategies tailored to the needs of FSWs.

Research Methodology

The researchers were able to conduct objective measurements and statistical analysis of survey data using a quantitative research approach. According to Cresswell (2014), this strategy is concerned with producing exact and generalisable statistical results. The researchers used a group comparison methodology proposed by Rubin and Babbie (2016) to compare GSWs with FSWs, demonstrating possible differences in burnout patterns across settings. This method increased the viability of the research by focusing on gathering data from geographically scattered generalist and forensic social work respondents in South Africa through social media platforms and an online survey.

A population, according to Mangezi (2014), refers to a group of human beings with some predefined criterion in common, which in the case of this study was the field of social work practice. The study focused on GSWs and FSWs who completed degrees at an accredited university between 2006 and 2022 and actively practised in South Africa. The researchers identified respondents for the study using an all-inclusive willing sample, specifically targeting GSWs and FSWs who met the criteria. GSWs and FSWs were invited to participate through a social media advertisement and willingly responded by completing an online survey using Google Forms. The questionnaire was completed by 382 GSWs and 143 FSWs. Investigating as many people as possible improves the statistical viability, effectiveness, generalisability, and precision of the study (Singh and Masuku 2014).

As a first step, the following demographic data were obtained to summarise the profile of the typical respondent: age, gender, highest qualification, year graduated, field of practice, years practising as a GSW, years practising as an FSW, organisation employed by, and position in the organisation.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), developed by Maslach and Jackson (1986), was used to compare the burnout patterns of study respondents in their respective current jobs as GSWs or FSWs. This scale consists of twenty-two items separated into three sections: occupational exhaustion, personal accomplishment, and depersonalisation or loss of empathy. Occupational exhaustion included, among other things, feelings of emotional depletion, being used up, fatigue, and frustration. Personal accomplishment involved assessing one's comprehension, effectiveness, vigour, and accomplishments, while depersonalisation or loss of empathy involved assessing impersonal attitudes, emotional detachment, and compassion, as defined by Day and Cooper (2023). Previous studies by Liebenberg et al. (2018), Morar and Marais (2022), and Naidoo and Schoeman (2023) have utilised the MBI in South Africa. Storm and Rothman (2003) and van der Colff and Rothman (2012) validated the MBI for police officers and registered nurses in South Africa, respectively. Scores on the MBI's three factors displayed a normal distribution. Regarding reliability, the three factors exhibited acceptable coefficient alphas exceeding the 0.70 guideline suggested by Taber (2017). No evidence of item bias for the MBI across race groups was discovered. Consequently, it can be concluded that the MBI effectively captured the experiences of both GSWs and FSWs in the South African context.

Recruitment is considered the first point of contact between the researcher and prospective respondents, as well as the first step in informed consent; therefore, public advertising increases the likelihood of recruiting respondents and helps in the adoption of a specific inclusion criterion to stay within the scope of the research (Haider 2022). The researchers advertised the study on various social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram) to collect voluntary responses for the study. Those who responded to the advertisement and expressed interest in the study received an email with a link to a Google Forms survey instrument. The offered link allowed respondents to access the platforms, complete the questions, and submit them electronically.

Data were submitted on a respondent-by-respondent basis to statistical consulting services for group comparison using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0.1.0 (SPSS Inc. 2021) for quantitative data analysis. The researchers conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA) per theoretical construct to test the validity of each MBI construct, employing indicators such as the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure, Bartlett's *p*-value, communalities, and total variance. Principal components extraction and Direct Oblimin rotation methods were utilised. This signifies that the data was reduced to its core components before being rotated using the Direct Oblimin technique to simplify and explain the data's underlying framework (Rossini, Engelbert, and Bellegard 2015). The results indicated no concerns about multicollinearity, with determinant values ranging from

0.002 to 0.86 (Gregorich et al. 2021). The KMO values were 0.94, 0.85, and 0.93 for occupational exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment, respectively, confirming suitability for EFA. According to Jagodics and Szabó (2022), the KMO measures the suitability of data sampling for EFA. Bartlett's sphericity test yielded p -values of <0.001 , indicating sufficient correlations among items. Sarstedt and Mooi (2014) explain that the Bartlett sphericity test examines to see if the observed correlation matrix differs significantly from an identity matrix, indicating that it is acceptable for factor analysis. Jagodics and Szabó (2022) state that communalities demonstrate the fraction of variance explained by factors for each item. Communalities ranged from 0.61 to 0.70 for occupational exhaustion, 0.62 to 0.72 for depersonalisation, and 0.54 to 0.74 for personal accomplishment, explaining 54% to 74% of variance. The total variance, according to Watkins (2018), indicates how much of the variance in the data is explained by the extracted factors. The extracted factors explained 64.95%, 66.99%, and 63.68% of variance, respectively, with only one factor extracted in each case, supporting the validity of grouping variables within factors.

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, with values of 0.93, 0.88, and 0.92 for the MBI factors, indicating high internal consistency (Field 2013). These results support the reliability of the factors. They encompass both GSWs and FSWs. Amirrudin, Nasution, and Supahar (2021) assert that Cronbach's alpha aids in a rigorous evaluation of survey instruments, improving the integrity of research.

The study compared the three MBI constructs (occupation exhaustion, personal accomplishment, and depersonalisation) and individual items within these constructs between GSWs and FSWs through comparative analyses, using independent t -tests to determine differences in burnout patterns between the two groups. Bosco et al. (2015) highlight the following effect sizes for interpretation: 0.2 for a small effect, 0.5 for a medium effect, and 0.8 for a significant effect size.

Ethical Considerations

In an academic setting, ethics involves following behavioural norms that encourage honesty, truthfulness, and accuracy while avoiding misconduct such as falsification, manipulation, or inaccurate information (McKenna and Gray 2018). The North-West University Health Ethics Research Committee approved the research study with the code NWU-00073-22-A1. The Programme Manager for Forensic Practice, the Director of Psychosocial Health, the Subject Head of Social Work, and the North-West University Research Data Gatekeepers Committee approved the study, recruitment, and data collection techniques. The intermediate risk level of the study has been recognised, especially when it comes to sensitive topics such as burnout patterns among GSWs and FSWs, who commonly encounter child sexual abuse narratives. The respondents were informed about the implications and risks of the study on the first page of the survey and received a consent form. They had the option of agreeing or disagreeing, indicating their willingness to participate. Respondents were also allowed to select "no response" or "prefer not to respond" to individual survey questions, ensuring flexibility. The total

scores on the three subscales of occupational exhaustion, personal accomplishment, and depersonalisation were unaffected. The researchers employed multiple imputation, a method during which they generated multiple datasets containing acceptable values for missing data based on observed data and statistical models. Each imputed dataset was analysed, and the results were merged to generate overall estimates and standard errors, resolving the uncertainty caused by missing data (Jakobsen et al. 2017). Respondents had the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without facing penalties. IP addresses were anonymised to protect privacy and confidentiality in online surveys. The questionnaire did not include personally identifiable information. Upon conclusion of the study, all data was securely stored in the office of the Research Director for COMPRES at the North-West University, with access restricted to the Research Director and the research team. The data will be retained for a maximum of five years before being destroyed.

Findings

The findings stem from an analysis of MBI data completed by GSWs and FSWs with degrees from an accredited university actively practising in South Africa, as detailed in the methodology section.

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The researchers collected demographic information, including age, gender, education, field of practice, years of practice as a generalist and forensic social worker, and organisation of employment and position. A significant proportion of the respondents (44.7%) were in the age group of 26 to 34 years, followed by 35 to 48 years (27.6%). Respondents aged 49 and over represented a lower percentage (6.2%) of the total. The gender distribution was moderately skewed, with 58.5% identifying as male and 41.2% identifying as female. The educational levels were diverse, with 34.7% holding bachelor's degrees, 21.9% holding honours degrees, and 26.1% holding master's degrees in forensic practice. A smaller percentage had other qualifications, including PhD (3.1%). The years of graduation varied, with 2017 and 2020 having the highest number of respondents. Substantial proportions graduated in 2018, 2019, and 2021. Most of the respondents practised as FSWs (52.1%), while a significant portion practised as GSWs (47.9%). The high response rate related to the specialisation of FSWs in relation to the total population who obtained a master's degree at the North-West University could have been influenced by certificate courses that allowed non-master's degree holders to specialise as FSWs. Years of experience as a GSW spanned a wide range, with a substantial portion having one to five years of experience (47.0%). Similarly, years of experience as a forensic social worker showed varying levels of expertise, with one to five years of experience being the most common (35.5%). Respondents worked in various settings, with government employment (40.5%) and private practice (29.2%) being the most common. Regarding the hierarchy of positions, senior social workers comprised the largest group (43.5%), followed by junior social

workers (24.1%), and supervisors (17.4%). Other positions, including assistant directors, deputy directors, and directors, made up smaller percentages.

Independent *t*-Test

Generalist vs. Forensic Social Workers: MBI Factors

A *t*-test was used to compare variations in occupational exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment among GSWs and FSWs. Adams and McGuire (2022) and Lakens (2013) emphasised that the *t*-test differentiates true differences from chance. The *p*-values were included for completeness, but the interpretation focused on effect sizes because an availability sample instead of a random sample was used. Ellis and Steyn (2003) established guidelines: ~0.2 represents a small or practically insignificant difference, ~0.5 a medium or practically visible difference, and ~0.8 a large or practically significant difference. Note: a difference of 0.46 was also considered as medium or practically visible because of its proximity to the 0.5 guideline value.

Table 1: *t*-test: Differences between generalist and forensic social workers across the three constructs of the MBI

Factors	Type of practice		Mean	Std. deviation	-value	Effect size
Occupational exhaustion	Generalist social worker	175	19.72	11.15	<0.0001	0.46
	Forensic social worker	190	24.85	10.97		
Depersonalisation	Generalist social worker	174	9.59	5.99	<0.0001	0.64
	Forensic social worker	190	13.71	6.40		
Personal accomplishment	Generalist social worker	174	21.00	10.89	0.003	0.29
	Forensic social worker	190	24.20	9.71		

The effect size ($d = 0.46$) indicates a practically visible difference in the occupational exhaustion scores of the two groups of social workers. Both groups exhibit a moderate level of occupational exhaustion. FSWs (mean = 24.85, SD = 10.97) experience slightly

higher levels than GSWs (mean = 19.72, SD = 11.15). Occupational exhaustion, defined as emotional overextension at work, affects up to 45% of healthcare personnel (Parandeh et al. 2022). Social workers in South Africa have shown indicators of occupational exhaustion, such as job discontent and decreased participation in the workplace (Calitz, Roux, and Strydom 2014).

In terms of depersonalisation and loss of empathy, a noticeable difference is observed ($d = 0.64$). GSWs (mean = 9.58, SD = 5.99) reported a low degree, while FSWs (mean = 13.71, SD = 6.40) reported a high degree. Weekes (2014) defines depersonalisation as detachment, dehumanised responses, callousness, opinions, cynicism, and bad attitudes. According to the findings of Sturzu et al. (2019), FSWs score lower in compassionate care, showing higher degrees of depersonalisation among them.

However, the differences in personal accomplishment between the two groups are practically insignificant ($d = 0.29$). Personal accomplishment is reported to be of a low degree in both groups. Personal accomplishment is characterised by feelings of competence and achievements in one's professional endeavours (Brady et al. 2020).

Both groups reported low degrees of occupational exhaustion; however, FSWs experienced slightly higher levels than GSWs. FSWs reported a high degree of depersonalisation. There are no statistically significant differences in personal accomplishment.

Generalist vs. Forensic Social Workers: MBI Factors: Individual Items of the MBI

As stated previously, the MBI concepts of occupational exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment were initially examined using a t -test. However, the researchers intended to carry out a more in-depth investigation to investigate differences between the two groups on individual items of the MBI questionnaire. Adams and McGuire (2022) suggested that the t -test be used as a statistical technique to gain a comprehensive understanding of the specific burnout patterns that differ between the two groups. In this section, the researchers only reported on the practically visible differences. The full data set is available from researchers on request.

Table 2: Occupational exhaustion

Question no.	Statement	Type of practice	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. deviation	<i>p</i> -value	Effect size
MBI6	Working with people all day is stressful for me.	Generalist social work	174	2.01	1.51	<0.001	0.48
		Forensic social work	189	2.76	1.55		
MBI13	I feel frustrated by my work.	Generalist social work	173	2.07	1.57	<0.001	0.50
		Forensic social work	188	2.85	1.58		

The effect size ($d = 0.48$) indicates a practically visible difference between the two groups of social workers with respect to the item MBI6, which evaluates the statement “Working with people all day is stressful for me.” GSWs (mean = 2.01, SD = 1.51) reported experiencing this stressor at least once a month, while FSWs (mean = 2.76, SD = 1.55) encountered it “several times a month.” Risser and Saleh (2022) noted that unrealistic work demands, high-risk situations, trauma, poverty, and socioeconomic and racial inequalities are sources of stress for social workers. Turner, Vanderminde, and Hamby (2019) agree that working with children and families in crisis all day is extremely stressful. Louw (2019) asserts that FSWs work with sexually abused children most of the time and require specialised skills for court settings, contributing to their stress when working with this vulnerable group.

Similarly, item MBI13, which assessed the sentiment “I’m frustrated with my work,” revealed a practically visible difference ($d = 0.50$) between the two groups. GSWs (mean = 2.07, SD = 2.85) reported encountering this stressor at least once a month, while FSWs (mean = 2.85, SD = 1.58) experienced it “several times a month.” High caseloads, resource limitations, insufficient assistance, and exposure to unpleasant circumstances can all lead to frustration for social workers (Risser and Abulhosn 2022). Young, Greer, and Church (2017) believe that working in the legal system can be challenging for FSWs due to the final decisions of the court, the need for resilience, and the objective attitude required.

These findings reveal significant differences in levels of stress and dissatisfaction between the two subcategories of social workers. It is evident that FSWs experience higher levels of stress and fatigue, which contribute to occupational exhaustion.

Table 3: Depersonalisation

Question no.	Statement	Type of practice	N	Mean	Std. deviation	p-value	Effect size
MBI5	I get the feeling that I treat some clients/colleagues impersonally, as if they were objects.	Generalist social work	174	1.94	1.54	<0.001	0.50
		Forensic social work	188	2.72	1.57		
MBI10	I have become more callous to people since I started doing this job.	Generalist social work	172	1.90	1.55	<0.001	0.61
		Forensic social work	188	2.85	1.52		
MBI15	I'm not really interested in what is going on with many of my colleagues.	Generalist social work	173	1.92	1.50	<0.001	0.52
		Forensic social work	189	2.73	1.54		
MBI22	I have the feeling that my colleagues blame me for some of their problems.	Generalist social work	172	1.62	1.50	<0.001	0.64
		Forensic social work	190	2.60	1.54		

The MBI reveals practically visible differences between the two groups of social workers in the following key categories of depersonalisation: MBI5, “I get the feeling that I treat some clients/colleagues impersonally, as if they were objects” ($d = 0.50$); MBI10, “I have become more callous to people since I started doing this job” ($d = 0.61$); MBI15, “I am not really interested in what is going on with many of my colleagues” ($d = 0.51$); and MBI22, “I have the feeling that my colleagues blame me for some of their problems” ($d = 0.64$). GSWs reported experiencing all of these “at least once a month” except for MBI22, which is experienced “at least once a month” leaning towards “at least a few times a year.” The reported means and standard deviations are as follows: MBI5 (mean = 1.94, SD = 1.54), MBI10 (mean = 1.90, SD = 1.55), MBI15 (mean = 1.92, SD = 1.50), and MBI22 (mean = 1.62, SD = 1.54). Depersonalisation is a common experience among GSWs, as evidenced by numerous research indicating high degrees of depersonalisation in the field (De Clercq, Haq, and Azeem 2019). According to Lizano (2015), depersonalisation is highly correlated with social work, with variances found between those in mental health-related social work and those in other professions.

On the contrary, FSWs reported more frequent occurrences of these dimensions of burnout, with experiences of “several times a month,” except for MBI22, which was reported as “at least once a month” leaning towards “several times a month.” Reported mean scores and standard deviations: MBI5 (mean = 2.72, SD = 1.57), MBI10 (mean = 2.85, SD = 1.52), MBI15 (mean = 2.73, SD = 1.54), and MBI22 (mean = 2.60, SD = 1.54). Farinha, Picado, and Carvalho (2020) found that depersonalisation is the most complex of the three dimensions of burnout. These scores among FSWs could be due to the extraordinary situation in which they work frequently, which requires the need to fake good feelings and remain impartial despite the inherent discomfort and aggravation.

These findings highlight the significant difference in burnout-related feelings between the two groups of social workers, implying that FSWs may be more vulnerable to burnout manifestations such as impersonal treatment, increased apathy, decreased interest in colleagues, and perceived blame from colleagues. Only practically insignificant differences were reported between the two categories of social workers for various items related to personal accomplishment.

Discussion of the Findings

This study is one of the first to examine burnout patterns among GSWs and FSWs in South Africa. Comparing these burnout patterns is essential to better understanding and managing their performance at work, especially given the emotionally taxing responsibilities that have a significant impact on both the personal and professional domains of their lives.

The survey findings first provide a complete overview of the social work landscape by describing the demographic characteristics, and, more specifically, the educational background, professional practice, and work experiences of the respondents. This in-depth investigation adds valuable views to the study's respondents' composition, education, and work situations. The new insights considerably improve the general understanding of the field of social work under investigation.

EFA was critical to verifying the burnout measurement and finding significant factors. During the EFA procedure, many statistical indicators such as the determinant, KMO measure, Bartlett's p -value, communalities, and total variance were thoroughly investigated. The results accurately represented occupational exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment, instilling trust in the assessment methodologies used.

Cronbach's alpha was used to analyse the reliability of the survey items, confirming a consistent evaluation of the underlying components linked to occupational exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment. The reliability of the survey instrument is confirmed by its good internal consistency, with all Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding the suggested level of 0.7.

When GSW and FSW burnout patterns were examined, the latter group showed higher levels of occupational exhaustion and depersonalisation. The nature of forensic social work, which entails dealing with legal difficulties and court-related issues, may contribute to these higher levels of achievement. However, no significant differences in personal accomplishment were discovered between the two groups.

A more in-depth investigation to determine differences between the two groups on individual items of the MBI revealed discernible differences in stress and frustration concerns. FSWs had higher stress levels and substantial variations in depersonalisation characteristics, indicating that they are particularly susceptible to impersonal treatment, increased indifference, decreased interest in colleagues, and perceived blame from colleagues.

The study's findings are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological framework. This theory acknowledges that FSWs' burnout patterns are influenced by a multitude of elements at many levels, encompassing the individual, interpersonal, and social domains. Adopting this perspective can assist FSWs in understanding the influence of multiple settings, how they interact, and how they can contribute to burnout. It also emphasises the significance of practitioners recognising and responding to FSW burnout.

Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution in comparing burnout patterns among GSWs and FSWs in South Africa. Previous research has investigated burnout in general social work disciplines, but there is a notable absence of studies specifically focusing on burnout patterns among FSWs. Therefore, this study's distinctive attribute is its direct comparison that sheds light on the challenges that FSWs experience. The empirical research not only advances our understanding of burnout patterns among FSWs, but it also has the potential to reinforce and improve procedures and regulations that are unique to this specialised profession in South Africa.

One of the study's strengths is its methodological accuracy, which incorporates rigorous statistical approaches such as factor analysis and reliability ratings. This accuracy lends credibility to the findings and provides a good foundation for applying tailored intervention. Finding higher levels of occupational exhaustion and depersonalisation among FSWs, as well as significant differences in depersonalisation features, demonstrates their sensitivity to burnout in a variety of ways.

These findings contribute to the scholarly knowledge of burnout patterns while also having practical implications. The study advocates for specialised interventions and supportive networks for FSWs including clinical supervision, trauma informed care, self-care practices, professional development opportunities, and crisis debriefing designed to address the specific challenges encountered by FSWs. This understanding is invaluable for forensic social work practitioners dealing with burnout. Furthermore, policymakers attempting to establish ways and strategies to manage burnout in this essential profession will substantially benefit from the empirical data provided by this study. By identifying and addressing the specific burnout challenges encountered by FSWs in South Africa, the research seeks to contribute to the improvement of work environments in forensic social work. This study establishes a basis for creating a better and more conducive work environment in forensic social work in South Africa by identifying and addressing the burnout patterns faced by FSWs.

Limitations

Although the focus on burnout patterns among GSWs and FSWs are useful, a thorough understanding of the causes and effects of burnout among these groups are required for designing tailored interventions and support systems that can have a long-term influence on the well-being of FSWs.

The study employed a willing sample approach, which introduced potential sampling bias as individuals experiencing burnout might have been less inclined to participate, thus potentially impacting the generalisability of the findings. In addition, social desirability or other factors may have influenced social workers' openness regarding burnout symptoms, potentially resulting in further bias in the results.

Even though the study was successful in identifying burnout patterns in the two social work fields, it did not provide therapeutic solutions. It is critical to comprehend the scope of the problem and to be able to seek alternate interventions to the challenges encountered.

Recommendations

Burnout should be studied in a broader range of social work speciality areas. Comparing different fields can reveal significant differences in burnout experiences, giving rise to customised intervention solutions.

Further research studies may also employ a qualitative approach to investigate the personal experiences and coping strategies of social workers, with an emphasis on a more in-depth exploration of burnout.

In research, it is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of therapies and support mechanisms to address burnout. Comparative research on the results of the intervention can inform evidence-based initiatives.

Future studies should incorporate elements of intersectionality, such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status to investigate how they intersect with burnout experiences in social work fields, guiding therapy modifications.

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