

SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES OF WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTHS AT CHILD AND YOUTH CARE CENTRES IN DURBAN

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ABSTRACT

Social workers employed in Child and Youth Care Centres (CYCCs) play a critical role in offering therapeutic services for children and youths in need of care. This article explores social workers' experiences working in seven different CYCCs in Durban. It is based on qualitative research using an exploratory, descriptive research design with a sample of eleven social workers. Social workers in CYCCs faced challenges including role overload and overlap, lack of adequate resources, safety and security concerns and limited support, which caused strain and compromised social workers' core role in CYCCs. The article offers practical solutions and recommendations for addressing these challenges.

Keywords: *child and youth care centres, children, therapeutic services, social workers, strain, youth*

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Social workers' task can be difficult because they interact with individuals experiencing pain originating from a range of life problems (Brown, Barker & Wilcox, 2012; Knight, 2015). The perception is that social workers are emotionally healthy, resilient and capable of working through problems, but in reality they experience serious emotional, psychological and physical hurt themselves (Bride, 2007; Ogińska-Bulik, 2005; Taylor, 2016) which may prevent them from performing their functions optimally. Despite social workers being offered auxiliary social support (Zibengwa & Bila, 2021) and working together with Child and Youth Care Workers (CYCW) in CYCCs, there are challenges. But because of the limited researched evidence, social workers' role and function in the prevention and care of children's bio-psycho-social wellbeing and their own improved professionalism remains largely undocumented. This article contends that social workers are essential role players in the care and protection of children and should be optimally productive and supported to perform their duties. Challenges faced by CYCC social workers in various ways (to be discussed in this article) impede the functioning of these social workers and thus also the care of children placed in CYCCs, the subject of this article.

Research has revealed some of the challenges experienced by social workers in general, but has not yet offered pragmatic evidence for improving their services, their wellbeing (Strydom, Spolander, Engelbrecht & Martin, 2017), their training, support and self-care, all of which compound the effects of vicarious traumatisation of social workers (Federico, 2017). Newell and McNeil (2011) discuss social worker burnout and stress related to high caseloads, fatigue and challenging clients. Furthermore, Strydom *et al.* (2017) and Munro (2011) discuss the impact of the demands of management and inspection processes from the Department of Social Development (DSD) and low pay, all of which prevent the offering of comprehensive, effective services for children and youths in need of care and protection (Nhedz & Makofane, 2015). A social worker experiencing these challenges may perform poorly, such as missing court and case deadlines, mismanaging caseloads, and not seeing cases through to completion (Joseph, 2017; Strydom *et al.*, 2017).

Children and youths in need of care are placed in group homes and CYCCs for several reasons, including a breakdown in the child's family setting or foster-care placement (Barford & Whelton, 2010). Many of these children and youths are deemed to be "at-risk" to themselves or others. Some engage in self-harming behaviours, act out sexually, and become verbally or physically abusive towards peers and CYCC workers (Glover, 2018). Such problems demonstrate the difficult task that social workers in CYCCs face while attempting to provide care and protection to these children. Understanding these social workers' frustrations and challenges in optimally carrying out their responsibilities is essential and can not only directly improve services, but also the policies that can permeate future design interventions (Hasenfeld, 2010). This research-based article explores these concerns.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

An ecosystemic perspective was employed to locate the experiences of social workers at CYCCs across various dimensions that affect or interfere with their services to children and youths. It accordingly allows for recommending comprehensive interventions that target the dimensions directly or in various different

ways. In this study the researcher used the ecological systems theory to illuminate the many levels or systems that impact on social workers, whether at the micro, meso or macro/exo levels. At the micro/meso system levels, this involves social workers' relationships at the individual/ group/ 'family' level (micro), and the article will specifically be related to the CYCC work environment (meso level). At the macro level or at broader social, organisational or political levels (macro or exo levels) the socio-political environment within which CYCW is carried out and the experiences of social workers will be a focus.

RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The study explored social workers' experiences working with children and youths at selected CYCCs in Durban by listening to their voices. The objectives were to explore the roles, functions, and experiences of social workers in selected CYCCs in the Durban metro area and examine feasible solutions and make recommendations.

Research methodology

A qualitative method using an exploratory, descriptive research design with a sample of 11 social workers working with children and youths in seven selected CYCCs located around Durban were interviewed in this study.

This being a qualitative study, sample size was limited to a small number of 11 (at which point data saturation was achieved), as it was important to glean rich data from a small select sample that met the research criteria. The sample of 11 social workers was selected using the snowballing sampling method. The selection criteria included two years of social work experience in a CYCC. To begin the data collection, two CYCCs were contacted and two social workers were interviewed. The staff interviewed then referred the researcher to other staff members in five other CYCCs. Ultimately the 11 social workers interviewed in the study came from seven CYCCs in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal.

Semi-structured questions in individual interviews were used by the researcher to obtain meaningful content on the lived experiences of social workers working in CYCCs, with each interview lasting about an hour and a half. A descriptive research design "accepts the value of context and setting", and "searches for a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon under study" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016: 67). For the study, it was imperative to consider the participants' thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptions, best achieved through individual interviews. Analysis was accomplished through content analysis where were was analysed by being categorised using three steps namely: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles, Huberman & Saldahna 2014; Neuman, 2011). At each level of analysis, constant comparison was employed to clean the data further until themes emerged from the data.

Trustworthiness and ethical issues

Rahman (2017) points out that qualitative research approaches sometimes omit contextual sensitivities, concentrate more on meanings and experiences, and hence undermine the study's research merit. The researcher comprehensively described the study's context, enhancing its dependability, confirmability and replicability for similar contexts.

The researcher's investigative thoughtfulness (Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas & Caricativo, 2017) was necessary as the first author was previously employed in the context of child and youth care work, and could have been subjectively influenced in obtaining and reporting on results (Barusch, Gringeri & George, 2011). Hence credibility was important and achieved by valuing and fully reporting on the 'expert' accounts provided by participants. The supervisory process, where data notes were subjected to supervisory scrutiny, ensured the principle of rigour in this regard.

A limited sample of 11 social workers from seven child and youth care centres does not allow for generalisability or objectivity (Harry & Lipsky, 2014). These challenges were mitigated by employing

triangulation of data (use of participants from seven different centres) and self-examination/supervision from the University regarding the presence of preconceived assumptions and biases toward particular aspects of the data.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal granted ethical clearance (HSS/0070/018M) after a rigorous process of review of the research proposal and ethical requirements were observed. It was important not to interview the children themselves, but rather the service providers as children at the centres were predominantly under-age and so could not consent to participate in the study. Moreover, the research intent was to explore the challenges of service providers (social workers). Confidentiality, integrity, professional dignity and trustworthiness of the information, as well as the participants' anonymity, were all explained to participants in their letters of consent. Participants were assured of being able to withdraw from the study at any time without question or penalty.

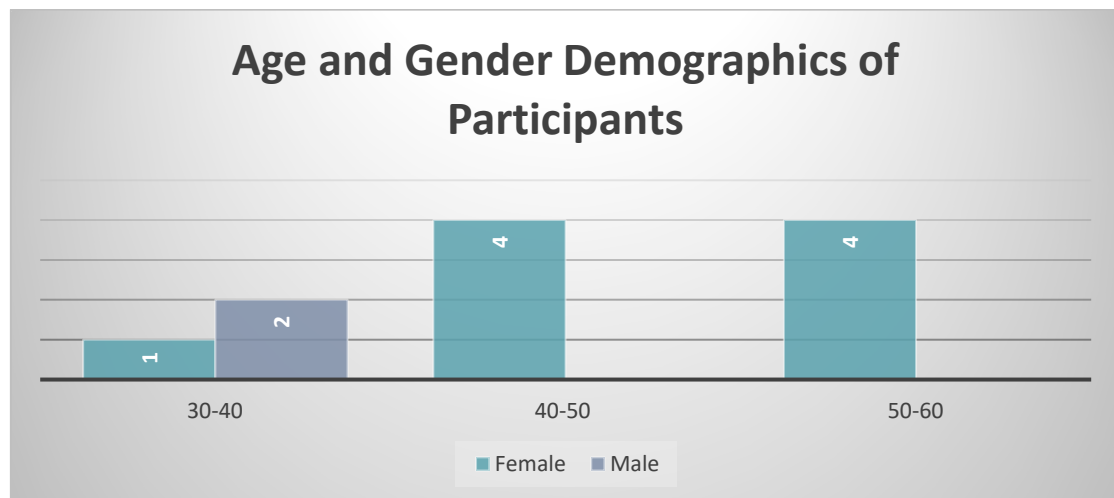
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of the research findings are presented in three sections: demographics of participants; geographic presentation of CYCCs; and themes.

Demographics of participants

The gender and age of the 11 participants included nine females and two males between the ages of 30 and 60 years of age. There were two males and one female between the ages of 30 to 40 years. Four female participants were between 40 and 50 years of age and another four females between the ages of 50 and 60 years.

**FIGURE 1
AGE AND GENDER OF PARTICIPANTS**



Geographic representation of CYCCs

In this research the 11 participants presented seven CYCCs in the Durban Metro, and these CYCCs are demographically highlighted below. These figures represent four institutions that were in affluent areas and the three that were in the peripheral areas of the city.

**TABLE 1
GEOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF CYCCS**

North of Durban	2
Central Durban	2
Inner West	1
Outer West	2

Themes

The following themes were identified from participants' lived experiences while working in CYCCs.

Context of complex problems of children

Thesen (2014: iv) indicates that behaviour of children in CYCCs includes "truancy, stealing, absconding, aggressiveness, inappropriate sexual behaviour and development problems". Compounding this is self-deceit, as noted in the example that follows.

Children who are abandoned seek or 'dream' of their families. Some of the social workers highlighted that these children sometimes run away and make up stories about their parents. In some instances, they quickly associate themselves with strangers whom they call 'mother', as discussed in the following quote:

It's difficult to deal with them because they seek that attention that sometimes the attention that is normal, they sometimes jump fences, go outside and then said "I was going to see my mom", they see "my mom", they seek mom everywhere, they want to bond with people they don't know. (Interviewee K)

It was feared that the complex nature of children's problems was not only left unattended, but worse, exacerbated by poor services, a macro concern that needs specific policy to change the status quo.

Participants lamented that the absence of permanency planning could lead to increased behaviour deviation (micro levels of stress among all children) and their own stress:

The behaviour of the children changes at times in the event that I cannot give them answers on when they are going home, especially if management is not taking my input seriously or the case manager is not taking working towards implementing the exit plan for reintegration. (Interviewee L)

It is difficult when the child is not coping at all; when the child is falling apart, and when the child is associated with drug dealers in the community, it becomes stressful for us as social workers. (Interviewee I)

Role overload, overlap and poor teamwork

From the ecosystemic perspective, Agere (2014) states that social work embraces the notion of human beings needing appropriate environmental support to function effectively. It was found that a macro-level policy on admission, schooling, and medical assistance challenged professional service provision because of the multiple roles being performed:

Hmmm... There are so many responsibilities, admitting children, ensuring that they get all that they need, taking care of counselling, ensuring that they go to school, renewing of court orders, everything that you can think of, like ensuring that they get proper medical help. They are ensuring that all their needs are met and doing everything that is needed to ensure that children's needs are well taken care of. That is a lot of work. (Interviewee C)

Inadequate staffing can seriously increase the pressure of high caseloads, leading to stress (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2010) and high staff turnover (McFadden, Campbell & Taylor, 2014). Organisational support is noted as a reliable indicator of retention (Martin, Hanne & Tuija 2019). In this study workload, an inadequate workforce and staff turnover were highlighted, interlinked, and cited as challenges by all participants:

Hmmm... I will take you back. When I started, I was the only social worker – I was doing everything. Ah... at the time, they decided to hire another social worker, but that social worker decided to leave and got work near home. Then I also worked alone. Then later, they replaced her. But at the moment I am alone again. So, our centre is registered to take 120 children, and we are required to have four qualified social workers. Now I am alone doing everything [with emphasis] – duties of four social workers. (Interviewee E)

Role overload and overlap (mesosystemic influence) seriously affected services to children:

Social workers do admissions of children referred by outside social workers; they make sure of the fact that statutory work is in order, so the court orders do not expire. They make sure children go to court when they needed to renew court orders. (Interviewee G)

Unfortunately, some of the CYCC social workers in the study performed only limited counselling and support, despite Agere (2014) citing this as a core function, because they had to play multiple roles that were sometimes not directly related to professional service. Hence at a micro level, their individual functioning was affected; this was overshadowed by meso and macro concerns over role overlap or performing functions that were not strictly professional. The interconnection of the micro, meso and macro systems of influence is apparent:

My situation is a bit unique because I am also the manager of the home. This is quite critical, and it's been because of the funding within our agency because we were going downhill, and we had to look at how we were going to save. It is a challenge because you do a lot of administrative, social work, and when it comes to the actual therapeutic side, that sometimes gets affected. (Interviewee B)

What is lacking is that it works better if there is a full-time therapist. Someone who is there to provide therapy for the children. Not to be everywhere. If there is a problem, they call you. So now you are counselling, then you are disciplining – it is not right. You are guiding the mom. Then you are everywhere. (Interviewee A)

CYCC social workers were clearly found to be offering services that did not fall within the ambit of their own roles and responsibilities (micro functions affected by policies and practices at a meso and macro systemic level); instead, they were disciplinarians or performed reunification duties commonly carried out by placement social workers. Ensuring that all statutory paperwork of a child placed in a CYCC is valid was challenging, especially where placement social workers failed to renew court orders in time. If the court order expired, the CYCC was not paid for that specific child because the court order is no longer valid, adding further pressure on the centres' finances. Placement workers not performing their duties (also cited by Calitz, Roux and Strydom 2014; Proudlock, Matthews & Jamieson 2014;) and removing statutory powers of CYCC workers strains an already serious staffing situation, distressing both child and worker where they must trace the child's family themselves or witness the child being disgruntled and/or displaying behavioural problems:

The challenge is that I have to chase and remind them about their duties. You know... If I do not remind them that order will lapse. Every day you call them, you remind them. You like: really, does it have to be like that? Remind people who have supervisors and management who are paid to do their work. But because we are the ones who are getting paid (subsidy), we have to do it. (Interviewee E)

The ideal was not achieved because of high caseloads, staff turnover and lack of resources; this finding is not unique to this study and is also highlighted by Hope and Van Wyk (2018) and Calitz *et al.* (2014). Yet little seems to have changed to address the problem since 2018. Teamwork challenges and role overlap or confusion were thus clear findings in the study.

Strydom *et al.* (2017) highlight the inefficiencies in non-profit organisations (NPOs), which were confirmed in this study. Multi-tasking in the study was found to lead to burnout and stress, confirmed by Marc and Osvat (2013). Lizano and Barak (2015) further mention that these negative experiences lead to job dissatisfaction and poor service quality, as also found in the current study. Team worker relationships are vital in promoting job gratification in any work environment (Redmond, 2014). In the study, such teamwork (exosystem influence) was clearly absent from placement workers and line managers, except in only three of the seven instances.

Teamwork with board/management was also absent. Like the authors of this article, Agere (2014) also found that most participants indicated no culture of consultation among those in top management positions with those who were doing the work. In most cases, this deficiency was because those in management were unable to empathise with the social workers:

They only invite you there, but they are not expecting to get your input. You are there because you have to give feedback about your work. (Interviewee A)

So, the funny part is that no matter how hard you are trying, they will keep on adding and adding. You end up picking that they do not understand your work because it is very difficult. Anyway, they do not understand. If they see you smiling, they think you are okay. They will think, Oh...she is coping, it is fine. It is not appreciated at all. Okay, you get a salary. A salary is a salary. I think that sometimes people have to understand that this is too much for one person. Anyways, they will look at the finances to see whether they can afford to hire the other person. Then they say no, there is money. If you appear as if you are coping, you will cope until you collapse. (Interviewee A)

Poor supervision training

The SACSSP's ethical guidelines for practice (SACSSP, 2007) stipulates professional supervision for all social workers. Caruso and Fawcett (2007) and O'Donoghue (2015) state categorically that supervision improves staff morale and efficacy, a microsystemic benefit that the CYCCs could not experience because of the absence of supervisory support:

It's very difficult to be without supervision because pastor doesn't know anything about what social workers supposed to do and basic supervision. What I can say is that he doesn't know anything. He is just relying on you that what needs to be done on the field and asking how are the things going...? (Interviewee D)

That is a challenge. A social worker is supposed to have a supervisor. As I have mentioned that I work for an NGO that does not have enough money, so I supervise myself. (Interviewee B)

Luckily, I have enough experience. Right now, if you look at the institution and think of someone who has just qualified – how will they survive in an institution when there is no supervision or guidance? It will be difficult to survive. I think my organisation was lucky to get a person with my experience where I can work independently. But I think one who just qualified will struggle. It will just be a disaster. (Interviewee F)

The study clearly revealed that only a few CYCCs had adequately trained CYCWs, as discussed by Thesen (2014) as well. In most instances, social workers were supervisors and trainers of lay CYCWs, a mesosystemic influence that has a bearing on macrosystem practice of not fulfilling this requirement:

That is a challenge because they were employed a long time ago when qualification was not needed. So, they did not need certification. They hired people from the community who are not trained as CYCWs. Although the act now requires it, that we hire people who are well trained. At the moment, we have only three that are qualified. Most of them are just ill-trained. Some have matric; some do not. This is a challenge because you have to train them because they do not know how to discipline or parent a child. They are living in the old system, which is against the Children's Act. (Interviewee D)

Well, when they first came here, they were not qualified, so the whole lot was not qualified and not subsidised; they also struggled with caring for the children. (Interviewee B)

This was very draining and difficult because some of the CYCWs were causing secondary trauma in children's lives by shouting at them or threatening to punish the children physically. Limited training and numbers of CYCWs was an added problem compounded by a lack of funding (exosystemic influence) that affected services and job satisfaction (a finding supported by Van der Westhuizen, 2019).

Residential social workers and CYCCs faced the predicament of the power inequality between the Department of Social Development (DSD) and these institutions. A study by Dlamini and Sewpaul (2015) highlighted that incapacitation and being overwhelmed have led many social workers to seek other employment. Such a turn of events only exacerbates the problem faced by CYCCs and further punishes children in need of care. Agere, Tanga and Kang'ethe (2017) and Proudlock and Budlender (2011) confirm that CYCCs are confronted with discrepancies in salaries between CYCCs and government employees in favour of the government social workers. Low wages were a glaring concern for some of the participants, resulting in social workers searching for better-paid employment. Financial constraints in the form of low salaries were not only impacting on the work environment (an exosystemic influence) of social workers, but their personal financial status was also negatively affected:

Finances – if DSD were to take over CYCCs and make sure that all professionals are paid. Or provide professionals that will offer support to CYCCs. The National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW) wanted to train caregivers, but now they are saying they do not have money. Caregivers are also not earning enough to train themselves. (Interviewee C)

Safety at CYCCs

CYCCs need 24-hour security personnel according to DSD regulations (macro-systemic policy influence). All participants highlighted that they were denied this, being instead exposed to recurrent theft and break-ins at CYCCs, a finding corroborated by Chung and Chun (2015). Being in an environment where crime is rife (macro concern) has prompted policy considerations to safeguard and protect CYCCs, but this policy is not implemented:

Before it was not safe, people were attacked, so we had to change. But later, it changed. There is no money, but we had to get security... Where we are, the crime is very high; hence security is very important. (Interviewee L)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Social workers' challenges in CYCCs appear to be even greater than the general day-to-day experiences of social workers. Understanding the above challenges experienced at the various systemic levels of a unique context of complex behaviour, role overload and overlap, poor teamwork, limited supervision and support and power inequality all contribute to inadequate service provision and poor job satisfaction. The call supported by these findings is for multi-stakeholder engagement to redress these challenges, for quality assurance, and financial and human resource support to CYCCs. CYCC social worker roles are strained by having to perform non-related duties apart from those that compromise the core role of social workers in a CYCC. To this end, we make the following recommendations for practice and training, as well as for policy development and future research

Practice and education

Social workers should not supervise child and youth care workers, but rather themselves access professional supervision by a registered social worker to clarify their responsibilities and ensure optimal services to the children. Supervision and training were a challenge and a concern expressed by participants. Thus, there should be funding and support for upskilling existing CYCWs who are already employed by CYCCs. With widespread crime and security concerns affecting CYCCs nationally as well, subsidisation of security personnel in CYCCs is essential and should be included in workplace budgeting.

Policy

Role overload and overlap could be addressed if DSD and CYCCs jointly engage to review policies (macro influence) to improve collaboration and teaming, not only to ensure better services but also to lighten the burden of an excessively heavy workload. At the policy level, the children's court should be hesitant to extend court orders of children in CYCCs after two years. Instead, there should be a requirement for a thorough assessment of the viability of family reunification or alternate care, if

appropriate; this is a function that can only be performed if resources are targeted accordingly. Policies supporting CYCC work and the issue of role overload should be implemented such as government/DSD subsidising qualified CYCWs as per the mandatory ratio of 30 children to one social worker. DSD should also enforce and assist CYCCs in employing only qualified and experienced CYCWs and deploying additional social workers to CYCCs. In addition, a policy should be introduced that ensures equal pay for social workers at CYCCs and at the DSD.

Future research

Future research in other geographical areas with larger samples could generate further discussion on the problems faced by CYCCs. Geopolitical concerns such as poverty, unrest, and climate that affect services micro systemically or at wider levels could be investigated.

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