

“IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW MANY (CASES) YOU GOT, IF YOU LOVE THE JOB, YOU CAN MANAGE EVERYTHING”:  
MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES UTILISED BY FRONTLINE SOCIAL WORKERS

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The adoption of the social development approach in South African social service organisations continues to challenge and stretch organisations in many directions. The frontline social worker navigating this terrain, carrying the bulk of direct services and undertaking various management tasks, is confronted with personal trauma, resource constraints, organisational issues, ethical dilemmas as well as the pressure of inclusive and representative service delivery. An exploratory descriptive qualitative empirical study using a case study research design was undertaken with the main aim being to explore and describe the management tasks of frontline social workers in the NPO sector in Port Elizabeth. Semi-structured individual interviews were held with frontline social workers and one focus group was held with middle managers. The study's findings revealed the aspects contributing towards undertaking management tasks, the experiences of executing management tasks and the consequences of doing so. This paper presents the management strategies utilised by frontline social workers.

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### **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

Weinbach and Taylor (2015:6) provide the following broad definition of social work management: “management is certain activities performed by social workers at all administrative levels within human service organisations that are designed to facilitate the accomplishment of organisational goals.” Management tasks in social work are therefore executed by the frontline social worker, the middle manager/supervisor and the top level manager/director. Lewis, Packard and Lewis (2012:4) operationalise the definition of social work management as follows: “management is the process of making a plan to achieve some end, organising the people and resources needed to carry out the plan, encouraging the helping workers who will be asked to perform the component tasks, evaluating the results, and revising the plans based on this evaluation”. In recent years increasing attention has been drawn to the roles of frontline social workers in executing their daily responsibilities (Hepworth, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried & Larsen, 2010). Frontline social workers are social workers who primarily render direct social work services to individuals, groups and communities. According to Patel (2005), and based on the social development approach that frames post-apartheid South African social work practice, some of the roles of frontline social workers include individual problem solving, couples or family therapy, groupwork services, educator, broker and case manager. Coulshed, Mullender, Jones & Thompson (2006) hone in on the management functions of social workers by suggesting that all social workers perform management functions, since practitioner skills (or direct social work services) in social work include managerial skills; they further indicate that social workers, at all levels, have to perform specialised management tasks.

Although Weinbach and Taylor (2015) confirm that management is a team function, frontline social workers in the South African NPO sector often “manage” in silos, because of the crisis nature of their work as well as the lack of human resources and middle management capacity within their organisations, naturally resulting in unintended consequences for these organisations. Furthermore, the South African welfare sector committed social service providers to adopting the social development approach to welfare, aligned to the democratic objectives rooted in social justice and a macroeconomic focus (Patel, 2005; Patel, Schmid & Hochfeld, 2012; Rautenbach & Chiba, 2010). The social development approach, being fundamentally different from apartheid social welfare provision, created additional demands on service delivery in the NPO sector (Rankin & Engelbrecht, 2014). Newer frontline social workers who had been trained in the theoretical foundations of social development, were joining organisations where most of the experienced social workers had never been trained in this approach. Besides making communication, supervision and intervention planning challenging, because both parties were not starting launching from the same level, frontline social workers also saw themselves fulfilling more formal management roles within their social service organisations in order to

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remain responsive to the macro-level needs of the social development approach (Department of Social Development (DSD), 2006), and to keep their organisations operational.

The social development approach was anticipated to accelerate transformation by addressing issues of race, class, gender and spatial imbalances because of its macroeconomic focus, emphasising the interdependence between social and economic development (Midgley, 1995; Patel, 2005; Gray, 2008; Patel, 2009; Rautenbach & Chiba, 2010; Weyers, 2013;). Emanating from the social development approach was the term ‘developmental social work’, which authors such as Patel (2005), Gray (2008) and Rautenbach and Chiba (2010) contextualised as social work services that are geared towards holistic, planned intervention, which places human and social concerns at the centre of social welfare policy and planning. Developmental social work is strengths-based and further geared towards bringing about social change, using a systems approach (focusing on the person and environment, and the interaction between the two), and based on the principles of social justice, equality, ubuntu, democracy and social change (Midgley, 1995; Gray, 2008; Patel, 2005; Patel, 2009). All social workers, and by implication all social work managers, are trained to be agents of social change (Sewpaul, 2013) – especially in the South African social work context, where transformation (change) underpins developmental social work and occupies a prominent space in the social development approach to welfare (Patel, 2005; Rautenbach & Chiba, 2010).

Hence management at all levels in social work, viz. boards of directors, top managers, middle managers as well as frontline social workers, needed to re-assess their prevailing strategies and align these to the social development approach. In order to remain responsive to the clients and communities they served, frontline social workers, middle managers and top managers in the NPO sector needed to transform their intervention strategies as well as their management roles on a micro, meso and macro level (Patel, 2014). For the frontline social worker this meant incorporating management tasks into their daily ‘direct services’ function, thereby also having to perform the following tasks traditionally performed exclusively by middle and top management: analysing situations and conceptualising what is happening; identifying problems and opportunities for addressing them; balancing competing goals; setting priorities for themselves and others; handling finances responsibly and reducing expenses whenever possible; and working effectively with others who may not share all of the same values (Weinbach & Taylor, 2015:8).

Therefore, it may be argued that the implementation of developmental social work imposed new demands on an already overstretched public as well as private social welfare sector (Rankin & Engelbrecht, 2014), since this approach dictated a shift in the culture and managerial practices of organisations rendering welfare services, to expand their services in order to reach less developed, under-resourced and more marginalised communities (DSD, 2012). Ultimately, social work practice and its alignment to professional social work goals rest on the shoulders of social service managers (Patel, 2014), a role in which the frontline social workers increasingly see themselves.

It is further noted by Rankin and Engelbrecht (2014) that the ability of frontline social workers to undertake management tasks would be dependent on the following inter-related management skills: technical, interpersonal and conceptual skills. According to Reyneke (2014), lower management levels (the level at which the frontline social worker would fall) require 42% technical skills (the ability to use methods, processes and techniques in social work), 50% interpersonal skills (communication, relationship, conflict resolution and leadership skill) and 8% conceptual skills (motivational skills and teamwork). According to Lewis et al. (2012) and Menefee (2004), managers need a good deal of education, training and development because of the multitude of technical and interpersonal skills necessary to perform management tasks in social work. In the South African context, social work management training and development are diluted because of the challenges of an inequitable apartheid past, leaving communities socially disabled, prioritising direct social work service delivery and neglecting management capacity in social work (Engelbrecht, 2012; Patel, 2005; Russell & Swilling, 2002).

Management alludes to shaping and exerting influence over the work environment. Social workers in the formal role of managers strive to ensure that the work environment is conducive to maximum productivity, which includes the “promotion of desirable activities” and “efficient delivery of services to clients” (Weinbach & Taylor, 2015:6). Ideally, management is intended to be mainly proactive in nature. This does not mean that management may not be reactive, since situations facing organisations usually do not give fair warning of arising, such is the dynamic nature of South African social work. However, what it means is that reactive management should form only a small part of managing an organisation. When reactive management is required, it means that there is an unanticipated problem facing the organisation and the management techniques employed should be rational, fair and prompt. This will allow the organisation to rebalance itself in a short space of time, ensuring that staff continue to deliver on the mission of the organisation. This applies especially in child protection services, where vulnerable children will be placed at further risk if the organisation is unbalanced for too long. According to Weinbach and Taylor (2015), good management practices create the stepping stones for achieving organisational goals, ultimately resulting in an organisation’s success.

Frontline social workers undertake a series of management tasks which are underpinned by the management functions of planning, organising, leading and control. Coulshed et al. (2006) contend that management is a function that all social workers undertake, implying that management is not a function reserved only for middle and top management. Weinbach and Taylor (2015:8) identify the following non-exhaustive list of the various management tasks:

- Analysing situations and conceptualising what is happening;
- Identifying problems and opportunities for addressing them;
- Balancing competing goals;
- Setting priorities for themselves and others;
- Working effectively with others who may not share all of the same values;
- Representing the organisation to staff members and in the community;
- Serving as a role model for paid staff and volunteers;
- Keeping others on track;
- Resolving interpersonal conflicts;
- Adhering to and ensuring that others adhere to ethical standards;
- Handling finances responsibly and reducing expenses whenever possible;
- Making difficult (often unpopular) decisions;
- Supporting decisions of others with which they themselves may disagree.

Weinbach and Taylor (2015:8) also contend that managers do everything else except render direct services to clients, which is contrary to the assumption of this study. This study is premised on the notion that frontline social workers also fulfil the stated management tasks in addition to rendering direct services to clients and communities. Hence, frontline social workers need to possess a combination of interpersonal, conceptual and technical skills (Reyneke, 2014) so as to meet all their direct services demands as well as to manage these demands. Pretorius (2014) further highlights some essential social work management tasks such as workload management, time management, information management, risk management and change management but relate them specifically to middle management positions. Not taking into account the management tasks that frontline social workers engage in creates a non-balanced view of the extent of the frontline social workers’ role in the organisation. This study therefore explores the nature of the management tasks undertaken by frontline social workers and their experiences of doing so.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

A sample of 19 frontline social workers and 6 middle managers from 3 NPOs (coincidentally all child protection agencies) in Port Elizabeth participated in this qualitative study premised on achieving the following specific objectives:

- To explore and describe the factors in the NPO sector that necessitate frontline social workers executing management tasks;
- To examine the nature of the management tasks that frontline social workers in the NPO sector undertake;
- To explore the experiences of frontline social workers in respect of their management tasks in the NPO sector;
- To determine the consequences of frontline social workers executing management tasks; and
- To propose a framework to support frontline social workers in the NPO sector in respect of executing management tasks

Data were collected in two phases. Phase 1: semi-structured individual in-depth interviews with frontline social workers, and Phase 2: a focus group with middle managers. Group prompts were generated from data gathered in Phase 1.

Because of the depth of the overall study findings, this paper reports on the findings only pertaining to following objective: *To determine the consequences of frontline social workers executing management tasks*. The intention of this paper is to present and discuss the empirical evidence obtained on the management strategies utilised by frontline social workers. The other four study objectives will be reported on in separate papers.

The main theme garnered from the findings under this objective was the development of frontline management strategies, which appeared to be a key consequence of undertaking management tasks. This theme, with its corresponding subthemes, will be discussed in this article.

## THEMES, SUBTHEMES AND CATEGORIES PERTAINING TO THE CONSEQUENCES OF FRONTLINE SOCIAL WORKERS UNDERTAKING MANAGEMENT TASKS

Table 1 provides an overview of the themes and subthemes identified from the findings.

**TABLE 1**  
**THEMES, SUBTHEMES AND CATEGORIES PERTAINING TO THE**  
**CONSEQUENCES OF FRONTLINE SOCIAL WORKERS UNDERTAKING**  
**MANAGEMENT TASKS**

Theme	Subthemes	Categories
Development of frontline management strategies	Workload management	Knowledge of caseload Prevention services reduces statutory pressure Use of innovative intervention tools
	Time management	Come to work early Take work home Report to donors in innovative ways Respect/honour return dates Present community workshops Apply realistic expectations of time use
	Relationship management	Know and meet every client Prioritise client satisfaction Build and maintain relationships with stakeholders
	Self-management	Use of diaries, planners and checklists Maintain positive supervisor-supervisee relationships

		Engage in self-reflection Apply social work values and principles
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Table 1 illustrates that the development of frontline management strategies by frontline social workers was the main consequence of undertaking management tasks. The subthemes that will be discussed are: workload management, time management, relationship management and self-management. Pseudonyms are used to identify the participant responses. These are indicated as P1, P2, MM1, MM2, etc. “P” indicates participant and “MM” indicates middle manager.

### **Theme 1: Development of frontline management strategies**

The main consequence of frontline social workers undertaking management tasks was that they had to develop strategies to enhance their workload management, time management, relationship management and self-management tasks.

#### ***Subtheme 1.1: Workload management***

The findings revealed that frontline social work participants found it extremely useful to be fully aware of the details of all their cases. Reading their casefiles, making summaries and knowing the contents of reports prevented embarrassing situations from arising when social workers were expected to answer questions in court. This is reflected in the words of the two frontline social work participants quoted below:

*Read the files, the small summaries there and make your own summary perhaps. (P4)*

*It's very embarrassing when you go to court and you do not know the contents of the report when you compiled the report. (P14)*

The frontline social workers indicated various ways of managing their workloads, since managing workload means having control over the service one renders to one's clients on a caseload (Calitz, Roux & Strydom, 2014; Strydom, 2010). Because of their excessive workloads, social workers have developed strategies to remain in control by getting to know every client on their caseload. Relationship building is an important skill for social workers as it enables growth and development for clients. Good interpersonal relationships result in a better understanding between clients and frontline social workers and therefore provide greater opportunity for sustainable social change to occur in the helping relationship. Utilising flexible ways of thinking and managing the administrative aspects of cases, such as making small summaries, indicate the frontline social workers' personal interest in a client/family. Preparing for court is also essential as it demonstrates that the social worker has anticipated the complexity of the case and has anticipated the possible contingencies when making recommendations in the court report. Exhausting all options prior to opening a Children's court inquiry demonstrates that the social worker has the best interests of the child at heart, as stipulated in the Children's Act No. 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 2006). As statutory work is administratively intensive and time-sapping in nature, social workers preferred to engage in prevention services with clients.

The study found that rendering prevention services is perceived to benefit families more in the long run, as opposed to statutory intervention. The following frontline social work participant, who works at a drop-in centre, stated that:

*I don't like statutory matters. Because I don't believe that's the way to go. Because what happens at 18 when the child is cut off from the community. There are times when statutory [intervention] is important but I only have one [statutory case]. My job expects that but I would rather find a way to work with the child and the family. (P16)*

The middle managers in the focus group collectively expressed the view that frontline social workers found prevention programmes more rewarding, because they do not entail labour-intensive reports and crisis management. This is evident in the response of one focus group participant, as quoted below:

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*I think this is why they [social workers] sometimes love the programmes that they are doing, because it's a little bit different from all the people that they see and all the reports and things. Then they can also use the skills and make use of what they've learned, especially in the schools they do the programmes at. (MM1&3)*

Prevention services entail interventions such as awareness about abuse, information on where to access birth documents, parenting programmes and budgeting on a child support grant, to name a few. According to the Integrated Service Delivery Model (ISDM) (RSA, 2006), prevention services are rendered prior to families needing statutory intervention. In addition, prevention programmes do not necessarily require lengthy investigations and reports. The programmes reach more people because they are generally community-based, or they are located in schools where large groups of children are targeted. Contrary to the findings of this study, Strydom (2012) postulates that child protection organisations have not been rendering prevention programmes because there is little funding for them. Instead, statutory services, which receive subsidies from the DSD, were the services that child protection organisations prioritised.

Another frontline social work participant highlighted the various intervention strategies she uses with children as a means of managing her workload for effectiveness:

*I use all kinds of stuff and I'm constantly adding to my toolbox, so to speak. I've got various forms of my own that I make use of. I make use of something called the three houses tool and there's actually a great app for that, which is very exciting. (P18)*

The findings of this study further revealed that frontline social workers have to be innovative in designing interventions for children because children need help to make sense of their feelings and to build trust. Therefore, the inclusion of more playful techniques rather than a conversational style of interviewing will naturally work better with children, as evidenced in the study undertaken by Chinakidzwa, Dika, Molefe, Mutasa, Yawathe, and Perumal (2013).

### ***Subtheme 1.2: Time management***

Coming to work very early and completing work at home was a strategy used by some frontline social workers to manage time, as indicated by three frontline social work participants quoted below:

*Most of the time if I find if a table looks like that (pointing to many files) in the afternoon I take a lot of work home and do it at home. I hate coming in the morning and it still looks like this. (P5)*

*I would rather go see a client at 7 o'clock in the morning. They are quite accommodating for that if possible. I arrange and see them 7 o'clock or quarter past 7, and then I take them to school. (P20)*

*We are supposed to be here at half past 3 [pm]. I come back tired, so I come very early in the morning and record. (P19)*

The findings revealed that participants needed to manage their after-hours time appropriately so as not to be weighed down by professional obligations. One frontline social work participant identified the need to maintain personal boundaries in relation to how much she extends herself after-hours, as indicated in her response below:

*I have very strict boundaries. I'm very aware of where I am personally and what I'm prepared to do inside and outside of work, in terms of extra work that I do after hours. I am very careful to cut work off, [although] you know you take some cases home, but it's very important to learn to [cut work off]. (P18)*

The two frontline social work participants quoted below indicated that having a system of return dates in place is beneficial in assisting them to manage their time and their workload:



*There are weekly due dates to hand in things and monthly return dates for your supervisor to look at the file contents. (P13)*

*No, I don't miss my return dates. So what we have here is that if the court order lapses maybe in January then we do it three months before but now it's four months before. (P15)*

The findings revealed that the use of social media assists frontline social workers in reporting to funders. The following frontline social work participant identified the use of Facebook as a time-saving innovation when reporting to donors:

*We have a Facebook page so everything we do is on there. So, if we get a donation we send a picture to the person or it goes onto Facebook, so that person can see that this is what we're doing or whatever. (P16)*

Another time-management strategy utilised by frontline social workers to reach a large number of clients was to offer community awareness workshops on social issues prevalent in certain communities. One frontline social work participant confirms this:

*The workshop is for the community, to empower them with knowledge on the social issues that are there such as: substance abuse, domestic violence, child neglect, sexual abuse. We do it through workshops. (P17)*

Two frontline social work participants advised that it was worthwhile to plan so as to use their time productively. However, it was also necessary to know one's limitations and have realistic expectations of how much can be achieved, as expressed in the responses below:

*Use your time as productively as possible. Realise that you can only do so much in one time. It is not possible to handle sixty to eighty cases effectively and efficiently at the same time. (P1)*

*I would say that even if you plan and it doesn't work out, you must (still) plan for your week with your basic stuff. And learn to say NO I cannot get to that today, but I will get to it. You've got to learn to accept your limitations. You can do so much and no more. (P7)*

Efficiency is directly related to how a social worker manages his/her time (Weinbach & Taylor, 2015). The findings above reveal that frontline social workers devised different strategies to enable them to manage their time effectively so that they may efficiently manage their work. It is evident that beginning work earlier than the official organisational starting times was one strategy used to manage time. Taking work home was another strategy. This is unfortunate, as it increases the working hours of the social worker and is bound to result in personal stress over a period of time (Coulshed et al., 2006). On a more positive note, however, it is evident from the findings that frontline social workers used innovative time-saving strategies to report to funders and to reach community members, such as sending funders photographs, maintaining a Facebook page and holding community workshops in areas in which there was a collective need for information.

Some authors contend that setting goals, prioritising tasks and planning ahead are useful time-management strategies (Pretorius, 2014; Weinbach & Taylor, 2015). Evidence of this contention is that frontline social workers organised their return dates along the lines of what was due weekly and what was due monthly, so as not to let court orders lapse. However, this study's findings correspond with those of Michie (2002), who notes that frontline social workers must know how much work they can get through in a day without causing personal and professional stress to themselves.

### ***Subtheme 1.3: Relationship management***

The frontline social work participants highlighted the need to meet and get to know each client on one's caseload as a beneficial strategy for relationship management between the social worker and the client. This is evident in the words of one frontline social work participant:

*It doesn't matter how many (cases) you got. If you love the job you can manage everything. Going through each and every file. When you have a chance meet every client. (P15)*

Adapting social work skills and giving unconditional positive attention to children was another useful relationship management strategy cited by another frontline social work participant:

*Using your skills and the resources that you have but sometimes having to adapt them to the children's needs. And then people [funders/donors] would come and the children don't want to come [to meet them] and would resist. But that's fine. You give them the love and the tolerance around it. People will say why do you give them a second chance? And you say they were put into a system to see how far they can actually come. I will not walk away from them. (P16)*

Acknowledging the individuality of children and youths enhances the relationship between the frontline social worker and the young person. Identifying and showcasing clients' talents has a ripple effect on managing relationships with clients as well as creating employment opportunities for them, according to the following participant:

*You need to show the talent. They [are] not just children who are orphaned – they actually have a personality. They are not young children, but from about 12 to 25 years. They all have skills in entertaining. You must see how many 25-year-olds are here. So people see them perform and see where they come from and they can get them to entertain for functions at a fee. (P16)*

Participants attributed the benefits of their job to the satisfaction that clients experienced with their services, and the change that clients perceived to have experienced. Furthermore, this change has a motivational impact on the participants, as captured in the words of the two frontline social work participants quoted below:

*They [clients] say I must come in every Wednesday and go on and they are not shy to tell people how they have changed. Like I say, that is my highlight of the week because to me it feels that is what I actually want to do. I want to make a change. I do not just want to run from court case to court case. (P7)*

*To see some change in some of the clients. Not in all of them. If I see change in one, that motivates me. (P6)*

Furthermore, when clients progressed into positions of leadership at school, the participants felt a sense of pride because, as the quote from one participant below indicates, these clients have risen above the adverse conditions they face at home:

*One of my foster children is now the head girl of a high school and she is doing very well, and she was accepted at NMU [Nelson Mandela University] for next year. One of my boys in the Children's Home is now the deputy head boy in his school; he is also a child out of a household that is very, very poor and there are lots of drugs involved with the family. Now he is doing well. (P5)*

Managing relationships with stakeholders is described as useful when services are required, such as pooling together with the DSD for transport or the Department of Health or requesting the services of the SAPS. Participants shared their thoughts on the matter:

*And other times then we coordinate with Department of Social Development, if they have got people that must go there [Children's Home] and then they go by a little bus and we put them all [our children as well] in a little bus. (P4)*

*So now we have the Department of Health who have given us a district surgeon so we don't have to go to the outpatient. It saves us money [and time]. (P17)*

*We check with them [SAPS] and they say don't go [into the area] today [gang activity is rife]. Go tomorrow or whenever. (P6)*

Although the findings revealed that managing relationships with stakeholders was positive and beneficial, there were also times when stakeholder relationships were stressful. The frontline participant quoted below explains her somewhat ambiguous relationship with the South African Police Service:

*You have to build up a relationship beforehand, I think. It's important. I've had good and bad experiences with the police. I've had police that are magnificently helpful and I've had the police turn around and say "Oh come on, give them another chance", as if you're doing that [the removal] on a whim ... because invariably there's begging [from the family] when you actually go and remove the child. (P18)*

The social work profession is premised on relationship building since it is a helping profession, based on working with people (Hepworth et al., 2010). Strategies such as getting to know each client, innovating for poor clients, showcasing clients' talents, understanding children's stages of development, and maintaining open communication with stakeholders were seen as beneficial. In order for change to occur in clients' lives, clients need to feel respected, valued and significant. These principles contribute to building trust and enhancing the self-worth of clients so as to facilitate change in their lives. When working with small children and adolescents, it is especially important to balance the understanding of their stages of development with the needs of funders. Forcing a child to engage against his/her will is detrimental to the child's development and inevitably delays progress in respect of bringing about change in that child's life. Once clients are comfortable with the frontline social worker, a deeper understanding emerges. To effect intrapersonal change is challenging, hence frontline social workers measure the appreciation shown by clients as well as client achievements as rewarding. Therefore, there is a need for frontline social workers to engage in relationship management strategies, as outlined in the findings of this study.

According to Claeys (2014), trust building is also a key component of building stakeholder relationships. Stakeholders in the NPO sector are significant partners in keeping with contingency theory, since frontline social workers cannot function in a vacuum. Child protection services demand that the Department of Health, Home Affairs and the South African Police Service are involved when determining the best interests of the child. Effective communication is enhanced by keeping promises, providing timely feedback and requesting assistance from stakeholders in advance. Valuing input and ideas as well as maintaining professional boundaries further enhances stakeholder relationships.

### **Subtheme 2: Self-management**

The need for self-management emerged as a significant consequence of frontline social workers' undertaking management tasks. Keeping a diary, maintaining a weekly planner and ticking off items on a checklist were some of the concrete self-management techniques used by frontline social workers to assist them in remembering tasks that must be completed. Participants shared the following:

*The programme, I put into my diary a month before so I know when the meetings are, the supervision meetings and the aged meetings. (P4)*

*Normally I would write in my diary every day and then I would do it on the computer too. Also, at the end of the month I would do a summary of all the [work I have done]. (P12)*

*Now that I have the checklist I know that I have a page for the court order or IDs, then under the report I'll put the birth date. So it helped me but it's a lot of work because I had to do more work on the file to put that right. So sometimes when I'm tired of doing admin work then I take a file and do the checklist after lunch [so my files are in order]. (P15)*

Self-preservation is enhanced by acknowledging support systems within the work environment. These support systems include colleagues and supervisors, as described below:

*Make use of your supervisor. Make use of other social workers with more experience. Bounce things off them all the time. You're not going to have all the answers, it's not your job to have all the answers. Don't expect to. Take that pressure off [yourself]. (MM5)*

*The social worker will have to learn to speak to her colleagues and her supervisor, to make sure that she debriefs every day. Because they do burnout very quickly, I've seen it happen in our organisation. (MM1&6)*

Besides having support systems in the work environment, according to the participant listed below, it is important to have a safe place to retreat to outside of the work environment:

*It's very important to have your escape and your place where your work doesn't follow you. I have a fantastic family and I have a very good support system in place. (P18)*

The findings revealed that frontline social worker confidence, assertiveness and open communication within the bureaucracy in the NPO are beneficial in preventing stress and burnout. The following focus group responses confirm the need to voice concerns:

*The younger social workers really struggle to work through the stress, they need to speak about it and not keep it all in ... bottled up inside. If you do not speak about it, then you are not going to make it. (MM2&4)*

*If you are not satisfied, talk. Do not just keep quiet and allow things to go on and on...talk (about it). (MM3&6)*

Another self-management strategy that was identified, was the need to self-reflect, weigh the pros and cons, and remain calm when work situations become tense. Reflecting on situations before reacting is cited by the frontline social work participant quoted below as more productive and less self-destructive:

*Not reacting when I'm in the moment. I will weigh the process, the scenario, whatever the case may be and then go discuss it. My feeling is that if I discuss things in a calm manner, obviously I don't shift blame then I say I'm unhappy about that. I realise that I may have contributed and this is my reason and this is where I come from. I'm just putting that on the table in a calm way and I can motivate what I have to say. (P1)*

A couple of frontline social workers indicated that personal self-reflection is an absolute necessity as it enables one to engage in rational decision making. Should emotions cloud a social worker's actions, situations may become tense, which may result in stress and burnout. The two frontline social work participants quoted below caution in favour of personal self-reflection on the opinions that social workers hold, and the need to always prioritise the best interests of the clients:

*I would say be very careful of the "glasses that you wear". Be very careful of the things that you don't know are your opinions and the way that you think about things. (P7)*

*I'd say keep your head open, keep your mouth shut and don't get emotional. Remember it's not about anybody in the office, it's about the client. (P9)*

Although self-reflection is magnified in the findings as a strategy to manage frontline social work tasks, self-reflection is an attribute that is gained with experience. All frontline social workers may not necessarily be capable of the kind of self-reflection that leads to unbiased and rational viewpoints. Some may require the assistance of their supervisors to help develop this attribute. According to the one frontline social work participant, reflection and considered opinions come with experience:

*No, obviously it's a skill that has developed over time. I would say that maybe 20-25 years ago I would probably also have reacted at first. My initial reaction would have been "upset" and maybe I would have spoken sooner. (P1)*

Upholding professional integrity by showing compassion, respect, engaging in open communication and being flexible in relations with clients was found to be critically useful as a quality that frontline social workers should possess. The words of the frontline social work participants quoted below are reflective of the need for professional integrity as essential to self-management:

*Be yourself with the people and handle everyone with respect ... doesn't matter who they are.*  
(P4)

*What I am there to do is to give clients respect, confidence and compassion.* (P7)

The findings further reveal that frontline social workers run the risk of operating in mechanical ways so as to be in control of their work. With the workload being so heavy, and time being limited, it is easy to slip behind with work, which will then result in poor self-management. One frontline social work participant fell into this trap of transforming into a “robot” so as to manage her day:

*I don't worry about lunch, I eat while I'm working. I don't feel. When I feel, then I'm not doing. I've become a robot but a nice robot, I've learnt to take everything as it comes and stay calm. I do it in a clinical way. I think it's the lack of time. That's why I've become like a robot. So you keep focused on what you can do.*(P9)

According to Calitz et al. (2014), social workers experience stress and burnout as a consequence of their workload and poor time management, and they fail to engage in self-care (Jackson, 2014). This study's findings reveal that frontline social workers used various methods to stay ahead of their workload, such as keeping diaries and planning in advance, irrespective of whether crises would affect their plans. This strategy gave frontline social workers a sense of control over their workloads, which contributes to an overall sense of wellbeing for the social worker. Frontline social workers also reported that supervisors are key role players in acting as buffers against stress and trauma, thereby enhancing self-preservation and preventing burnout. Coupled with this, engaging in hobbies and having support systems outside the organisational environment contributed to self-care. This finding further addresses a recommendation, made by Calitz et al., (2014), that more support be provided to social workers in the form of supervision and support groups.

Another self-management strategy that frontline social workers employed was being assertive and expressing their concerns with the relevant structures, as opposed to remaining silent and self-destructing. According to Patel (2005), the social worker fulfils the role of advocate in discharging his/her duties as a social worker. By implication, it makes sense for advocacy to begin from within, on a micro level of functioning. Although authors document the value of self-advocacy, this is sometimes difficult for social workers to engage in without self-reflection (Stewart & MacIntyre, 2013).

According to the participants in this study, personal self-reflection enables the social worker to respond to issues in a thoughtful and developmental manner after reflection, as opposed to becoming irrational and agitated, which results in stress. Participants indicated that work experience (predictive knowledge) allows for constructive self-reflection. It may also be argued that a pre-condition for self-reflection is a safe supervision environment that is enabling rather than controlling (Coulshed *et al.*, 2006), and in which the social worker is respected and nurtured. Upholding professional integrity by engaging in respect, care, compassion, flexibility, hope and instilling confidence in clients were also seen to be beneficial self-management strategies. In contrast, the findings also revealed that the workload sometimes makes social workers function in mechanical ways, which may ultimately be detrimental to client services. Working mechanically inevitably results in not being in tune with your clients (Hepworth et al., 2010).

## CONCLUSIONS

This article presented the findings in respect of the consequences of frontline social workers undertaking management tasks. The key consequence was that frontline social workers developed

strategies to manage workload, time, relationships and the self. Based on the findings, a number of broad conclusions may be drawn and recommendations made.

- The variety of work that frontline social workers had to manage was rewarding, but also stretched their capacity. Workload management is monotonous and boring which, in some instances, resulted in social workers becoming mechanical in their operations. Work pressure resulted in frontline social workers becoming desensitised and detached from societal ills. In a similar vein, the emotional and personal pressures precipitated by frontline management tasks resulted in diminished self-worth and confidence for the frontline social worker. Mutual trust between the supervisor and supervisee, as well as debriefing among colleagues, relieved frontline social workers' stress. Having the backing of the Children's Act instilled confidence in frontline social workers and middle managers.
- Building rapport with clients and stakeholders contributed positively to relationship management. A deeper understanding emerged from good relationships and effecting change with client systems were more constructive.
- Extending working hours by coming to work earlier and taking work home, balanced with maintaining work/personal life boundaries, was a beneficial time-management strategy. In addition, the use of social media within the ethical parameters of the organisation, reduced the hours spent on writing formal reports to funders.
- Resourcefulness on the part of frontline social workers was evident in the strategies they developed to enhance their workload management, time management, caseload administration, relationship management, management of volunteers and self-management. Consequently, the need for self-care such as having hobbies, socialising outside the work environment and positive family relationships was realised.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Below is a list of the practice recommendations flowing from the conclusions reached above; they are clustered according to the subthemes presented in this paper. An additional subtheme, viz. organisational support, was included.

### **Workload management**

- The caseloads of frontline social workers should be manageable, guided by the relevant child-protection frameworks and adequate time should be apportioned to each case in consultation with the supervisor.
- A focus on prevention programmes should dominate in the strategic plans of NPOs, because prevention programmes reach more people in a shorter time and avoids statutory intervention, which requires much time and workload management. Prevention programmes also allow for creativity and reduce much of the administration that individual and groupwork demands.
- Frontline social workers should assess the estimated time, support and resources required to deal with each client and each crisis to assist with developing a vision for managing their caseloads.

### **Time management**

- Frontline social workers should advocate for the use of non-traditional administrative methods and reporting within the ethical parameters of the profession, e.g. audio recording interviews and getting social auxiliary workers to transcribe interviews, taking photos of how funds were utilised and using social media platforms to display community engagements and sponsorships.

### **Relationship management**

- The organisation should schedule quarterly meetings with stakeholders such as South African Police Services, Department of Social Development, Department of Home Affairs, Department of

Justice and Department of Health to renegotiate and cement relationships due to the dynamic nature of the environmental factors facing the NPO sector.

- All clients should be informed of the crisis nature of work by frontline social workers when scheduling appointments, so that clients are aware that appointments may be need to be rescheduled in response to crises and they should not become agitated and negative towards frontline social workers.

### **Self- management**

- The use of collegial support/peer debriefing by frontline social workers is encouraged so as to get through difficult cases.
- Frontline social workers should commit to self-care by identifying and utilising safe and nurturing spaces outside the office environment for respite.
- A persistent engagement in self-reflection by frontline social workers is recommended so as to reduce reactivity and burn-out in difficult circumstances in the office and in the community.
- Frontline social workers are encouraged to engage in activism in respect of their working conditions, e.g. safety within communities, access to resources, salaries, etc.

### **Organisational support**

- Frontline social workers should be actively nurtured by middle and top management, and these relationships need to be enhanced with a strong focus on the supportive component of supervision.
- There should be biannual evaluations held with frontline social workers so as to proactively ensure their emotional and physical wellness.
- Non-threatening trust-building exercises for the frontline social workers and supervisors in the form of teambuilding activities should be incorporated into the strategic planning of the organisation.
- Training on strengthening the application of core legislations, such as the Children's Act and other legislation pertaining to families, should be commissioned biannually.
- Organisations to partner with higher education institutions as well as professional boards to commission further research on management tasks in the public sector so as to share best practices.

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