

## EXPERIENCES OF SERVICE-USER VIOLENCE AND COPING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED DURING SOCIAL WORK SERVICE DELIVERY: SUGGESTIONS FOR ENSURING SOCIAL WORKERS' PERSONAL SAFETY

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Workplace violence or incidents where social workers are abused, threatened or assaulted by service users in executing the duties related to their work is acknowledged as a serious concern and an occupational hazard in many countries. This type of violence directly and indirectly challenges social workers' safety, health and wellbeing. In this article, emanating from a qualitative research project, 14 South African social workers' experiences of service-user violence and their coping strategies employed during social work service delivery are reported, and suggestions for ensuring social workers' personal safety are put forward.*

**Keywords:** *coping strategies, occupational hazard, service user violence, social work service delivery, social workers' personal safety, workplace violence*

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## INTRODUCTION

Workplace violence or incidents where social workers are abused, threatened or assaulted by service users in executing the duties related to their work – which in turn directly and indirectly challenges social workers' safety, health and wellbeing – is acknowledged as a serious concern and occupational hazard in many countries (Enosh, Tzafrir & Gur, 2012; Kagan & Itzick, 2019; Koritsas, Coles & Boyle, 2010; Littlechild, 2005a; Pollack, 2010; Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; Scalera, 1995; Winstanley & Hales, 2015). In the late 1980s Kipper (cited in Newhill, 1995:631) already made the claim that, after police officers, social workers run the highest risk of workplace violence being perpetrated against them. This unsurprisingly led to the social work profession being labelled as a “risky” and “dangerous profession”, both internationally and domestically (Freese, 2015; Nho & Choi, 2009), and seemed to confirm the prevailing notion that service-user violence in social work is “inevitable” or an “every day, part of the job” (Shin, 2011). Social workers, specifically those involved with cases concerning child abuse, neglect, sexual molestation, child custody matters, divorce proceedings and domestic violence, and those working in the fields of child and family protective services, foster care and mental health, are particularly vulnerable to harm, as many of the service users they engage with are involuntary service users and therefore resist social work services, becoming belligerent, agitated and uncooperative (Gonzalez, Faller, Ortega & Tropman, 2009; Kim & Hopkins, 2015; Pollack, 2010; Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; Scalera, 1995; Shin, 2011). The most common types of service-user violence perpetrated against social workers documented in the literature are physical violence, verbal harassment and threats, and damage to property (Laird, 2014; Nho & Choi, 2009; Sarkisian & Portwood, 2003). Social workers have even “lost their lives in the line of duty” (Freese, 2015; National Association of Social Workers, 2013), or face the risk of this. Examples from the literature consulted attests to this.

- In January 2016 Alexandra Mezher, a Swedish social worker, was stabbed multiple times by an Ethiopian migrant known as Youssaf Khaliif Nuur when she intervened in a fight between the assailant and another boy in a child migrant centre in Mölndal, Sweden. She subsequently passed away (Andersson & Fagge, 2016).
- Lara Sobel, a child protection social worker employed by the Washington State in the United States of America (USA), was shot twice by a client known as Jody Herring, who had lost custody of her 9-year-old daughter because of Sobel's intervention (Sancken, 2015).
- Robert Searle was charged in connection with the attack on Phillip Ellison, a social worker rendering social work services in the field of adult care at Lancashire County Council in the United Kingdom (UK) (Pollack, 2010). Ellison passed away after multiple stab wounds sustained.
- Teri Zenner was killed with a chainsaw by a schizophrenic client in Kansas, USA (Sancken, 2015).
- Lisa Putnam, a social worker employed by the Macob County, Michigan, was killed by a client from whom she had removed two abused children (Huff, 1999).

In South Africa Deon Kondos, a social worker from the Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Federasie (a non-governmental organisation rendering welfare and welfare-related services) in Potchefstroom, in the

North-West province of South Africa, was killed by the renowned South African musician Zirk Bergh whilst supervising a visit between this divorced father and his children in 2013. The incensed father took issue with having to see his child under supervision of the social worker and shot and killed the social worker, as well as his ex-wife's new husband, before turning the gun on himself (Taung Daily News, 2013).

When turning to the body of knowledge on the topics of "social workers' personal safety" and "client/service-user violence" the researchers discovered that these topics, to use the words of Creswell (2016:88), have been "understudied" or not substantively researched *domestically*. The MSW study undertaken by Zimunya (2020) entitled "Social workers' personal safety challenges and coping strategies employed during social work service delivery: suggestions for promoting social workers' personal safety" specifically focuses on the topic mentioned and this article is a précis of the key findings. Ncongwane (2014), speaking in general, points to the paucity of literature on workplace safety and violence, indicating that although workplace violence has become a global phenomenon, there are very few studies that have been carried out in South Africa. In a study by Alpaslan and Schenck (2012) focusing on the topic of challenges related to working conditions experienced by social workers practising in rural areas, the challenges of rural social workers' personal safety emerged as a theme and the authors recommended that this be placed on the agenda for further research.

When shifting the focus to the body of knowledge available on the topic *internationally*, Nho and Choi (2009:47), in their article reporting on South Korean managers' views on whether or not social workers are safe in their workplace, conclude that the topics of social work safety and security issues in the workplace have been dealt with "cursorily in social work literature". Alther (2012), a US second-year MSW student who published an article entitled "Workplace Safety for Social Workers: A Student's Analysis and Opinion", points out that her library search of peer-reviewed articles from 1950 to 2012 using the search terms "workplace safety" and "social workers" produced only one relevant article published in 2007. She continues that between the years 2004 and 2008, as a response to an increase in the deaths of social workers in the line of duty, the USA promulgated legislation in the form of the Social Worker Safety Act (Act No. 111 of 2009). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2013) in the USA also formulated guidelines for social worker safety in the workplace (Alther, 2012).

In their search for literature on the topic being reported on in this article, the authors came across several articles on or related to this topic, published internationally, but the articles mentioned below are by no means an exhaustive list. Based on their desktop research conducted, US authors Sarkisian and Portwood (2003) published an article entitled "Client violence against social workers: from increased worker responsibility and administrative mishmash to effective prevention policy". Littlechild's (2005a, 2005b) articles focusing on violence and aggression against child protection workers emerged from studies conducted in the UK. The authors MacDonald and Sirotych (2005) give an account of violence in the social work workplace based on the Canadian experience in their article. Pollack (2010), writing from the USA, provided an international perspective of the topic of "social work and violent clients". Criss (2010), from the South-eastern University in Florida, USA, published an article on the "effects of client violence on social work students". A sample of 595 social work students participated in this study. Based on data obtained from 413 South Korean child protection workers and community workers, Shin (2011) published an article entitled "Client violence and its negative impacts on work attitudes of child protection workers compared to community service workers". In their article focusing on the topic of workplace violence towards social workers, Koritsas *et al.* (2010) encapsulate the experiences of the 266 Australian social workers who made up the sample of their study. Focusing on Israel, Enosh and Tzafir (2015), Tzafir, Enosh and Gur (2013), and Enosh, Tzafir and Gur (2012) wrote extensively about client aggression toward social workers and social work services in this country. In their article Chung and Chun (2015) reported on the workplace stress and job satisfaction among child protective workers in South Korea, also focusing on the buffering effects of protective factors. Emanating from their national survey, Padyab, Chelak, Nygren and Ghazinour (2012) reported on client violence and the mental health status among Iranian social workers in their article.

In the light of the introductory remarks and the body of knowledge outlined above, the researchers formulated a two-pronged problem statement that provided the impetus for embarking on this research journey.

- Social workers often have to render social work services to involuntary service users and practice in environments that are unpredictable and increasingly unsafe, which exposes them to the risk of being verbally and physically assaulted (Enosh *et al.*, 2012; European Commission, DG-V (3) Littlechild, 2005a; Kagan & Itzick, 2019; Koritsas *et al.*, 2010; Laird, 2014; NASW, 2013; Nho & Choi, 2009; Pollack, 2010; Scalera, 1995; Reeser & Wertkin, 2001; Winstanley & Hales, 2015), and where it happens some social workers sustained permanent injuries or tragically lost their lives “in the line of duty” (NASW, 2013).
- On the local front, there seems to be a gap in the body of literature and research on the topic of social workers’ personal safety focusing specifically on their experiences of service-user violence and the coping strategies employed during social work service delivery (Alpaslan & Schenk, 2012; Ncongwane, 2014; Zimunya, 2020).

The two-pronged problem statement informed the *research questions* explored on this research journey. These were:

- What is the nature of service-user violence experienced by social workers during social work service delivery?
- What coping strategies do social workers employ following experiences of service-user violence during social work service delivery?
- What are social workers’ suggestions for ensuring social workers’ personal safety during social work service delivery?

The *goal of the study* was to develop an in-depth understanding of the nature of service-user violence experienced by social workers, as well as the coping strategies they employ following experiences of such violence, and to recommend suggestions for ensuring social workers’ personal safety during social work service delivery.

Facilitating the process of realising the stated aim, the following *objectives* (or steps) were formulated:

- To explore and describe, as findings, the nature of service-user violence experienced by social workers during social work service delivery;
- To explore and describe, as findings, the coping strategies employed by social workers following experiences of service-user violence during social work service delivery;
- To explore and describe, as findings, the suggestions forwarded by social workers for ensuring social workers’ personal safety during social work service delivery.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Proceeding from Maxwell’s (2013:50) assertion that in research a theory can serve as a “coat closet”, with the distinctive constructs making up the theory functioning as “coat hooks” to hook the data on, Schlossberg’s Transition Process Model (1981) was decided upon as the theoretical framework for the study. Schlossberg’s model emerged from her analysis of how adults adapt to transitions and provides a systemic framework for understanding these transitions and identifying the elements that influence individuals’ ability to cope during a transition period and move on, adapting to the transition (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012; Burch, 2020; Gbogbo, 2020). According to Schlossberg (1981), a transition can be an *event*, such as a social worker being physically assaulted by a service user during a home visit, or a *non-event* (e.g. not getting promoted at work, as anticipated) that results in a change in that person's perspective and, as an outcome, transforms relationships, practices, expectations, and responsibilities (Anderson *et al.*, 2012; Gbogbo, 2020; Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006;

Schlossberg, 1981). The impact of the transition will be determined by the setting where the event took place and whether it was regarded as expected or unexpected. Unexpected events, as they are not planned, can disrupt an individual's day-to-day living and functioning (Burch, 2020). Dealing with a transition triggered by event and/or a non-event is viewed as a staged process with the individual "moving in, moving through, and moving out" of the transition (Anderson *et al.*, 2012; Gbogbo, 2020). 'Moving in', in the context of the research, can be interpreted as a social worker changing his view about service users being passive recipients of social welfare services following the experience of a physical assault. 'Moving through' denotes coming to terms with what happened and coping while venturing forth, while 'moving out' points to the end of the transition and the beginning of another transition (Burch, 2020). Schlossberg mentions four contributing factors that could either benefit or detract from the individual's capabilities to cope during a transition period. These are the *situation*, *self*, *support* and *strategies*; they are referred to as the 4-S system in Schlossberg's Transition Process Theory (Burch, 2020; Evans *et al.*, in Gbogbo, 2020; Schlossberg, 2011). The "situation" speaks to the event and the circumstances surrounding it. The "self" refers to the individual's attitude, worldview and resilience. "Support" refers to the convoy of support available at the time of the transition, both institutionally and interpersonally, to provide assistance. "Strategies" refers to the coping strategies the individual employs to modify the situation and manage the stress caused by the situation (Burch, 2020).

## **METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH METHODS**

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this research project as qualitative research is geared towards studying participants in their natural surroundings, aiming to explore and describe the phenomenon being investigated by way of uncovering how participants make sense of and interpret their experiences, trying to understand their social reality, and obtaining multiple sources of data (Creswell, 2016; Hammarberg, Kirkman & De Lacey, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Mohajan, 2018). As elements that are inherent in the qualitative research approach, the collective case study and phenomenological research designs and an explorative, descriptive and contextual strategy of inquiry were employed. The collective case study design afforded the researchers the opportunity to study and gain insight into the case of social worker safety in the execution of social work service delivery from the perspectives of multiple participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Thomas, 2016; Stake, 2005; Yegidis, Weinbach & Myers, 2018). Allowing the participants to reflect on and describe experiences where their personal safety was compromised during social work service delivery, and how they coped following these events, justified the inclusion of the phenomenological research design as a strategy of inquiry. This design concerns itself with exploring personal experiences and how individuals make sense of the world around them, as well as how they transform these experiences into consciousness (Mohajan, 2018; Perry, 2013; O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015; Turner, Balmer & Coverdale, 2013).

Employing the explorative, descriptive and contextual research strategy of inquiry was necessitated by the fact that the topic, domestically viewed, has been under-studied (Babbie, 2013; Creswell, 2016; Thomas, 2016; Yegidis *et al.*, 2018). This called on the researchers to go on a contextually situated (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011) explorative journey to find answers to the research questions and, based on the outcome of the exploration, provide a detailed description (Yegidis *et al.*, 2018) of the service-user violence that was experienced by social workers and how they coped following these events, as well as report on the suggestions made by them on how social workers' personal safety can be ensured.

The population for the study was geographically limited to the Tshwane region in the Gauteng province of South Africa, because of time and cost limitations. From this population 14 participants were purposively recruited using a criterion of inclusion. Only participants who were information-rich about the topic in that they had experienced first-hand incidents of service-user violence and could provide insights into and a greater understanding of the phenomenon being investigated were included (Johnson, Adkins & Chauvin, 2020; Suri, 2011). Interviews, commonly used in qualitative research (Alshenqeti, 2014; Johnson *et al.*, 2020) to collect data from the participants, were conducted in a semi-structured fashion. The interviews were mainly guided by open-ended data-collection questions. The eight steps

proposed by Tesch (in Creswell, 2014) were employed to facilitate the process of data analysis in a systematic and orderly fashion. The strategies of triangulation of data sources and peer debriefing, together with the utilisation of an independent coder to independently analyse the data set and a dense description of the research process and findings (Anney, 2014; Hays, Wood, Dahl & Kirk-Jenkins, 2016), contributed individually and collectively to the study's credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, ensuring that the study was conducted in a trustworthy, reliable and rigorous manner.

Being cognisant of the fact that social researchers have a moral obligation to conduct research in an ethical manner and treat the research participants with integrity, dignity and respect (Punch, 2016; Thomas, 2017), the ethical principles of obtaining the participants' informed consent, anonymising their identities, the confidential management of information, and the provision of debriefing in the event that it would be requested by the participants were upheld. Ethical clearance was obtained from the UNISA Department of Social Work Ethics Review Committee (Ref#: R&EC:24/08/17/51677938\_04) allowing for the research project to be conducted.

### **The demographic profiles of the research participants**

As mentioned earlier in this article, 14 participants made up the sample for this study. The participants, all meeting the stated criterion for inclusion in the study, were recruited from three non-profit organisations (NPOs), namely, the Catholic Women's League (CWL), the Tshwane Leadership Foundation (TLF), and an unnamed NPO, as well as from the Department of Social Development's (DSD) 2013. Mamelodi, Manaka House, Temba, and Soshanguve service points in Tshwane, Gauteng Province, South Africa.

The sites from which the participants were recruited deliver "social welfare services". Such services, according to Streak and Poggenpoel (2005:4), aim "to support, empower and fulfil the rights of vulnerable South Africans as well as help prevent vulnerability". The DSD and the NPOs' welfare service delivery is informed by the Framework for Social Welfare Services (DSD, 2013), which aims to facilitate/guide the implementation of a well-resourced, comprehensive, integrated, rights-based, and quality developmental social welfare service (DSD, 2013).

Against the introductory remarks, an overview of the demographic particulars of the participants is provided in Table 1 below.

**TABLE 1  
THE BIOGRAPHICAL PARTICULARS OF THE PARTICIPANTS**

Pseudonym	Age	Organisation the participant is employed at	Gender	Race	Years of social work practice experience	Highest qualification in Social Work	Social work services rendered
Amahle	26	TLF	F	African	3	Bachelor's degree in Social Work (BSW)	Child and youth care services
Batseba	30	TLF	F	African	3	BSW degree	Social work with refugees
Clara	31	DSD	F	African	6	BSW degree	Generic social work services
Dawn	55	CWL	F	White	10	BSW degree	Generic social work services
Flo	34	DSD	F	African	8	BSW degree	Generic social work services
Jules	30	DSD	F	African	1	BSW degree	Generic social work services
Khomotso	51	DSD	F	African	8	BSW degree	Generic social work services
Lwazi	35	DSD	M	African	5	BSW degree	Generic social work services
Marinus	56	DSD	M	White	36	BSW degree	Generic social work services
Nathi	46	DSD	F	African	10	BSW degree	Generic social work services
Rebone	24	An unnamed NPO	F	African	1	BSW degree	Generic social work services
Thulani	29	DSD	M	African	7	BSW degree	Generic social work services
Unathi	42	DSD	F	African	11	BSW degree	Generic social work services
Velile	32	DSD	F	African	10	BSW degree	Generic social work services

From the table above it becomes clear that the participants' years of experience ranged from one to 11 years. Three of the participants are male and 11 are female, with their ages ranging from 24 to 56 years

of age. In terms of the racial distribution, 12 participants are Black Africans, whilst the remaining two participants are White. The dominance of females in the social work profession is a trend observed both in South Africa and internationally. Khunou, Pillay and Nethononda (2012) hold the view that “the caring professions”, such as social work, teaching, and nursing, are regarded as female-orientated professions. Craik, the President of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) (2019), confirms this to be the case for social work internationally, while Alpaslan (2019) in his South African study entitled “Promoting social work graduates’ employment through the social work curriculum: employers’ perspectives on the employability of UNISA’s newly qualified social workers” noted a similar trend (Cf. Alpaslan & Lombard, 2011:434).

## PRESENTATION OF THEMES AND LITERATURE CONTROL

From the processes of data analysis, the following three themes emerged:

- The nature of service-user violence experienced by social workers during social work service delivery;
- Coping strategies employed by the social workers to deal with the service-user violence experienced;
- Social workers’ suggestions about what can be done to ensure their personal safety.

In the ensuing discussion, each of these themes will be presented with various sub-themes.

### **Theme 1: The nature of service-user violence experienced by social workers during social work service delivery**

Various authors (Guay, Goncalves & Jarvis, 2014; Harris & Leather, 2012; Kim & Hopkins, 2017; Koritsas *et al.*, 2010; Lamothe, Couvrette, Lebrun, Yale-Soulière, Roy, Guay & Geoffrio, 2018; Lynch, 2017; Raczova & Lovasova, 2017; Robson, Cossar & Quayle, 2014; Wacek, 2017; Winstanley & Hales, 2008) make mention of the high prevalence rate of violence towards social workers, especially child-protection social workers (Littlechild, 2005b; Shin, 2011), with such violence being physical, verbal or emotional in nature.

The accounts of the participants interviewed confirm this as they *experienced aggressive behaviour, verbal threats and physical attacks from service users*. Some even *got chased away*, and one reported *being stalked by a service user*. The following excerpts testify to this. Dawn’s account speaks of the aggressive behaviour displayed by service users towards her and her colleagues:

*We have got a huge homeless group... and they will often come to the organisation to demand services. They will demand money... clothes... demand blankets, they will demand anything that we can give them, and when we say ‘no’, they get extremely aggressive... we’ve been spat at, we’ve been sworn at... I have been spat at, sworn at, they’ve tried to kick in the gates... this year [2019], we’ve had to ask twice for ADT [a security company] to come and remove people that were getting overly aggressive at the gate, or the police come...*

Nathi recounted the threatening behaviour of service users:

*...as a mediator... I have to be that person that doesn’t take the side of the other. Most of the time I make sure they understand what my role is, but... they always think that I’m taking sides somehow and some of them... they always threaten me... to kill me or even to make sure that my life doesn’t go any further.*

Dawn shared the following threatening incident:

*I’ve had a client sitting with a knife in the boardroom, and it was a normal table knife and he was sitting there turning it around and he was asking for assistance. So, the idea is if I didn’t give him the assistance, what would happen?*

Khomotso also explained how she was chased away when she went to conduct a home visit to investigate an alleged rape incident:

*I remember I was doing a home visit for a case that was reported... about this guy... It was allegedly claimed that he raped... a little girl. He was so, so violent. When I arrived and introduced myself that I am a social worker... he just got so mad... before I told him my reason for the visit he was just like, 'I am not going to allow you to come into this house, take your car, please get out of this house'... He was just so violent... I was treated like just dirt... [The man said] 'just get out of my house before I can do something that I am going to regret, just get out of the house'. He was so mad; I didn't even get the chance to interview him and I was alone. Can you just imagine, alone attending to such a case?*

Unathi described an incident where a begruntled service user poured petrol over a social worker, intending to set her alight. She said:

*Like there was an incident that happened... [to] one of my colleagues... it was a mediation session. So, this lady thought that the social worker was biased and then she couldn't take it very well. The time when they were called again for the interview, the lady came with petrol in a bottle and then while they were in a session, that lady poured the social worker with petrol... saying 'you side with my husband'.*

Flo described how a service user stalked her and how this incident resulted in her personal safety being threatened:

*It was 2012 and I was pregnant and this client comes in for an intake and I do the intake... Then he started stalking me. He would come during my working hours. He would come just to stare at me whilst sitting at the park next to my workplace here, stare at me and I was not aware all the time until he came to my place where I am staying.*

In support of Flo's experience about being stalked, Regehr and Glancy (2011) point out that social workers are often stalked as a result of their interaction with service users who may be suffering from major mental health problems and who may develop delusions regarding their relationship with the social worker. A 2005 Canadian survey conducted by MacDonald and Sirotych (2005) aiming to investigate the experiences and attitudes of social workers working with violent or potentially violent clients found that 16 percent of the 171 respondents had been stalked at one point in their career.

Some of the participants interviewed also made reference to incidents where they had to render social work services in unsafe areas and under unsafe working conditions, compromising their health and personal safety. The following accounts are provided in support of this sub-theme. Dawn shared the following:

*Sunnyside [a suburb adjacent to central Tshwane] ...it's just a scary area... the one day I went to a flat and as I walked in, the chap asked me as I walked past, he said, 'do you think you are going to come out of the block of flats?' and I said to him 'I should hope so'... When I came back out, he looked at me and said, 'you came out' and I said to him 'yes', he says, 'no, I was watching because I just wanted to make sure that you come out'. So, from his point of view, he was trying to ensure my safety, but it's a bit intimidating, you know. Someone says, 'do you think you are going to come out?'. But the service users themselves, no, I have never had a feeling where a client intimidated me. It's more the environment that makes you just feel unsafe, and you don't like being here after dark either, you know, it's a bit scary.*

Batseba, who provides services to refugees, spoke of areas that are wise not safe health-for social workers:

*It's an area that is not safe, like it's not hygienically clean and then there is a high rate of TB [tuberculosis] and then we're not allowed to wear masks to go out there. Our management...*



*say if you go to people to assist them and we are wearing masks, it's more like you... are disgusting to them, or you become like a threat to them.*

## **Theme 2: Coping strategies employed by the social workers to deal with the service-user violence experienced**

The accounts below showcase the support mechanisms (Khan, in Schlossberg, 1981:10) the participants employed as coping strategies to adapt after having their personal safety compromised during social work service delivery.

Amahle, after an incident where she was physically attacked by a service user, shared how she spoke to her supervisor in an effort to be debriefed:

*...luckily I am supervised every Monday. My supervisor came through and it was that debriefing and telling her, and she actually stepping up to say 'listen we need to put security measures in place', but on my side it was just like it happened, this is it, this is life, welcome to reality, and we just need to prepare for more situations...*

The latter part of Amahle's account confirms the prevailing notion that service-user violence in social work is "inevitable" or an "every day, part of the job" (Shin, 2011).

Thulani enlists support from her colleagues for the purposes of debriefing:

*Sharing with colleagues, because they help me to debrief when I come back from such situations. Also just reporting to my supervisor to let them know what's going on at the particular house, so that if I go there and something happens, they will know.*

Khomotso copes by speaking to her friends. She made reference to this as follows:

*I spoke about it [referring to the incidents where a family reacted aggressively towards her, and when she was chased away] with my friends just to debrief about everything.*

Various scholars (Allen, 2017; Chun & Poole, 2009) assert that enlisting emotional support, assistance and guidance from friends, fellow social workers and supervisors is a healthy, emotion-focused coping strategy for managing stress and controlling one's emotional response in relation to a stressor.

The participants also spoke about practising their faith as a coping strategy to navigate through the turbulent waters of working in unsafe working conditions where they encounter volatile service users, and where they had actually fallen prey to client violence. In support of this coping strategy, Allen (2017) points out that engaging "in spiritual and mindfulness practices such as worship, prayer, reflection... can be a source of transformative solace and a renewal of spirit". The following storylines are provided in support of this sub-theme (coping strategy).

Nathi mentioned how she employs prayer as a protective buffer, stating:

*I always pray that whenever I do... God should guide me through... I always turn to Him for protection and everything, because really, I am dealing with people that are very frustrated most of the time.*

Lwazi spoke of using his personal faith as a coping strategy along the following lines:

*...my faith is the one that kept me going in this profession... so, even if there is danger I always believe if it's time for me to die, it's time. If not, God is going to save me; I am going to be safe. So that's the strategies that I am using. It's internal, based on my faith, my mind is channelled to say anything that must happen, let it happen, but with God's grace I am going to be safe...*

Following incidents where the participants' personal safety was compromised, they arranged for company when doing home visits as a coping strategy. Statements by Flo, who was verbally threatened by a service user, and Marinus, who survived the ordeal of almost being highjacked, are provided in support of this sub-theme. Flo said:

*What I do is, I avoid doing home visits alone. I would say [to] one colleague 'let's go, so that we can at least be two'.*

Marinus said the following:

*...if it's very dangerous, I take a colleague with me; then I am not alone. That I've learnt out of any situation to take a colleague or auxiliary with me. The second instance is to get SAPS or anybody else to accompany...*

Hardy (2016:18), in support of this sub-theme and in an attempt to prevent service-user violence, encourages social workers to "pair up with a colleague and conduct home visits".

### **Theme 3: Social workers' suggestions about what can be done to ensure their personal safety**

The various suggestions forwarded by the participants to ensure the personal safety of social workers will be presented as sub-themes below.

- ***Pay social workers a danger allowance, enabling them to pay for debriefing***

Nathi spoke about this:

*...there was a time when we used to get the danger allowance, but it stopped sometime... I do think... for all the social workers to feel safe, a danger allowance somehow, it has to be considered again... So, if they get extra cash somehow, maybe it will assist them to get that help, especially psychological help; that's the most important thing.*

Latching on to the aspect of debriefing, it was also suggested that the employer organisation refer social workers for counselling following incidents where their personal safety had been compromised. Velile expressed the need for counselling:

*...and also to take us for... like if maybe you've been in an incident whereby you felt traumatised, to take you for counselling or EAP [Employee Assurances Programmes where they could receive debriefing, counselling and become empowered to respond proactively to client violence].*

The provision of counselling and debriefing services is essential to ensuring both the social workers' psychosocial functioning and the quality of service being offered by the employer organisation, as these two aspects are inextricably linked (Conway, 2016).

- ***Raise management's awareness about the personal safety of social workers***

Amahle's account very clearly speaks to this suggestion:

*People are not aware... that our environment is not safe. They tend to think we are dealing with passive clients who are vulnerable all the time. The truth is, that's hardly the case. Yes, you will have those passive clients, but then you will have those aggressive clients... So, it's firstly to make our management aware, because, truly, when I said that, I was... laughed at... when I... spoke to the... external supervisor who is not part of the organisation I work for... The ones inside here [referring to the internal supervisors], they were just like, 'don't be silly, she wouldn't have done that [referring to how a client threatened to attack Amahle] – you know she knows you're a social worker'... So, it was just dismissed, like you are just throwing your toys out of the cot... So, we need to actually educate our managers in the Child and Youth Care Centres... we need to educate them.*

In support of Amahle's suggestion, the International Federation of Social Workers (2012) states that the responsibility of promoting, ensuring and protecting social workers' health and occupational safety must be placed in the hands of the employer agencies.

- **Inform colleagues about your whereabouts; do not go out alone on home visits; and develop a buddy-system**

Batseba's account supports this suggestion:

*...when you're going out, inform other colleagues that's where you are going, so that they can know of your whereabouts, how long you are going to spend there. If you spend more than the time you have estimated, then they should start to contact you or... make means to get hold of you. And then also have company wherever you are going – don't go to a place alone...*

Dawn also suggested that social workers should go out accompanied by others:

*...You can ask a colleague to go with you if you are unsure... Develop good relationships. Our organisation has a very good relationship with the police... they do what they can to ensure our safety at work. When you go out into the community... there is a tremendous amount of goodwill with the people... people are willing to help you...*

Hardy (2016:18), in support of this sub-theme, states: “pair up with a colleague and conduct home visits”. The buddy-system is also encouraged by the NASW (2013), particularly because it minimises the risks that social workers are likely to face in terms of their personal safety in the field. Liquid Personnel and Munro (2015) are of the view that regardless of a social worker's level of skill and experience, it is impossible to do commendable work in a non-supportive environment and without the support of other key stakeholders, such as police officers, to ensure both the social workers' and the service users' personal safety.

- **Train social workers in self-defence and how to ensure their personal safety**

Flo's account is provided in support of this suggestion:

*I would say they should train us. I don't know what training they call it – this basic one to be able to defend ourselves like the police get. If they can train us as social workers to be able to defend ourselves to say 'when somebody attacks you, this is what you do'...*

Like Flo, various scholars call for social workers to be trained on aspects of personal safety and preventative practices, such as self-defence and de-escalation training (Kim & Hopkins, 2015; Kim & Hopkins, 2017; Newhill, 1995; Ringstad, 2005).

- **Employers must bolster their initiatives to ensure social workers' personal safety**

Jules, in this regard, suggested secure, clean office spaces and roadworthy cars:

*...the offices that we have, most of them is an open plan; I mean that alone it's not safety. Secondly, our offices are a mess. I think if we are prioritised in terms of better offices to start with. They [referring to management] always speak of budget when we speak, of course, but then most of the time the G-vehicles [the vehicles that are offered by government for home visits] are not even safe. You get stuck somewhere in and the only person who can assist you is the transport officer [employee to assist when a G-vehicle breaks down]. You cannot allow anyone else to help you. That also is very not safe, because anyone can come and claim to try to help you and God knows what might happen...*

- **Resources being acquired, such as cell phones and GPS**

Khomotso recommended:

*...we can have cell phones with us, so that I can notify the supervisors that 'OK, I am here... what, what, what', and we can also have the GPS you know. That can show us the direction and all that, because sometimes we just drive the car and these people, they see the G-cars and already they know that it's a government car. You can be put in a risk of being hijacked, you know, and with hijacking, anything is possible, rape and all that.*

- **Provide social workers with panic buttons, or install these in offices, along with security cameras**

Lwazi articulated the suggestion about the installation of panic buttons along the following lines:

*There is no emergency button that you need to press to call them [referring to the security officers] to come and assist, so I think if they can consider that, put an emergency button or something...*

Marinus's account points to the suggestion of security cameras being installed and he also spoke about the effectiveness of employing a private security company:

*I think the security at the department can be jacked up [increased]... Don't... one day... have a task team and the next security [guards]. Security has improved a lot since we got private security. The government ones, they were not good; they just let people in, fill in forms, and that's it... I think [security] cameras to cover the whole place. Our whole office is not covered with cameras.*

- **More security guards should be employed**

In an effort to promote the personal safety of social workers, Amahle suggested that:

*I would love to have a security guard outside on the patio... who monitors everyone's movements, coming in and out... So, we need more security personnel; we need more check-ups. I am for the panic buttons... even though I do feel it is a long stretch... everybody probably wants it, but more security personnel.*

In support of this sub-theme and the participants' accounts provided, Perkins, Beecher, Aberg, Edwards and Tilley (2017) mention that employers should furnish helping professionals with panic buttons or personal alarms, install fixed emergency alarms in offices, and employ security guards in an attempt to protect employees' personal safety. Bickley (2014) suggests that agency staff must know where the vehicle safety equipment is and how to use it, and that each vehicle must have communication equipment so as to allow staff to communicate in times of danger.

## DISCUSSION

Social work is a risky profession with social workers having to operate in risky situations (NASW, 2013; Robson *et al.*, 2014; Whitaker & Arrington, 2008; Winstanley & Hales, 2015) In rendering social work services, social workers may be physically attacked and find themselves at the receiving end of the aggressive behaviour of distressed, frustrated and hostile service users whose (sometimes unrealistic) service expectations and needs were not met. These attacks and displays of aggression were not only limited to the service users' homes, but transpired in the social work offices and while the social workers were on the road during fieldwork. The physical, verbal and emotional attacks on social workers by service users seems to confirm the prevailing notion that service-user violence in social work seems to be "inevitable" or an "everyday, part of the job" (Enosh *et al.*, 2012; Harris & Leather, 2012; Koritsas *et al.*, 2010; Raczova & Lovasova, 2017; Robson *et al.*, 2014; Shin, 2011; Winstanley & Hales, 2008). This seems to be true, especially for social workers employed in the field of child-protection services who are more frequently exposed to verbal and physical threats and abuse by service users, especially when they have to remove children in need of care and usually when service users are at their worst and experiencing severe challenges, thus making them susceptible to outbursts of frustration, anger and aggression in the process (Kim & Hopkins, 2017; Lamothe *et al.*, 2018; Lynch, 2017). In addition, social workers who must conduct home visits, especially in unsafe communities that are often riddled with crime and violence, are more at risk of having their personal safety being compromised (Pace, 2015). Experiencing service-user violence and aggression has a negative impact on the social workers' functioning, leaving them feeling exposed, helpless, embarrassed and defenceless, as well as leading to a lack of self-regard (Jussab & Murphy, 2015; Lanctôt & Guay, 2014). Social workers seem to employ various coping strategies as a way of dealing with the incidents and situations in which their personal safety was compromised. Navigating each incident as a "transition", based on Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Process Model, and in the process of facilitating their "moving through" the transition (Schlossberg,

2011), the participants used what this author refers to as “support” and “strategies”. They processed the incidents where their safety was compromised in an attempt to change the course of events by enlisting a convoy of organisational and interpersonal support (Khan, in Schlossberg, 1981; Pearlin & Schooler, in Schlossberg, 2011:161), such as speaking to a supervisor, colleagues, friends, or a therapist. In addition, the participants drew on their faith as a coping strategy, an important ingredient providing support in highly stressful situations, helping one to bounce back after a crisis (Allen, 2017; Pearlin & Schooler, in Schlossberg, 2011:161). Other preventative strategies to ensure their personal safety, such as enlisting the help of the police and organising a buddy system when conducting home visits (Hardy, 2016), were adopted. On the aspect of coping strategies employed by the participants to process the incidents where their personal safety was compromised, they employed what Papalia, Sterns, Feldman and Camp (2007:425) would classify as “constructive ways of coping”, as these coping strategies assisted them in giving meaning to the incidents that happened in a way that did not harm or derail their relationships with the self or others.

## CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the suggestions made by the participants, and in view of promoting the personal safety of social workers, the following recommendations are made.

- The employers (namely, the DSD and the NPOs), the South African Council for Social Service Professions, the organised labour union organisations representing social workers, and social workers themselves should develop uniform minimum standards and policies on:
  - secure, safe, clean, and hazard-free workspaces and environments preventing injury and illness;
  - safety protocols and practices when engaging with service users at the office and during home visits and in the community, such as informing colleagues where home visits will be conducted; not leaving keys in the door when seeing service users at the office; establishing a buddy system; or establishing police and community networks that allow someone to accompany social workers who are entering high-risk areas or investigating child abuse and molestation or domestic/community violence cases;
  - resources and equipment, and the provision thereof, to ensure the personal safety of social workers during home visits, i.e. the following aspects were specifically mentioned by the participants: roadworthy vehicles fitted with tracking devices; GPS to allow the accurate determination of geographical locations; cell phones; and panic buttons and pepper spray to use in self-defence; and
  - resources and the provision thereof to ensure social work safety in the workplace, i.e. the following aspects were specifically mentioned by the participants: armed and well-trained security officers; thorough security checks of service users; and panic buttons and security cameras in the office.
- The employers (namely, the DSD and the NPOs) should arrange for and offer training programmes to all staff in their employ, not only social workers, in terms of:
  - self-defence, de-escalation and personal safety training;
  - informing them about the personal safety policies, protocols and practices within the organisation; and
  - the use of resources and equipment ensuring their personal and communal safety.
- Social workers and their labour union representatives should, through all channels and avenues available, keep management informed about the personal safety challenges facing social workers in the execution of their duties and hold them accountable for prioritising social workers’ personal safety.

- The employers (namely, the DSD and the NPOs) should have a professional network of support available to offer counselling and debriefing to social workers whose personal safety has been compromised. In addition, they need to budget for such services when they are outsourced and allow social workers to access these services.

## CONCLUSION

This article provided an account of the dangers social workers face in the line of executing their duties and the coping strategies they employ following experiences of service-user violence. In addition, the participants made suggestions for promoting social workers' personal safety. This paper also underscores the fact that ensuring the personal safety of social service professionals is the responsibility of employers (namely, the DSD and the NPOs), the South African Council for Social Service Professions, the organised labour union organisations representing social workers, and social workers themselves.

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