

SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

by

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DECLARATION

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DEDICATION

“Sugarcane is sweetest at its joints”

African proverb

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SUMMARY

Studies across the globe have shown that workplace violence against social workers has become an endemic problem in both developed and developing countries. Workplace violence can therefore be classified as physical violence, verbal abuse, threats, intimidation, harassment, and/or aggression. Such traumatic experiences arising from workplace violence exposure are of particular concern where access to treatment and/or psychosocial support is often unattainable. Workplace violence against social work employees is a common occurrence in South Africa. However, there are serious limitations in the present literature on understanding workplace violence in the South African social service profession.

The epidemic of workplace violence remains largely under-reported and under-researched; existing research studies focus primarily on healthcare personnel workplace violence. The primary goal of the research was to gain an understanding of South African social workers' experiences of workplace violence, to better understand the causes and implications of this phenomenon. Understanding South African social worker's experiences of workplace violence is of great significance to address and prevent the phenomena of workplace violence in a social work setting. For purpose of the study, a qualitative research approach was implemented, along with the exploratory and descriptive research designs. Purposive and snowball sampling were employed to identify prospective research participants of the seventeen semi-structured interviews. From the seventeen social workers, experiences of workplace violence within the South African context telephonic interviews were used due to Covid-19 rules and regulations and as REC suspended face to face interviews. Gathered data was analysed using thematic content analysis.

The key findings of the study revealed that South African social workers experience various forms of workplace violence in practice. It varies according to individuals, organisations, and communities. Workplace violence occurs in all five types of workplace violence namely, client-related workplace violence, co-workers related workplace violence, employer to employee workplace violence, and relationships related workplace violence and organisational related workplace violence. Factors contributing to workplace violence to name the few (see, for example, lack resources, lack of safety, inability to deal with the situational crises, lack of workplace violence

policy, support, and measures Non-Governmental Organisations, favouritism, unfair treatment, bullying newly appointed employees and divisions within the organisation). It was found that workplace violence does exist in the social work profession, but it is just that no one is talking about it. It was found that newly appointed social workers are being bullied, picked up a lot and when addressing these unethical treatments to supervisors, the supervisor does nothing and senior employees get away with it. To address workplace violence, it is recommended that workplace violence policies, measures and support should be implemented in South African social work practice to safeguard social workers from workplace violence. It has been recommended that the social worker's safety should be the priority, provide resources, a collaboration between DSD and NGOs, apply professionalism and attend reported issues and the DSD need to educate the communities and clients about social workers role.

OPSOMMING

Studies oor die wêreld heen toon dat werkplekgeweld teenoor maatskaplike werkers 'n endemiese probleem geword het in beide ontwikkelde en onderontwikkelde lande. Werkplekgeweld kan geklassifiseer word as fisiese geweld, verbale mishandeling, dreigemente, intimidasie, teistering en/of aggressie. Sulke traumatiese ervarings voortspuitend uit blootstelling aan werkplekgeweld is van besondere kommer waar toegang tot behandeling en/of psigososiale ondersteuning dikwels onvolhoubaar is. Werkplekgeweld teenoor maatskaplike werkers is 'n algemene tendens in Suid-Afrika. Daar is ernstige beperkings in die teenswoordige literatuur oor die begrip van werkplekgeweld in die Suid Afrikaanse maatskaplikewerk-professie.

Die epidemie van werkplekgeweld is 'n ongerapporteerde en -nagevorsde fenomeen; bestaande navorsingstudies fokus primêr op werkplekgeweld van gesondheidsorgpersoneel. Die primêre doel van hierdie navorsing is om 'n begrip te ontwikkel vir Suid Afrikaanse maatskaplike werkers se ervarings van werkplekgeweld ten einde die oorsake en implikasies van hierdie verskynsel beter te begryp.

Die begrip van die Suid Afrikaanse maatskaplike werkers se ervarings van werkplekgeweld is van groot betekenis vir die aanspreek en voorkoming van die verskynsel van werkplekgeweld in 'n maatskaplikewerk-opset. Vir die doel van die studie is 'n kwalitatiewe navorsingsbenadering geïmplementeer, saam met verkennende en beskrywende navorsingsontwerpe. Doelbewuste en sneeubal steekproefneming is gebruik om voornemende deelnemers te identifiseer vir die gestruktureerde onderhoude. Telefoniese onderhoude is benut om die werkplekgeweldervarings van sewentien maatskaplike werkers in te win, en om die Covid-19 reëls en regulasies na te kom. Data is geanaliseer deur die benutting van inhoudanalise.

Die sleutelbevindinge het aan die lig gebring dat die Suid Afrikaanse maatskaplike werkers verskeie vorms van werkplekgeweld in die praktyk ervaar. Dit verskil volgens individue, organisasies en gemeenskappe. Werkplekgeweld kom voor in al die vyf tipes van werkplekgeweld naamlik, klientverwante werkplekgeweld, mede-werkers verwante werkplekgeweld, werkgewer tot werkgewer werkplekgeweld, verhoudingsverwante werkplekgeweld en organisatoriese verwante werkplekgeweld.

Bydraende faktore tot werkplekgeweld, om slegs 'n paar te noem, is die gebrek aan hulpbronne, gebrek aan veiligheid, onvermoë om situasionele krisisse aan te spreek, gebrek aan werkplekgeweldbeleid, ondersteuning en maatreëls in partikulêre Nie-Regeringsorganisasies, voorkeurbehandeling, onbillike behandeling, en boelie van nuut aangestelde werknemers in die organisasie. Daar is bevind dat werkplekgeweld wel binne die maatskaplikewerk-professie bestaan, maar niemand praat daaroor nie. Daar is verder bevind dat nuut aangestelde maatskaplike werkers geboelie word, en wanneer hierdie onetiese behandeling aan supervisors gerapporteer word, word niks gedoen om dit aan te spreek nie, en senior werknemers word nooit aangespreek nie. Daar is ook bevind dat maatskaplike werkers wat vir NROs werk, self werkplekgeweld ervaar of 'n getuie daarvan is, anders as maatskaplike werkers in diens is van byvoorbeeld die staat. Ten einde werkplekgeweld aan te spreek, word aanbeveel dat werkplekgeweldbeleide, -maatreëls en -ondersteuning geïmplementeer word in die Suid Afrikaanse maatskaplikewerk-praktyk om maatskaplike werkers van werkplekgeweld te beveilig. Dit word aanbeveel dat die veiligheid van maatskaplike werkers prioriteit moet geniet, sowel as die verbetering in die voorsiening van hulpbronne, samewerking tussen organisasies, toepassing van professionaliteit en die aanspreek van gerapporteerde kwessies.

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1. DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

Studies across the globe have shown that workplace violence against social workers has become an endemic problem in both developed and developing countries (Choi, Maas, Koehoorn & McLoed, 2020; Mishra, Chopra, Jauhari, Ahmad & Kidwai, 2018; Munoz & Pence, 2016; Yang & Caughlin, 2017). According to Cetinkaya, Rashid and Nasir (2019), while the nature of workplace violence varies, it is a behaviour that happens in almost all organisations and business environments today.

Workplace violence is defined as violent acts directed towards workers, which includes physical assaults, the threats of assault, and verbal abuse, (Boyle & Wallis, 2016; Brockhill, 2020; Englander, 2007; Malesa & Pillay, 2020; Sicora, Nothdurfter, Rosina & Sanfelici, 2021). Examples of workplace violence range from physical to non-physical activities, which can escalate over time (Shier, Graham & Nicholas, 2018). Winter (2012:196) explains, "While the phenomenon of workplace violence has been widely associated with visible, direct, physical acts and the visibility and transparency of their subject-object relations, the nature of workplace violence varies and is not always physical". Workplace violence can therefore be classified as physical violence (involving physical contact, such as stabbing, kicking, and beating); verbal abuse (contributing towards); threats (attempts to make use of physical or psychological force resulting in fear of negative consequences); intimidation (actions of frightening or threatening); harassment (being harassed by a client, colleague or supervisor at workplace); and/or aggression (portrayal of aggressive behaviour towards social workers during intervention) (Fleischer, 2017; Koritsas, Coles & Boyle, 2010; Respass & Payne, 2008; Scalera, 1995; Van De Griend & Messias, 2014). Workplace violence thus often occurs while a practitioner performs work-related duties and is recognised as having far-reaching consequences for workers' health and safety (Turpin, Shier, Nicholas & Graham, 2020). Such traumatic experiences arising from workplace violence exposure are of particular concern where access to treatment and/or

psychosocial support is often unattainable (Falconer, Casale, Kou, Nyberg, Hill & Cluver, 2020).

Social workers are considered more likely to witness and experience workplace violence because of the nature of their job, whether this be worker-client violence, violence between colleagues, violence in social settings, radical political violence, religious violence, or ideological violence (Boyle & Wallis, 2016; Koritsas et al., 2010). Winstanley and Hales (2008) concur that social workers are prone to experiences of physical assault, verbal threats of assault, verbal abuse, and property damage at some point in their career. Indeed, international research on workplace violence in the social work profession indicates that social workers are subjected to various forms of workplace violence and statistics confirm that there is a risk that social workers may be exposed to workplace violence during their daily interactions with clients, colleagues, as well as in their supervision. For example, Newhill's (2003) survey conducted in the United States of America on workplace violence directed to social workers, found that 58 percent of the 1,129 social workers who participated in the survey said they had experienced at least one workplace violent incident in their careers to date. Another larger study conducted by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in the USA in 2004 found that an estimated 44 percent of social workers faced personal safety issues on the job; of that 44 percent, many were in their first five years on the job in child welfare and health care (Whitaker, Weismiller & Clark, 2006). In 2011, the American Federation of State, Country, and Municipal Employees reported that approximately 70 percent of social workers in the United States have been victims of violence or threat of violence in the workplace (Kim & Hopkins, 2015; NASW, 2013). In a United Kingdom study, Winstanley and Hales (2008) reported that 64 percent of residential social workers surveyed had been assaulted and 75 percent had been threatened over a twelve-month period. This phenomenon therefore requires the need to implement programmes, policies and legislation that protects social welfare professionals against workplace violence worldwide (Courtney, Valentine & Skemer, 2019). Due to the massive increase in workplace violence towards social workers in the US for example, the government enacted legislation to promote the safety of social work professionals through the Social Workers Safety Bill and the Social Workers Safety Act, 111 of 2009 (Kim & Hopkins, 2015; Whitaker et al., 2006).

These are just some examples from available studies; the researcher notes that much of the international research has been primary undertaken in the United Kingdom and the United States of America (Koritsas et al., 2010). However, workplace violence against social workers is not an unheard-of phenomenon in the South African context, although much of this violence is not disclosed in the media. As indicated in a study conducted by Malesa and Pillay (2020), there are no definitive statistics of workplace violence in South Africa. Kennedy and Julie's (2013) study on workplace violence in the trauma and emergency environment in South Africa, however, confirmed that workplace violence had reached epidemic levels in the healthcare environment, despite underreporting of the phenomenon. Workplace violence is therefore an underreported phenomenon in the South African context, especially within the social services arena. When reported, the focus of workplace violence is primarily on that of other professional groups (e.g., healthcare) than in social work, even though social welfare practitioners run a high risk of work-related violence, as the nature of the profession exposes social workers to violent situations. South African social workers are being exposed to workplace violence daily while rendering critical social welfare services. Workplace violence, violence prevention, and workplace safety is thus an important concern in the social service sector (Malesa & Pillay, 2020; Yang & Caughlin, 2017).

The following is an example of a workplace violence incident that occurred in the South African social work context; an incident took place on December 14, 2013, whereby Deon Kondos, a South African social worker, was shot dead by a client at the offices of the South African Women's Federation. This is one incident of many. In March 2017, 6000 South African social workers launched a protest action, which included demands for, among others, better and more secure working conditions (Hoppstadius, Olofsson & Espvall, 2020; Kagan & Itzick, 2019). However, there is limited scientific evidence available in the South African context to investigate social workers' experiences of workplace violence and its implications on the profession at the organisational level. The exact occurrence of workplace violence remains underexplored in the South African social work profession (Malesa & Pillay, 2020).

To be able to determine risk factors that give rise to workplace violence towards social workers and to develop appropriate prevention mechanisms, it is important to

determine and understand causative factors first adequately. The assumption behind workplace violence can be contextual, cultural, organisational, environmental, and psychological, for example, increasing employees' workload, intimidation, harmful supervision, autocratic management, oppression and discrimination, disputes among colleagues and lack of support for social workers and the organisational (Danso, 2018; Johnson, Nguyen, Groth & White, 2018).

However, little information is available on the prevalence and causative factors of workplace violence in South Africa. It is therefore necessary to gain knowledge on how the workplace violence against social workers both occurs and affects them as individuals, their duties, their supervision, and their working relationships at the organisation (Shier et al., 2018). This will better inform what needs to be done to both prevent and protect social workers in South Africa from harmful situations.

1.2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Workplace violence against social work employees is a common occurrence in South Africa (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012; Kennedy & Julie's, 2013; Kgosimore, 2007; Malesa & Pillay, 2020; Van Fleet & Van Fleet, 2010). However, there are serious limitations in the present literature on understanding workplace violence in the South African social service professions. The epidemic of workplace violence remains largely under-reported and under-researched; existing research studies focuses primarily on healthcare personnel workplace violence (Kennedy & Julie, 2013; Terblanche & Borchers, 2018). It is problematic that there are no or limited studies which investigate social worker's experiences of workplace violence in the South African context and the implications of this on professional practice (Malesa & Pillay, 2020). Without proper scientific knowledge of workplace violence in the social work profession, the causes of workplace violence against social workers will remain unknown. Therefore, it is important that social workers' experiences of workplace violence are investigated by means of exploring and describing factors contributing to workplace violence in the social work profession and the implications thereof for social workers' practices. This is especially important for office-based and community-based social workers who often practice in dangerous areas (Cabiati, Rainer & Folgheraiter, 2020). This will better enable organisations and policy makers to enact legislation and mechanisms to safeguard social workers against violence in their workplace. While

South African social workers experience workplace violence like any other social workers in the world, it is evident that there are no or minimum protection policies in place such as those established in the US and there is limited scientific knowledge of workplace violence in the social service workplace.

1.3. RESEARCH QUESTION

The primary research question for this study was as follows:

- What are South African social worker's experiences of workplace violence?

Beyond highlighting social workers' personal experiences, this study also considers how workplace violence may be addressed in the social work context. Secondary research questions were therefore as follows:

- What would be the appropriate theories of social work practice that can describe and analyse factors that causes workplace violence in a comprehensive and effective way to serve as a guide for future practice?
- What can be done to address workplace violence among South African social workers to safeguard their workplace?

1.4. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The primary goal of the research was to gain an understanding of South African social workers' experiences of workplace violence, to better understand the causes and implications of this phenomenon. To achieve this goal, the following four objectives were identified:

- i. To conceptualise and analyse theories of workplace violence applicable to social work practice;
- ii. To explain and describe the factors contributing to workplace violence in social work and implications thereof for social workers' practice, particularly within the South African context;
- iii. To empirically investigate South African social workers' experiences of workplace violence;

- iv. To draw conclusions based on social workers' subjective experiences in order to make appropriate recommendations for social workers, organisations, and policy makers to better safeguard South African social workers against workplace violence.

1.5. THEORETICAL POINT OF DEPARTURE

The theoretical point of departure of the study was based on the systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). This is supported in literature; several scholars utilised both systems theory and social learning theory to explore and describe workplace violence (see for example, Anderson & Kras, 2008; Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Bandura, 2001; Cetinkaya et al., 2019; Martinko & Zellars, 1996; Mihalic & Eliot, 1997; Neuman & Baron, 1998; Olson, 1994). Per the system theory, the transactions and interactions that take place between subsystems (i.e., the individuals, the organisation, and the environment) determined the overall functioning of that system. "A system is defined as a whole entity composed of separate but interacting and interdependent parts" (Ambrosino, Heffernan, Shuttlesworth & Ambrosino, 2005:55). The individual's transactions within the organisation are, for example important to determine productivity within the organisation. Workplace violence therefore has the potential to affect system transactions within a working environment which will in turn affect productivity of the organisation (Ambrosino et al., 2005). The researcher utilised systems theory to take into consideration the levels and subsystems of the workplace environment for interacting players, including the social worker, supervisor, co-worker, and the client. According to the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1983, 2001; Mischel, 1973, 1999; Mischel & Shoda, 1995), people acquire aggressive responses the same way they acquire other complex forms of social behaviour, either by direct experience or by observing others (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Martinko & Zellars, 1998). Social learning theory is therefore applicable to workplace violence as it explains the acquisition of aggressive behaviours (i.e., via observational learning processes) and provided a useful set of concepts for understanding and describing the beliefs and expectations that guide social behaviour.

Workplace violence has a significant impact on social workers, at the individual and organisational level, as well as society at large. It is a complex and multi-faceted issue

with multiple cause-effect mechanisms and requires countering interventions on all sides (Ramacciati, Ceccagnoli, Addey & Rasero, 2018; Wieser & Mata-Greenwood, 2013). Therefore, this study was an effort to examine the challenging context in which workplace violence occurs and its far-reaching consequences for the employees and organisation (Cetinkaya et al., 2019). The combined understanding of systems theory and social learning theory as the theoretical point of departure, therefore, enabled the researcher to have a clear and holistic view of the factors contributing to workplace violence as well as those needed for preventative measures to safeguard social workers (Brankovic, 2019; Kagan & Itzick, 2019).

1.6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section of the study focuses on the research methodology used, in terms of the research approach, design and method, including literature review, population and sampling, means of data collection and analysis, as well as ethical considerations.

1.6.1. Research approach

The study was conducted using a qualitative research approach. The qualitative research approach allows the researcher to examine participants' experiences by using a specific set of research methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, content analysis, visual methods and/or life histories and biographies (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020). As the objective of this study was to understand the phenomenon of workplace violence by exploring the views and experiences of participants (Aspers & Corte, 2019), the qualitative approach permitted for a multifaceted and holistic view of social workers' experiences, to explore and describe causative factors of workplace violence and implications for practice (Fouché & Roestenburg, 2021). A qualitative approach enabled the researcher to explore non-numerical data that enabled the description and interpretation of meaning. The researcher was able to highlight the participants' views, knowledge, and experiences of workplace violence as well as their recommendations to safeguard social workers in their workplace.

1.6.2. Research design

The proposed research design for this study was both exploratory and descriptive; this combination enabled the researcher to both describe and explore the experiences of participants with regards to workplace violence in social work practice. The need for exploratory research developed from a lack of knowledge and information on a new area of interest (Creswell, 2007; Fouché & Roestenburg, 2021). The researcher held the view, as presented earlier, that workplace violence and its causes were an under-researched phenomenon, especially within the South African social work context. Exploratory research further aims at providing insights into a phenomenon (Kumar, 2019) and enabled the researcher to answer the question of ‘what’ social workers’ experiences of workplace violence are. Descriptive research, on the other hand, aimed to present specific details of a situation or phenomenon and it allowed the researcher to gain deeper understanding (Creswell, 2014; Fouché, 2011; Strydom, 2021). This was to ensure a more detailed description of the situation or phenomenon (Kumar, 2019). The use of both an exploratory and descriptive research design allowed the researcher to develop new and in-depth knowledge on social workers’ experiences of workplace violence, and in doing so, the researcher was able to explore and describe the factors contributing to workplace violence in social work and its implications therefore for practice and responsive legislation.

1.6.3. Research method

The following section outlines the method of data collection, population sampling and ethical considerations, beginning with the literature study.

1.6.3.1. Literature study

The literature study focused on the research topic and the contextualisation of the research questions and findings. Roestenburg (2021), suggested that a literature review provides a framework for research and magnifies the areas of knowledge on which the study wishes to expand. A review of literature was undertaken in this study to refine the topic so that themes and limitations within literature and empirical data could be identified (Turner, Cardinal & Burton, 2015). The literature study looked at the following: existing literature on social workers’ experiences of workplace violence; and gaps in existing knowledge that needed to be filled in terms of exploring and

describing factors that caused workplace violence. Both local and international literature were utilised to create comparisons and gain an understanding of the potential effect of workplace violence for social workers and their practice.

1.6.3.2. *Population and study*

To conduct the research from a qualitative approach as indicated earlier, participants needed to be identified; this is done by sampling. Strydom (2021) defines sampling as the process of selecting a portion or smaller number of units of a population to represent the total population. A sample can thus be described as a subset of the population in which the researcher is interested (Kumar, 2019; MacDonald, 2012; Strydom, 2021). For this study, purposeful-snowball sampling was implemented as it allowed the researcher to select the sample based on the experiences and knowledge of workplace violence towards social workers to meet the overall objectives of the study (Maree, 2016; Guetterman, 2015; Strydom, 2021).

This sampling method was selected because the researcher was specifically interested in social workers' experiences of workplace violence. Social workers in the researcher's professional network were contacted by the researcher via a telephone call. The social workers confirmed that they had knowledge, experience, and previous exposure to workplace violence. The social workers also met the criteria for inclusion as described below and were invited to participate in the study. According to Strydom and Delport (2011), it is important to clearly identify and formulate pre-selected criteria for the identification and selection of participants.

The criteria for inclusion in this study were as follows:

- i. The participant must be a registered social worker with the South African Council of Social Service Professions (SACSSP);
- ii. The participant can be from any organisation, thus public or private, in the Western Cape province;
- iii. The participants may have any number of years of experience and the researcher is interested in the workplace violence experience not the number of experiences;
- iv. The participant must have been exposed to workplace violence or have knowledge of someone who has been exposed to workplace violence.

The researcher determined whether the participants met the criteria for inclusion after the initial telephone contact; and those who met the criteria were invited for the research interview. The participants volunteered to participate in the study and gave their consent via the signing of a consent form which was emailed to the participants. The researcher explained the consent form to the participants thoroughly before inviting them to sign the consent form, and to send it back to the researcher. Social workers were recruited in their personal capacity as the researcher is interested in their personal experiences rather than in their experiences at a specific organisation. The researcher did not interfere with any organisational practice, and all contact with participants were outside their working hours. The sample was made up of seventeen participants currently registered with the SACSSP as social workers. Participants are professionals, registered at the SACSSP, and according to the Ethical code of the SACSSP, one professional cannot question the integrity of another professional in terms of honesty (particularly as a research participant based on informed consent). Furthermore, there would be no benefit for a participant to provide “socially acceptable responses” and to be dishonest. The focus of the research was on the reflection of experiences and not on behaviour and/or “socially acceptable/unacceptable responses”. The data collected from the seventeen selected participants of the study enabled the study to achieve its data saturation.

1.6.3.3. Method of data collection

The method that was implemented for data collection was a semi-structured interview schedule. The semi-structured interview provided the researcher with the opportunity to gain a holistic view of the experiences, perceptions, and knowledge of the participant, with regards to the specific research topic (MacDonald, 2012; Roestenburg, 2021; Strydom & Delpont, 2011). The semi-structured interview schedule guided, rather than dictated the interview with the aim of giving the participant the opportunity to share their stories and experiences (Strydom & Delpont, 2011). This method of data collection was appropriate as the researcher wanted to develop a better understanding of social workers' experiences of workplace violence (Rossetto, 2014). Furthermore, this method gave the researcher flexibility to further explore relevant and emerging themes that arise from the interview (Roestenburg, 2021).

Telephonic interviews were conducted after hours and during lunchtime, and at a convenient time to the participants (Farooq & Villiers, 2017). Telephone interviews assisted by lessening social pressure and chances of misinterpreting observational behaviours, whilst building rapport (Vogl, 2013). Therefore, the researcher found the telephonic interview as an appropriate means for data collection; this was particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic and regulations around social distancing. The researcher recorded and transcribed the interviews; social workers were made aware of this and gave consent prior to recording. The interview template has been provided as Annexure 2.

1.6.3.4. Method of data analysis and management

Qualitative data analysis entailed a reduced volume of raw information, sifting significance from trivia, identifying imperative patterns, and constructing a framework for illustrating significant concepts (Dey, 2003; Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Schurink, Schurink and Fouché (2021) propose that there are multiple ways to analyse qualitative data and argued that the type of analysis selected depended on the specific study. However, there are broad guidelines to be followed when analysing qualitative data. Firstly, the data was to be organised and prepared which entailed the following: data was recorded; the data was analysed and edited in terms of recordings and additional field notes; data was then managed by organising the data and reading the transcripts and adding memos (Roestenburg, 2019). Secondly, the data was reduced into categories and key concepts to identify themes and recurring ideas. After themes were identified, it was important to evaluate which information was useful for the study.

The data was interpreted, and phenomena were classified to draw linkages. Third and last, the data was presented. For this study the telephone interviews were recorded with a voice recorder and additional notes were taken to record all possible observations. The phone was on speaker mode to allow for flexibility between the researcher and participant during the telephone interview (Schurink, Fouché & De Vos, 2011). All notes and recordings were transcribed to ensure that the data was easily manageable. Upon completion of the transcriptions, time was allocated to study the material to identify themes and significant information to explore and present data patterns and linkages.

1.6.3.5. *Ethical considerations*

According to Strydom (2021), research is based on trust, acceptance, cooperation, promises and well-accepted conventions and expectations between all parties involved. Strydom (2021), further stated that when persons are the subjects of a particular study, this creates unique ethical dilemmas. The participants of the research study consisted of seventeen social workers practicing in various public and private organisations and/or environments. The researcher ensured that all social workers gave informed consent before participating in the study; the participants received a copy of the signed consent form before conducting the official interviews. The researcher recorded the interviews, data remained confidential and participant names are to be kept anonymous. The researcher stored data in a password protected computer and further backed this up by storing data in the cloud via OneDrive.

As a social work student, the researcher was compelled to be committed to the professional ethics of the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) and thus adhered to the following ethical procedures and practices (see Annexure 4):

➤ *Avoidance of harm*

Strydom (2021) states that everything we do could possibly harm someone else physically or emotionally. It was therefore important to protect participants against all possible harm (Appollis, Eggers, De Vries, De Vries, Lung & Mathews, 2020; Strydom, 2021). To ensure no harm done to study participants, the participants' emotional state was monitored throughout the empirical process. The participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any point during the research process and was informed of this. Should a participant withdraw, the data collected (both written and the electronic recording) was shredded and deleted. This ensured that the data cannot be used for the study. Strong emphasis was always placed on the confidentiality and privacy entitled to the participant.

➤ *Voluntary participation*

No participants should be forced to participate in research (Strydom, 2021; Vanclay, Baines & Taylor, 2013). For the purposes of this study, the researcher contacted the

participant first and then made an appointment to invite them to participate in the study. Participation was voluntary and subject to informed consent (see Annexure 1). The researcher ensured that the topic and purpose of research under investigation were clearly explained to the participants before sending consent forms or beginning the semi-structured interviews. As previously mentioned, the participants could withdraw their participation from the study at any point in the research process.

➤ *Informed consent*

All information about the research, including the goal of the research; the expected duration of the participant's involvement; the procedures to be followed during the investigation; the possible advantages, disadvantages and dangers to which participants may be exposed; as well as the credibility of the researchers were provided to the study participants (Strydom, 2021). The researcher made initial contact with participants via telephone to explain the study; the participants expressed the desire to be involved and meets the stipulated criteria, the researcher sent a consent form via email. The written consent form has all necessary information regarding details of the research project for the participant to be able to make an informed decision about their participation. The interview did not take place until this consent form has signed, and both the researcher and participant have a copy (Kumar, 2019). The consent form is presented as Annexure 1.

➤ *Confidentiality*

Johnson and Yanca (2010) and Strydom (2021) state that participants should be informed of all possible limits with regards to confidentiality as well as the steps put in place to avoid a breach in confidentiality. The privacy of the participant was protected and always considered throughout the study process. No identifying particulars were discussed in the research and no identifying particulars were requested for the purpose of the study. The identity of the participants was not made available to the public. The researcher conducted telephone interviews with participants to collect qualitative data and therefore know who they are, but participants remained anonymous for the purpose of the study. The data was secured electronically on a password protected computer, therefore ensuring confidentiality. Audio recordings and transcriptions were not shared with any other parties.

➤ *Debriefing*

Debriefing entails a session that is devoted to participants' experiences during the interview session to address any emotions, self-discoveries and misconceptions that may have arisen from the interview process (Strydom, 2021). Debriefing further minimises any possible harm (Strydom, 2021). This study was medium risk as it focuses on social workers' experiences of workplace violence. Thus, should any of the participants have needed debriefing, the researcher appointed an independent social worker to be available do so (see Annexure 6). Debriefing services were free of charge for all study participants. This was to be done under the supervision of the Social Work Department at the University of Stellenbosch. During telephonic interviews, no debriefing needs were identified or requested.

This research proposal was submitted to the Departmental Ethics Screening Committee (DESC) and Research Ethics Committee (REC) and approved to ensure minimum risk for participants (Project number: 18800) (Annexure 3).

1.6.3.6. *Trustworthiness of the research*

This section focuses on different verification methods, namely, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility and authenticity, will be discussed.

➤ *Transferability*

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of the qualitative research study can be transferred to other contexts or settings with other respondents (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Schurink et al., 2021). To support the claim of the two authors above, the worldwide experience of social workers in this study is evident, as well as the varied knowledge of workplace violence forms and experiences. This study can be applied to other South African contexts and provinces outside of the Western Cape, as many social workers in South Africa have experiences of or have witnessed various forms of workplace violence in social work practice. The findings regarding the South African social workers experiences of workplace violence in social work practice correspond with international literature on the experiences and knowledge of various forms of workplace violence encountered by social workers in their line of duty at a global level (see for example, Kim & Hopkins, 2015; Newhill, 2003; Winstanley & Hales,

2008). The conclusions and recommendations that were made in this study are furthermore valuable for all systems involved including social workers, supervisors, organisations, and communities, to prevent and safeguard against violence within social work practice. This will potentially help to safeguard the profession of social work and render services without fear of workplace violence.

➤ *Dependability*

Dependability includes aspects of consistency and whether the research process is rational, well documented, and audited (Schurink et al., 2021). To ensure the dependability of this study, an independent coder was used to read through the research transcriptions and empirical chapter. The coder confirmed the themes, sub-themes, and narratives used in the research study (Annexure 6). This independent coder has completed a post graduate degree in Social Work and is registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professionals (SACSSP).

➤ *Confirmability*

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings of the research study can be confirmed by other researchers (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The findings of the study align with existing literature and confirm the existence of workplace violence in the South African social work profession (Winstanley & Hales, 2008); furthermore, the narratives presented in Chapter 4 of this study are all direct dialogue from the participants and the researcher made no changes to these narratives. In addition, the themes, sub-themes, and categories identified in Chapter 4 were all verified through literature control from existing literature.

➤ *Credibility*

Credibility in research aims at demonstrating the extent to which the research is believable, appropriate and the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Schurink et al., 2021). To ensure the credibility, the researcher established a primary and secondary research question to highlight experiences of South African social workers experiences of workplace violence, and valuable as well as appropriate theories of workplace violence to add the credibility of the study as has been demonstrated by the participants in Chapter 4.

The semi-structured interview schedule was used for all seventeen research participants as it was seen or approved by the supervisor prior initial telephonic interview. The credibility of the research findings represents plausible information drawn from the participants' original data and correct interpretation of the participants' original views, see Annexure 7 for the reflexivity report.

➤ *Authenticity*

Authenticity is seen as an important component of establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research so that it may be of some benefit to the society (Schurink et al., 2021). The findings of the research study will be helpful to prevent and protect social workers from any form of workplace violence. The recommendations and conclusions for social workers at an individual level; organisations at a meso level and DSD and Council at a national level are provided to ensure the research worthiness and its contributions to the South African field of social work practice.

1.7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Limitations of the study are crucial elements that the researcher needed to be mindful, acknowledgeable as they are inevitable (Strydom, 2021). After the compilation of the researcher study, a few limitations could be identified in this study on social workers experiences of workplace violence, namely, there was no South African social work literature on workplace violence available; literature on workplace violence in South Africa was limited to the fields of healthcare, education, and the police department. Therefore, the researcher made use of foreign literature on workplace violence within the social work context. It was further identified that there is a lack of workplace violence policy, as well as measures and support implementation in respective organisations, as it applies to the outbreak of workplace violence in South African social work practice. A final limitation is the geographical focus of the study, whereby participants represented social work organisations and practice within the Western Cape. However, the researcher is of the view that South African social workers have similar experiences irrespective of the area in which the study was conducted.

1.8. PRESENTATION

The layout of the research study is made up of five chapters. This section serves as Chapter one, which is an introduction to the research topic, providing an overview of the rationale behind the problem statement and describing the research questions, goals, and objectives of the study. The chapter gives a theoretical point of departure for the study and outlines ethical issues, as well as a brief overview of the process of participant recruitment, data collection and data analysis. Lastly, the limitation of the study is presented. Chapters Two and Three are literature review chapters. Chapter Two focuses on the first objective of the study, which is to conceptualise and analyse theories of workplace violence applicable to social work practice. The chapter presents the definition and typology of workplace violence, locating this within the South African social work context; a theoretical lens for workplace violence utilising systems theory and social learning theory is presented. Building on this, Chapter Three is based on the second objective of the research study, which is to explain and describe the factors contributing to workplace violence in social work and implications thereof for social workers' practice, particularly within the South African context. Chapter Four expands on the third objective, presenting empirical data and analysis. The findings are presented according to the themes identified in the study. Finally, Chapter Five meets the fourth objective of the study, which is to draw conclusions based on social workers' subjective experiences to make appropriate recommendations for social workers, organisations, and policy makers to better safeguard South African social workers against workplace violence.

CHAPTER TWO:

CONCEPTUALISING WORKPLACE VIOLENCE WITHIN THE SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL WORK CONTEXT: DEFINITION AND THEORY

2.1. INTRODUCTION

The recent rise of workplace violence in South Africa's social service sector has raised concerns over the safety and protection of social workers in their workplace (Truter, Fouché & Theron, 2017). Literature shows that exposure to workplace violence and threats is particularly high in the social and human services sectors, such as healthcare, education, public safety, retail and justice industries, and social work (Kennedy & Julie, 2013; Kgosimore, 2007; Piquero, Piquero, Craig & Clipper, 2013; Spector, Zhou & Che, 2014; Terblanche & Borchers, 2018). Employees in these sectors are experiencing a high rate of workplace violence, which manifests itself in different forms. Workplace violence is therefore a fast-growing problem that requires both a comprehensive description and strategic plan of intervention to minimise this phenomenon, particularly within social work practice (Respass & Payne, 2008).

The first objective of this study, as provided in Chapter One, is to conceptualise and analyse theories of workplace violence applicable to social work practice. Therefore, this chapter aims to conceptualise and analyse workplace violence within the systems theory and social learning theory. In doing so, this chapter looks at workplace violence within a South African context and discusses the cycle of workplace violence within the set of interrelated elements functioning as a whole. The chapter begins by defining and contextualising workplace violence. The researcher then explores workplace violence through a theoretical lens in social work using the systems theory and social learning theory; the chapter ends with an analysis and conclusions.

2.2. DEFINITION OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

The concept of workplace violence can be difficult to define as it varies by employee interpretation; this leads to the identification of different behaviours related to violence in the workplace. Such examples of workplace violence range from physical to non-

physical activities (Shier et al., 2018) including experiences of bullying, verbal abuse, threats, physical abuse, sexual harassment, and sexual abuse (Boyle & Wallis, 2016). In addition, the experiences of workplace violence vary from country to country and culture to culture. Furthermore, while violence in the workplace is to be “found in both developing and industrialised nations... the information from developing countries about such phenomena is frequently limited, episodic, and ill-defined” (Martino, 2012:17). That said, there have been several valuable attempts to define the workplace violence phenomenon.

As mentioned earlier, a definition of workplace violence can cover physical activities such as sabotage or the nonphysical acts, such as the use of abusive language (Haines, Marchand & Harvey, 2006). According to some scholars, workplace violence is defined as an actual or attempted physical assault (Bentley, Catley, Forsyth & Tappin, 2014; Kagan & Itzick, 2019; Koritsas et al., 2010). Others define it as any behaviour intended to harm workers or their organisation (Malesa & Pillay, 2020; Sander-Philips & Kliwer, 2020). Magnavita and Heponiemi (2011:203), referenced in recent work by Malesa and Pillay (2020), present a more inclusive definition of workplace violence as “violence acts directed towards workers, which includes physical assaults, the threats of assault, and verbal abuse, and it is widely recognised as having far-reaching consequences for workers’ health and safety”.

Workplace violence is further considered by some to be an intentional trick to misuse authority, threaten someone, or incite actual harm against another person or group in work-related circumstances that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal development and/or deprivation (Gacki-Smith, Juarez & Boyett, 2009). Workplace violence can also be referred to as organisational violence, which has become a part of organisational life, initiated not only by those working in high positions but workers at all levels as well as customers (Stutzenberger & Fisher, 2014). As suggested by Cetinkaya et al. (2019:312), the “cause of violence at the workplace can be contextual, cultural, organisational, environmental and psychosocial”.

Despite the several definitions provided, several scholars maintain that it becomes difficult to understand the full extent of violence at the workplace because of the varying way of defining this phenomenon (Chappell & Di Martino, 2006; Kennedy,

Burks, Calhoun, Essary, Herring, Kerner & Machuca, 2011). The variety of modes of workplace violence that social workers are subjected to can, for example, be intentional, unintentional, physical, verbal, or emotional (Hope & Van der Merwe, 2013; Koritsas et al., 2010; Scott, Ryan, James & Mitchell, 2011). A typology of workplace violence is thus helpful for a more complete understanding of what is meant by workplace violence, particularly within the social work context.

2.3. TYPOLOGY OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Shier, Nicholas and Graham (2016:4) postulate, “Workplace violence is a surprisingly prevalent aspect of social service workers’ professional lives. It can be perpetrated by clients, peers, supervisors, and administrators and is understood to be comprised of both direct and indirect aspects of interaction within the workplace”. Within this context, Kgosimore (2004) identifies five types of workplace violence directed to/experienced by social workers:

- 1) Client-related workplace violence
- 2) Co-worker’ workplace violence
- 3) Employer-to-employees workplace violence
- 4) Relationship workplace violence
- 5) Organisation related workplace violence.

This section of the chapter will explore these five types of workplace violence, providing evidence for each typology. Through this discussion and review of literature, work-related violence will be understood in a broader sense, which will then be contextualised within the South African social work scenario through the empirical study.

2.3.1. Client-related workplace violence

The social worker-client relationship has been described as the soul (Biestek, 1957), heart (Perlman, 1979), and major determinant (Hollis, 1970) of social work intervention. According to the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP, 2004), a client is defined as any individual, family, group, or community receiving the professional attention of a social worker. Within this context, it is important to realise that a “client” of the social worker may also refer to more than one

individual, and within the South African context, may refer to families and communities at large.

Client-related workplace violence in practice is a global issue (Beattie, Griffiths, Innes & Morphet, 2018). Client perpetrated violence against social workers is common and detrimental to a social worker's wellbeing with consequences including physical injury and psychological illnesses (Radey & Wilke, 2018). The researcher is of the opinion that this type of workplace violence often manifests itself through physical, verbal, and psychological violence. Evidence further suggests that this typology of workplace violence occurs more frequently in organisations that work within the field of child protection, including child and family welfare organisations, and child and youth care centres (Alpaslan & Schenk, 2012; Radey & Wilk, 2018; Robson, Cossar & Quayle, 2014; Schiller, 2017; Truter & Fouché, 2019).

Literature offers several insights into the drivers of the client-related workplace violence typology. Social workers can be challenged to face controversial issues (Hardy & Jobling, 2015), achieve certain outcomes, and maintain roles that are not always practically, ethically, or professionally feasible (Graham & Shier, 2013). In later research conducted by Graham and Shier (2014), it was found that the roles that social workers are responsible for fulfilling are continuously evolving and frequently contested by government policymakers, community members, service users and social workers themselves (Cabiati et al., 2020). These expectations of the helping profession can negatively affect social workers' wellbeing due to negative workplace experiences, work stress, caseloads, and strain (Graham & Shier, 2013, 2014). Social workers are further expected, in certain situations, to enforce rules which may result in high-risk situations where a social worker is vulnerable to a physical attack from a client. Client-related violence could be further perpetuated because of personal and intrusive questions asked of the client or the home setting. Additionally, social workers often practice in unsafe or remote areas of households and communities where there are threatening factors nested in the community itself, such as gangsters, criminal activities, and political unrest (Anderson, 2010; Kendra & George, 2001; Kgosimore, 2004; Shields & Kiser, 2003).

Social workers are affected emotionally and physically by exposure to client-related conflict and threatened violence in their workplace (Ferguson, 2011). Further, client-

related workplace violence affects social workers' ability to conduct comprehensive assessment in all social work methods of practice; "workplace violence from clients can significantly affect social workers' capacity to carry out their work effectively, and their commitment to that work" (Littlechild, 2005:388). Social workers should be alert to the possibility of client-related (thus also community-related) workplace violence exposure and should be equipped with the necessary skills to protect themselves when a client attempts to harm a helping professional. When confronted with a violent client in the workplace, social workers are expected to utilise the social work code of ethics and values of care and nonviolent behaviour (Ferreira & Ferreira, 2015). In the South African context, social work values, and ethical principles and standards are articulated in a Code of Ethics by the SACSSP, guiding professional conduct and the address of ethical challenges (SACSSP, 2004). However, in the South African social work context, there is a lack of concrete policy that prevents acts of violence and harm against social workers within their workplace environment.

2.3.2. Co-worker workplace violence

Co-worker workplace violence is also known as staff-on-staff or worker-on-worker workplace violence. Such workplace violence refers to incidents where a worker is unfairly treated, abused, or threatened by a colleague in their workplace (Chappell & Martino, 2006; Eyasu & Taa, 2019; Griffiths & Royse, 2017). The perpetrator can be a current or past employee of the workplace who ill-treats a worker within their working environment, the nature of such violence ranges from colleague to colleague. Per Chappell and Martino (2006), staff-on-staff workplace violence often takes place when colleagues have differences or do not see eye to eye on a work issue. This type of workplace violence is prevalent within the social work setting and has potential adverse consequences for social workers and the organisation (De Jonge & Dormann, 2003). Kgosimore (2004) identifies workplace violence from a social worker-to-social worker as a form of violence which can be physical and psychological, including threatening behaviour, verbal or written threats, and harassment; within this context, physical and psychological workplace violence are predominantly discussed in literature (see for example Kennedy, 2004; Mayhew & Chapell, 2003; Radey & Wilke, 2018; Robson et al., 2014; Ringstad, 2005, 2009).

The researcher is of the opinion that physical and psychological workplace violence have the potential to harm both the perpetrator and victim, and result in a decline in productivity within the organisation setting. It is therefore important that the organisation protects, and assures the safety of, workers in their workplace (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2013). To do so, increased studies, much like this present study, are needed to assess the prevalence and type(s) of workplace violence within the social work profession, particularly in developing countries such as South Africa. Although worker-to-worker workplace violence is prevalent and leads to negative outcomes for workers (Shier et al., 2016), this study found limited information about preventative measures to discourage worker-to-worker workplace violence at the organisational level.

2.3.3. Employer-to-employee workplace violence

Employer-to-employee workplace violence is defined as any form of soft or extreme physical or non-physical violence committed by an employer, which directly or indirectly affects their employee(s) in a negative way (Kgosimore, 2004). The nature of interactions between the employer and the employee can influence whether an individual might experience workplace violence because of transactions and interactions (Howard, 2011; Tepper, 2007). In most cases the employer makes use of unfair treatments towards their employees. Harmful supervision caused by supervisors and managers at the management level of the organisation may depict some form of such workplace violence, as well as the employee's tendency to normalise such situations (Beddoe, 2017; Hendricks & Cartwright, 2018). Chappell and Martino (2006) found that employer-to-employee workplace violence often occurs due to a toxic relationship between the social worker and the supervisor or manager.

Supervision is an important component of professional learning. However, harmful supervision, generalised hierarchal abuse, and supervisor undermining can lead to unhealthy working conditions. According to Wynne (2020), harmful supervision is a practice that is vicious to the social work professional, clients, students, and supervisees. Harmful supervision can be defined as supervision that is lacking in sufficient or informed guidance and support, understood as any conduct or activity that does not maintain moral qualities and principles (Department of Social Development (DSD) & SACSSP, 2012). Supervisors that are involved with employee performance

evaluation, pay raise decision-making, and discipline, exert an influence over organisational justice and this can lead to internally generated workplace violence (Howard & Wech, 2012). The multiplicity of negative supervisory behaviour has been studied in international literature to determine the effects on employees (Howard & Wech, 2012; Tepper, 2007).

Both the employer and employee(s) have a role to play in minimising stressful situations, which may result in workplace violence. This can be done by means of reporting stressful situations and applying necessary interventions to avoid any harm toward social workers in their workplace. The duties of an employer are to provide a safe space for an employee, and to, as far as is possible, prevent any form of workplace violence, ensuring that social workers perform their job-related duties in a healthy and safe working environment (Sarkisian & Portwood, 2003). An employee can exercise their basic Constitutional rights in this regard, such as the right to freedom and security of the person (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996); the right to be free from all forms of violence from of either public or private sources (Bill of Rights, 1996, Section 12.1(c)), and the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or wellbeing and to work within a protective environment as per section 24 of the Bill of Rights (1996). These are just some examples of several workplace rights available to the employee.

2.3.4. Relationship workplace violence

In any workplace, there is always a mixture of personalities, and while differing personalities contribute to the team dynamic, there are a range of interactive relationships that are present as a result. Workplace relationships are unique interpersonal relationships with important implications for the individual in those relationships as well as the overall organisation in which the relationships exist and develop (Baral, Logie, Grosso, Wirtz & Beyrer, 2013). Relationship workplace violence refers to a variety of maladaptive and/or harmful relationships amongst employees. The perpetrator might have a personal relationship with the employee or employer that becomes violent, or employees may gossip about another employee or their employer. There are no rules to predict what will occur with regards to workplace relationships, which can both benefit and hinder the employees and organisation.

Relationship workplace violence affects all systems in a working environment, which includes the victim, co-workers, supervisors, and employers on a management level (Alpaslan & Schenck, 2012; Anderson, 2010). The consequences of relationship workplace violence minimise trust, confidentiality, and the general work ethic of the organisation (Miner & Cortina, 2016; Montgomery & Oladopo, 2014; Yang, Caughlin, Gazica, Truxillo & Spector, 2014). When the organisation experiences this type of workplace violence, it is important to review the constitution of the organisation to restore a healthy workplace culture within the organisation and its employees. An organisation that has a culture of hierarchical and autocratic leadership style, for example, can cause exclusivity and decline group thinking and interrelations due to the sequence of following orders initiated on an upper organisational level. Relationship workplace violence, if not addressed, can evolve into a culture of organisational-related workplace violence.

2.3.5. Organisational-related workplace violence

According to Cetinkaya et al. (2019:311), “literature has depicted that the violence at the workplace can prevail at different levels of an organisation”. Boyas, Wind and Kang (2012) suggest that employee’s experiences of organisational workplace violence are the results of an unsafe environment, burnout, and job stress, which leads to intent to leave the field. Organisational-related workplace violence varies dependent on the type and structure of an organisation. For example, within an organisation that consists of various hierarchical positions, it is likely true that those who are hold higher positions are less at risk of experiences of violence, unlike those who hold lower positions in their workplace. In addition, those who hold higher positions are more likely to receive prized benefits and recognition while those who are occupying lower positions often experience humiliation, intimidation, and criticism, and exposure to workplace violence (Gillespie, Gates, Miller & Howard, 2010; Griffiths & Royse, 2017). Furthermore, social work organisations formalise several programmes that contain activities that are often mandatory and require a social worker to fulfil stipulated work-related duties. However, these activities can result in several factors that may affect social workers; when this effect is negative, this may constitute organisational workplace violence. For example, the organisation needs to be aware of and sensitive to the emotional histories that staff members bring with them into the workplace. “Organisations are open systems and as

such, the external environment must be considered when addressing workplace violence” (Howard & Wech, 2012:113). Staff members should be alerted to the possibility that exposure to violent cases, for example, may trigger their own, or a colleague’s traumatic experiences (Cabiati et al., 2020; Taylor & Zeng, 2011) and allow for safeguards and debrief in such scenarios.

The impact of workplace violence at both the individual and organisational level can be extensive, including reduced job-related well-being, satisfaction, and performance and increased work-related stress (Cunniff, 2011). The organisation should implement policies and procedures to be fair to all involved; these actions will help social service workers to handle difficult situations fairly, ethically, and legally, despite the complicated nature of workplace violence episodes (Pollack, 2010). The negligence of the organisation, on the other hand, can lead to a chaotic workplace and lack of faith in the institution’s staff and administrators. Thus, it is important to provide recommendations for policy makers at the organisational level to safeguard social workers in their workplace (Visagie, Havenga, Linde & Botha, 2012).

The above classification of different types of workplace violence experienced within the social work arena demonstrates that not all types of workplace violence are identical in their social and psychological reinforcements; rather, the types of workplace violence can be differentiated. Within the social service sector, social workers are particularly at risk of violence in their workplace as social workers practice within a wide range of organisational structures and systems in which they fulfil their different duties. The prevalence of workplace violence among social workers has increased and is a growing concern (Radey & Wilke, 2018; Respass & Payne, 2008). As mentioned above, experiences of violence can result in the decline of overall life satisfaction and can have a longitudinal impact on the overall perceived well-being of social workers, increasing intentions to leave the organisation and even the larger social work profession. Although the phenomenon of workplace violence is known within South African context, research is often concentrated on the healthcare sector. The phenomenon of workplace violence within the South African social work area remains largely underexplored. Several authors agree that increased scientific examination of workplace violence in all sectors that deal with the public is needed (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012; Kennedy & Julie 2013; Kgosimore, 2007; Malesa & Pillay,

2020; Terblanche & Borchers, 2018). Such investigation contributes to necessary knowledge around safeguarding the social workers' workplace.

2.4. LOCATING WORKPLACE VIOLENCE WITHIN SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL WORK

Violence in the workplace has always been present in one form or another whenever people have worked together. The western world first began to give attention to this issue in the 1960s and 1970s, when it became an area of interest and concern to workers and unions (Bowie, 2013). However, workplace violence has become a topic of more frequent discussion over recent years (Koritsas et al., 2010; Newhill, 2003; Spencer & Munch, 2003; Respass & Payne, 2008). This is true also of the South African context.

Per Kennedy and Julie (2013:1), "violence in South African society has reached epidemic levels and has permeated the wall of the workplace". However, violence in the workplace can still be viewed as an underreported phenomenon in South Africa.

Evidence of this phenomenon has been most widely reported within the health care sector (see for example, Kennedy & Julie, 2013; Nguluwe, Havenga & Sengane, 2014; Terblanche & Borchers, 2018). As indicated earlier in this chapter, violence at the workplace depicts a set of activities such as physical assaults, threatening activities, or non-physical abuse, which happens in a work environment context (Cetinkaya et al., 2019). While Malesa and Pillay (2020) assert that workplace violence occurs in any work setting or occupational group, workplace violence risks are further said to be most evident in a profession that seeks to promote stability and relational continuity in the lives of communities, families, and individuals (Cabiati et al., 2020). Physical workplace violence seems to be the most common form of abuse in occupations such as healthcare, law enforcement, in service delivery areas in which theft is widely reported, and in the mental health sector where patients can sometimes be difficult to subdue (Burden, 2017; Malangu, 2012). Social work is a practising profession (Teater, 2013) that often requires direct interaction with clients, colleagues, and supervisors in a variety of settings; "taking into consideration of the workplace violence identified in other professions such as healthcare, court employees, police officers and educators,

it is clear that social service workers may be in particularly risk situations” (Respass & Payne, 2008:132).

Workplace violence, violence prevention and workplace health and safety are therefore crucial issues in the social service sector (Yang & Caughlin, 2017). However, while there are some existing studies that have shown that social workers can suffer due to painful and stressful situations in their job (Boyas et al., 2012; Dingwall, Eekelaar & Murray, 2014), the nature and cause of workplace violence within the South African social work profession is not well documented or understood. Kgosimore (2007:62) agrees with this view, highlighting that although within “South Africa the spectacular of workplace violence is a serious concern, it is an under researched area in the field of social work practice”.

This study seeks to address this research gap by providing scientific evidence to identify the causes of workplace violence and the implications thereof for practice. This will be done through the lens of the systems theory and social learning theory to better gain an understanding of social workers' experiences of workplace violence. In addition, understanding workplace violence against the backdrop of these two theories will give the researcher a clearer picture of the factors that increase the risk of, or directly causes, workplace violence in social work practice. According to Spencer and Munch (2003:535), social workers often do not report violent incidents in the context of their job because of the perception that these occurrences are “an inevitable part of their work and that social workers should be able to take care of themselves”. The issue of normalising workplace violence as part of their job description makes it difficult to provide recorded and reliable statistics of violence against social workers in their workplace. The empirical investigation of this study will attempt to combat this by means of encouraging the voice of social work participants in terms of their experiences and/or knowledge of workplace violence; these findings will be presented in the empirical study (see Chapter Four). Through such analysis, the researcher is of the opinion that this study will provide empirical evidence related to the nature, scope, and prevalence of workplace violence within South African social work and in turn better inform policy development for the safeguarding of the profession.

2.5. A THEORETICAL LENS FOR WORKPLACE VIOLENCE: SYSTEMS THEORY AND SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY.

This section of the chapter focuses on the nature of workplace violence by means of conceptualising the phenomenon within the systems theory and social learning theory; this will allow for the development of a theoretical understanding of the factors that cause/contribute to workplace violence (Caws, 2015). The use of an informed theoretical underpinning in this study is crucial because social work intervention is grounded in theory and evidence-based practice (Masilo, 2018; Truter & Fouché, 2019). While several theories pertaining to workplace violence may be identified within the context of social work practice, the researcher identified the systems theory and social learning theory as most valuable for this study, due to the unique way these two perspectives address human behaviour in terms of multi-layered relationships and environments.

The researcher holds the view that systems theory and social learning theory are therefore appropriate, valuable, and applicable to explore and describe violence or causes of violence in social work practice. These two prominent theories are premised on the idea that both an effective system and learned behaviour are based on individual needs, rewards, expectations, and attributes of the people functioning within the system. The individual and the organisation are theoretically understood as systems that are interrelated, therefore individuals (referring to social workers in the context of this study) are affected by other subsystems at the organisational and client-interaction level which may influence one's behaviour in the workplace. The focus of this section of the chapter is, therefore, to explore workplace violence through the systems theory and social learning theory to gain a better understanding of the interrelatedness of systems and learned behaviour which contribute to the workplace violence phenomenon.

2.5.1. Systems Theory

A dominant theory of interrelated systems and transactions that may shed light on workplace violence towards social workers' is the systems theory. Within the social work profession, systems thinking has been heavily influenced by the work of the biologist Bertalanffy and his systems theory (1968). Bertalanffy encouraged looking at

the system as a whole, with its relationships and interactions with other systems as a mechanism for growth and change (Friedman & Allen, 2014).

2.5.1.1. *Defining systems theory*

According to Ambrosino et al. (2005:55), “A system is defined as a whole, an entity composed of separate but interacting and interdependent parts”. Systems theory consists of organised components which operate as an item; “a system within a system” (Engelbrecht, 2019:33). The systems theory outlines the functioning of these interrelated components and emphasises that the individual does not function in isolation, but rather that it is important to consider the individual as a system that interacts with other systems that in turn forms a system as a whole. Social workers often find it helpful to utilise systems theory during intervention with clients, as it provides a theoretical framework for the description of a system (or systems) that is causing harm towards other systems which then results in improper functioning of the organisation and/or environment as a whole ((Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney & Strom-Gottfried, 2010; Walsh, 2010).

In the context of workplace violence, a system may refer to the client, community, workers, management, and/or organisation; these systems can never function in isolation. By means of identifying factors contributing to workplace violence, the research may be able to identify a system (or systems) that are not properly functioning which can expose or pre-dispose social workers to violent situations in their workplace. Once the system is identified, it is easier for the researcher to provide appropriate recommendations for the safeguarding of social workers in their working environment.

2.5.1.2. *Systems theory and the social work organisation*

As stated by Walsh (2010) in Drisko and Grady (2019:75), “systems theory is central to social work as a profession, as it challenges the idea held in science is complex, interactive phenomenon could be simplified to a linear cause and effect equation”. Systems theory argues that there is an interactive, circular pattern of causation “in which all elements of a system simultaneously are influenced by, and influence, each other” (Walsh, 2010:92). Systems theory in social work is based on the idea that behaviour is influenced by a variety of factors that work together as a system with various inputs, processes, outputs, and outcomes made up of interrelated components

of the overall organisation (Dahlgaard-Park, Reyes & Chen, 2018; Hepworth et al., 2010; Bertalanffy, 1968).

A theoretical framework of interrelated systems posits that a range of nested contextual systems such as the client system, social worker, management, and the organisation shapes individual attitudes and behaviours. People are inextricably linked to their environment, and a theory that identifies systems of experiences and interactions tends to make logical and practical sense to workers in their daily practice (Connolly & Harms, 2015). All these systems are influenced by the policies, activities, and programmes that the organisation is oath to comply with when rendering welfare services to the service users. The focus of the systems theory is thus on human behaviour and problems from the perspective of the individual within the context of complex and interrelated systems (Drisko & Grady, 2019). Such a holistic view considers the needs, behaviour, and experiences of all those interacting within a system (Teater, 2014; Bertalanffy, 1968).

The functionality of the organisation requires transactions and interactions that take place among different subsystems, which include the individual and their environment (Alter, 2018). Poor interactions amongst employees, for example, results in a negative atmosphere within (and toward) the working environment (Yang et al., 2014). Systems theory can conceptualise adaptability and enhance transformation between the employees, employer(s), and the organisation. The employer(s) and the organisation use their expertise to contribute to the demands of social work employees who themselves experience or have knowledge of someone who experienced workplace violence, to safeguard their workplace (NASW, 2013; Wong & Kelloway, 2016). From a systematic viewpoint, the individual pathology of the social work employee is only comprehensible within the context of the various interacting systems within the workplace and larger organisation environment.

2.5.1.3. *Types of systems*

The purpose of systems theory is to model system dynamics, constraints, and conditions and to elucidate principles that can be discerned and applied to other systems at every level of nesting in a wide range of fields for achieving optimised equifinality (Beven, 2006; Hepworth et al., 2010). Theoretically, systems can be

considered either open or closed. “Each system either open or closed is bounded by space and time, influenced by its environment, defined by its structure and purpose and expressed through its functioning” (Bertalanffy, 1968:39). Open systems within the social work context refer to systems (often the external environment) that interact with other systems within an organisation, exchanging information, energy, or resources with respective service users. A closed system, on the other hand, refers to the system that has little interaction with other systems or the outside environment (Bertalanffy, 1968). That said, no social system can be completely closed or open, but are usually identified as relatively closed or relatively open (Chikere & Nwoka, 2015). A review of closed systems is not necessary for this study as although a closed system might pose a danger towards the organisation itself, the nature of the profession operates primarily within an open system environment.

The researcher is particularly interested in the open system organisation, as client, family, group and community interactions and interventions heavily influence much of social work practice (Howard & Wech, 2012). Organisations that are open systems thus require that the external environment be considered when addressing workplace violence (Howard & Wech, 2012). For this study the researcher finds it important to include externally generated workplace violence as it accurately reflects the fact that social work organisations are open systems, as well as the fact that much of the violence that occurs in organisations is externally generated (Howard, Johnson, Wech & Stout, 2016). Service users from respective environments are capable of perpetrating workplace violence and social workers render critical services to their service users in their respective communities. Hence, the external environment consists of factors that can lead to violent acts in which social workers often act as mediators (Beattie et al., 2018; Littlechild, 2005; Truter & Fouché, 2019). Overall, the systems theory will enable the researcher to look at the causes of, and factors which may evolve into, violence in the workplace, as well as identify appropriate helping systems for addressing the problem and/or minimising workplace violence. The assumption of the systems theory is that there are similar underlying concepts, principles, and models in different fields, even though they may have evolved independently (Bandura, 1977; Hope & Van der Merwe, 2013; Teater, 2010). Systems theory can thus be applied to all fields or systems. It is the sum or interaction of these

parts that form a whole and it is this interaction that makes the parts themselves meaningful.

2.5.1.4. *Workplace violence and systems theory*

As described earlier in the chapter, there is no consensus as to what constitutes an act of violence, and such interpretation is often left to the individual experiencing the phenomenon (Ringstad, 2005; Spencer & Munch, 2003). The researcher aims to provide evidence for the strengthening of the various interacting systems by means of highlighting factors that cause workplace violence through informed empirical data. The researcher will therefore identify social workers whom themselves have experienced workplace violence to share their knowledge and experience. Such individuals could be considered as targeted systems. However, as described in more detail above, the targeted system cannot function in isolation (Bertalanffy, 1968).

The researcher is of the view that when a system fails it is because of the improper functioning of a feedback channel which then leads to workplace violence. As indicated by Lovasova (2014), failure to uphold the rights of an employee and dissatisfaction within the system or the organisation is more likely to create workplace violence. The researcher takes into consideration that all systems consist of components that have independent relationships. To comprehend the risk factors that reinforce phenomenon of workplace violence can contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon itself (Aven, 2016). Therefore, if one system is not functioning well, the systems theory allows the researcher to look at this holistically to understand the problem and potential causal factors. Thus, it is important that the researcher identify varied interacting factors that cause workplace violence by means of applying systems theory to identify harmful or high-risk transactions and recommend appropriate safeguarding measures for social workers, employers, and organisations (Edwards, 2016). Systems theory in social work practice can be complimented further through the contextual understanding of behaviour will lead to the most appropriate (or maladaptive) practice interventions. As such, this study analyses the phenomenon of workplace violence through a second theoretical lens: social learning theory.

2.5.2. Social learning theory

A critical element of this study is that of human behaviour; social learning theory is an evidence-based practice that explains human behaviour such as aggression, intimidation, threats, and verbal abuse which are contributors to/direct indicators of workplace violence (Littlechild, 2005). The social learning theory is therefore a valuable framework for enabling the researcher to understand the behavioural factors underlying workplace violence as will be described by the participants of the study in Chapter Four. This section of the chapter discusses the theory of social learning and in particular, socially learned behaviours that lead to experiences of workplace violence within a social work setting. Social learning theory is applicable and valuable for this study as it gives the researcher a clear indication of how social behaviour is learned as well as the influential potential of such learned behaviour.

2.5.2.1. *Defining social learning theory*

Social learning is a theory of learning processes and social behaviour that proposes behaviours are often acquired by observing and imitating others (Bandura, 1963). The focus of the social learning theory is on learning as a form of active and social participation (Steyn, 2008). In addition, this theory proposes that learning is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context and can occur purely through observation or direct instruction, even in the absence of motor reproduction or direct reinforcement (Bandura, 1963). According to social learning theory, social behaviour is learned and imitated through observing, experiencing, and modelling. "Social learning theory focuses on external stimuli in order to deconstruct behaviour in relationship to the response patterns" (Anderson & Kras, 2005:103). Furthermore, social learning theory posits that response patterns to particular stimuli are learned through either experiences or observation (Bandura, 1973).

2.5.2.2. *Social learning theory and the social work organisation*

Social learning theory suggests that both environmental and personality factors have an impact on individual aggressive behaviour (Bandura, 1973; Enosh & Tzafir, 2015). Social workers, clients and supervisors are exposed to organisational dynamics as well as the overall organisational culture and atmosphere. "When the organisation is infused with social workers with dysfunctional behaviour, a given social worker is

exposed to many and varied social cues signalling that inappropriate behaviour is appropriate, values, and likely to be condoned” (Robinson, Wang & Kiewtz, 2014:134). The organisation and its employees have a responsibility to avoid dysfunctional behaviour by means of utilising policies in practice that are against any form of workplace violence.

2.5.2.3. *Components of social learning theory*

Social learning theory identifies three primary models of learned behaviour: family influences, subcultural influences, and symbolic modelling. Social learning theory is particularly influential in describing the concept of vicarious learning, or modelling, where individuals learn behaviours without actually experiencing these behaviours (Bandura, 1977; Robinson et al., 2014). For example, social workers may have role models in their respective practice education and they themselves may be role models to others in their workplace. According to Robinson et al. (2014:131), “employers serve as a role model in that their behaviour and its subsequent behaviour provides the opportunity for employees to learn what behaviours are socially appropriate and rewarded in their workplace”. According to Bandura (1977), most responses are learned inadvertently, or on purpose, through examples; this component of learning is essential to understanding the process by which individuals engage in violence and aggression.

Bandura (1983), as cited in Martinko and Zellars (1996), suggests that observational learning may be the most influential component overall within the modelling model. In the social work profession, for example, the social worker is likely to imitate what they observe from their co-workers, supervisors or even managers. Social learning theory suggests that ambient environments provide a given employee increased exposure to role models from which a social worker can learn (Bandura, 1977). When these models demonstrate how to engage in dysfunctional behaviour without incurring negative consequences, and possibly even incurring positive responses, employees are more likely to copy such behaviour. Appropriate modelling in turn guides social workers to engage in what is considered appropriate behaviour for the social work practice context. This copycat effect has been understood to occur because of social influences through observing or witnessing the behaviour of a co-worker as a means of social learning (Bandura, 1977).

2.5.2.4. *Workplace violence and social learning theory*

Social learning theory is applicable to understanding the workplace violence phenomenon, particularly in social work practice, as it explains the acquisition/learning of verbal abuse, intimidation, threats, and aggressive, violent behaviour. The theory provides a useful set of concepts for understanding and describing the beliefs and expectations that guide social behaviour. According to this theory, workplace violence is learned in the context of the working environment. Exposure to workplace violence can mean visually or auditory witnessing such behaviour and/or observing the effects of the behaviour. Witnessing any form of workplace violence could influence employees' negative or positive behaviour. Whether such behaviour is modelled "through a client, colleague, employer or supervisor, workplace violence is detrimental to the wider organisation in the short and long term, both directly and indirectly" (Enosh & Tzafir, 2015:973).

However, as previously highlighted, the wide range of violence behaviours makes it difficult to define and consequently assess the prevalence, extent, and effect of violent behaviours on social workers and clients (Kennedy et al., 2011). Social learning theory will assist the researcher in developing a clearer understanding of the learning process of social workers who are victims of workplace violence, as well as those who have knowledge of, or have witnessed the workplace violence experiences of others.

2.6. CONCLUSION

This chapter provided an overview of workplace violence, in terms of its definition and typology within the social work setting. Five types of workplace violence were explored in terms of client-related workplace violence, worker-to-worker workplace violence, employer-to-employee workplace violence, relationship-based workplace violence, and organisational workplace violence. The chapter further identified the limited research into workplace violence within the South African social work context, and the correlated dearth in appropriate policy response for safeguarding social workers.

Finally, the chapter discussed the main concepts of systems theory and social learning theory as the underpinning theoretical knowledge for this study. In doing so, the chapter provided an understanding of interrelated systems in social work organisations and how behaviour is learned within these systems. The systems theory and social

learning theory are evidence-based practice of social work profession that addresses the complex transactions between people and their environments (Masilo, 2018). The use of these two theoretical frameworks illustrates different types of systems involved in the formation of a system as a whole and the modelling of observed behaviour by these various interacting systems that in turn influence the overall culture of behaviour within the organisation. These two theories enable the researcher to better explore how workplace violence develops and/or occurs in the social work setting.

Social workers' experiences of workplace violence need to be heard, due to insufficient academic evidence and analysis in the South African context, which in turn makes it difficult to provide concrete evidence on the phenomenon of workplace violence within the social work profession. Against this backdrop, the chapter that follows will explain and describe in further detail the known factors contributing to workplace violence in social work and the implications thereof for social workers' practice, particularly within the South African context, before exploring empirical findings in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER THREE:

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO WORKPLACE VIOLENCE IN SOCIAL WORK AND IMPLICATIONS THEREOF FOR SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

3.1. INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter offered a conceptualisation and analysis of workplace violence utilising the systems theory and social learning theory. In unpacking the various typologies of workplace violence experienced by social workers, the previous chapter identified the social work profession as being exposed to a variety of factors that increase the risk of physical and verbal workplace violence from clients, colleagues, and supervisors (Gillespie et al., 2010; Griffiths & Royse, 2017). Through systems and social learning understanding, the researcher identified several means by which workplace violence may be generated or perpetuated within the social work environment.

Evidence in literature suggests that patterns of workplace violence range from physical to non-physical activities that can worsen slowly over time, both in terms of the incidents of violence and the effect on the recipient(s) (Nguluwe et al., 2014; Shier et al., 2018). Studies have identified that being subjected to physical and verbal abuse takes its toll in terms of psychological distress, and this may affect normal working and leisure lifestyles for months to years afterward (Scott et al., 2011). Yet, while international literature confirms the prevalence of workplace violence against social workers, workplace violence is rarely focused on within South African social work research or practice agendas (Hope & Van Wyk, 2018; Sabbath, 2019); there is inadequate information available on individual and organisational factors which contribute to workplace violence in the social work profession (Carpenter, 2011; Chung & Chun, 2015; Colby, 2013; Drisko, 2014; Fleischer, 2017; Hope & Van der Merwe, 2013; Lizano & Barak, 2015).

Existing studies on workplace violence in South Africa are primarily focused on the healthcare sector (Chapman, Styles, Perry & Combs, 2010; Malesa & Pillay, 2020;

Terblanche & Borchers, 2018). Research does indicate, however, that South African societies consist of factors that can cause or perpetuate workplace violence among social workers, such as unemployment, robbery, starvation, lack of resources, gang related activities, harassment, and hostile clients (Kirsten & Bruce, 2010). A study conducted by Masson and Moodley (2019) confirmed South Africa as a particularly violent and traumatised society and presented the social work occupation as one that is not always sufficiently acknowledged for, or safeguarded against, its contribution to the fight against such violence and crime. It has been further recognised by the SACSSP (2019) that social workers in practice face numerous challenges in the course of their work, as well as in their workplaces. In a more recent study by Masson and Moodley (2020:172), it was reported that “social workers employed at the South African Police Service (SAPS) are working in a traumatic environment, where police suicide rate is of national concern”. This is one example of the critical social welfare services rendered by social workers in areas where there are often high safety risks through, inter alia, gang-related activities, with poor support from SAPS and limited to no workplace violence policy in welfare organisations.

It is challenging, therefore, for the social work profession to successfully maintain and safeguard its workforce when issues of workplace safety go largely unreported. The aim of this chapter is thus threefold; firstly, this chapter aims to explore and describe in more detail factors that contribute to workplace violence in social work practice as identified in literature; secondly, this chapter will discuss the effects and impact of workplace violence on the social work organisation as a whole; and thirdly, this chapter aims to highlight the implications of workplace violence on social workers themselves. The researcher is of the view that this chapter will support the development of new knowledge of, as well as spur on further studies on, the workplace violence phenomenon within South African social work. The exploration and description of the contributing factors in the social work context as identified in international and some local literature will better inform recommendations at the organisational and policy level to safeguard social workers, complimented by the empirical evidence presented in Chapter Four. It is the researcher’s hope that this will both encourage and enable social workers to remain in the profession, and to render services in a safe working environment.

3.2. DEFINITION OF SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE.

To best understand how workplace violence both arises in and affects social work and its practice; it is necessary to have a clear definition of these two terms. The researcher offers brief definitions below. These are not exhaustive but address how social work and social work practice are understood for the purpose of this study.

3.2.1. Definition of social work

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) General meeting and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) General Assembly approved the following revised global definition of social work in July 2014:

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional level” (IFSW & IASSW, 2014).

As presented in the definition above, the social work profession is one which is focused on contested concepts such as social change, social cohesion, and the liberation of people, social justice, and human rights. This demonstrates social work as being a profession very much on the forefront of conflict and tension; a practice-based profession engaging in significant human issues. Such conflict would certainly affect the professional, be it directly or indirectly.

3.2.2. Definition of social work practice

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2013), social work practice is defined as:

“Consists of the professional application of social work values, principles, and techniques to one or more of the following ends: helping people obtain tangible services; counselling and psychotherapy with individuals, families, and groups;

helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services; and participating in legislative processes. The practice of social work requires knowledge of human development and behaviour; of social, economic, and cultural institutions; and of the interactions of all these factors”.

Despite the potential conflicting environment of a social worker (as indicated in the previous section and in the global definition), it is expected of the social worker to remain true to professional values, principles, and techniques. The SACSSP has a legal obligation to ensure that social workers practice in accordance with minimum standards, adhere to their code of ethics, and be licensed to practice through registration (SACSSP, 2019).

The above definitions of social work and social work practice both outline the profession as one that is practice-based and requires knowledge of human development and behaviour, which in the context of this study consists of factors that may cause or contribute to workplace violence in social work practice. Systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1963) form the theoretical lens used in this study to better understand the conceptualisation and causes of workplace violence, as discussed in Chapter Two; in doing so, the researcher recognises the theoretical underpinning of social work, as highlighted in the global social work definition. The above definitions also provide insight into how social workers respond to the internal and external factors that affect themselves, their practice, the client, the organisation, and the surrounding environment; recommendations can be drawn for how social workers, clients and the organisation may safeguard social work practice against experiences of workplace violence.

Finally, adopting the importance of evidence-based and knowledge-based practice as outlined in the global definition, this study seeks to provide a concrete understanding of the learned behaviour of social workers and the interrelated systems that impact upon the functioning of social workers in their practice environment. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the causes and impact of workplace violence on social workers, their practice, and the organisation, as identified in existing literature.

3.3. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO WORKPLACE VIOLENCE AGAINST SOCIAL WORKERS

Violence in the workplace is considered a challenging and complex phenomenon for both social workers and the organisation in international literature (Cetinkaya et al., 2019). This section of the chapter reflects on contributing factors within the workplace violence phenomenon, based on evidence drawn from international and local research (see for example, Borchers, 2015; Gillespie et al., 2010; Malesa & Pillay, 2020; Terblanche & Borchers, 2018).

According to Bowman, Whitehead and Raymond (2018:290), “Violence is commonly studied as the outcome of intersecting risk factors embedded in individuals, families, or broader social systems”. The researcher utilised this definition as it relates to the underlying theories of this study (systems theory and social learning theory) in addressing interrelated systems and how behaviour is moderated and learnt in practice. Individuals, families, groups, and the environment are the primary domains in which social work services are rendered and social workers deal with client systems at the individual, family, group, community, and societal level (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney & Strom-Gottfried, 2013; Zastrow, 2017). The interaction of factors contributing to workplace violence is therefore complex, particularly given today’s varying, broad, and inclusive definitions of workplace violence.

According to Bertalanffy’s (1968) systems theory and Bandura’s (1963) social learning theory, a phenomenon such as workplace violence results from numerous intertwined systems and modelling of behaviours through observation (Hope & Van der Merwe, 2013; Teater, 2010). Both theories recognise that social workers cannot be evaluated as a single entity but form part of the unified whole, which includes the client system, the organisation, and the environment (Hope & Van der Merwe, 2013). Systems theory and social learning theory, therefore, view workplace violence as occurring within (and because of) interrelated systems, within which an individual learns through observation and modelling. The researcher thus finds it appropriate to explore factors contributing to workplace violence holistically rather than just on social workers at the individual level. Figure 3.1 demonstrates the interrelatedness of contributing factors towards workplace violence.

Figure 3.1. Clusters of contributing factors in workplace violence



As referenced by Bowman et al. (2018:287), a “theoretical framework recognises that the complex pathways to violence move between and within individual, family, community and social levels of human systems. In addition, these are built on a range of interacting factors that are both clustered at these systems and differentially related to violence in time and space”.

By means of utilising the theories of systems and social learning in this chapter, the researcher identifies potential contributing factors of workplace violence as being either internal, as related to the social worker or client, or external in terms of the organisation or environment. The researcher has further categorised these factors in the view of the theoretical underpinning of the systems and social learning theory as occurring at four levels: situational, individual, organisational, and environmental. These are discussed in more detail below.

3.3.1. Situational factors

In recent studies of workplace violence, the phenomenon of workplace violence is increasingly considered to be a situational outcome within an ecological or multilevel framework (Bowman et al., 2018). Several scholars have used a range of analytic

strategies to explore the situational and effective dimensions of workplace violence (see for example, Lindegaard, Bernasco & Jacques, 2015; Nassauer, 2016).

Bowman et al. (2018:288) argues, “scholars of violence in the workplace need to identify and enhance our understandings of the relationships between situational or interactional factors and violent outcomes, and to take seriously the need to study precisely how these factors represent key mechanisms for the translation of risks for violence into its observable enactments”. According to the systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1973), situational factors involve a range of behaviours which spring from workers during specific situations; these two theories give one a clearer indication of the co-operation of these systems and modelling of behaviours in social work practice.

Situational factors largely represent external factors; influences that do not take place within the internal environment of the social worker but evolve within an external environment or workplace that surrounds the social worker, client, manager, or the organisation. The interaction between the social worker and environment is key to understanding risk factors causing/contributing to workplace violence, generating evidence-based practice to inform effective decision-making for the safeguarding of social workers (Truter & Fouché, 2019). The researcher is of the opinion that workplace violence is too complex to be sufficiently understood and addressed in single-level investigation. The social learning theory (Bandura, 1973) and systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) used in this study demonstrates that there is an interaction between the social worker and environment, where the physical and social environments determine social workers’ behaviour (Baral et al., 2013; Baron-Epel & Ivancovsky, 2015).

Such situational factors are discussed below under two sub-categories: situational factors within the environment, which includes interactions with client groups, communities, and other professionals; and situational factors within the organisation, which includes interactions between colleagues, supervisors, and managers.

3.3.2.1. Situational factors within the environment

International evidence suggests that social workers often find themselves in stressful external situations when rendering social welfare services (Boyas et al., 2012;

Dingwall et al., 2014). Social workers may be in particularly risk situations that range from provocative situations, aggressiveness, frustration, and discomfort (Malesa & Pillay, 2020). Stressful situations can occur, for example, during an encounter with a violent family, client, and/or community. Situational factors such as conflict intervention, for example, can also turn out violently. A dispute during an intervention can motivate aggression, physical abuse, and/or intimidation toward the social worker.

Inappropriate behaviour from individuals, groups, or communities, such as harassment, intimidation, or disrespect, furthermore, constitute forms of workplace violence (Copeland & Henry, 2017; Truter & Fouché, 2019); be this through direct harm to the social worker or indirect creation of a work environment that is characterised by fear and stress. Inappropriate behaviour within the workplace has been well researched over the last two decades, although this research is almost exclusively limited to Europe (compare Stutzenberger & Fisher, 2014; Yusop, Dempster & Stevenson, 2014). South African social workers, however, often find themselves in working conditions which are characterised by stress and fear (Hipp, Beenhardt & Allmendingen, 2015). Kheswa (2019), for example, identified a disproportionate number of South African social workers as experiencing effects of secondary stress within their practice environment.

The researcher is of the opinion that situational workplace violence often occurs due to the inability of the social worker to effectively handle a specific situation that escalates into an argument, intimidation, threat, or physical violence. Further research on the contributing situational factors within the social worker's working environment is needed within the South African context, to better inform appropriate professional, organisational and policy response.

3.3.2.2. *Situational factors within the organisation*

Mistrust in the workplace and poor relationships among social workers can lead to inefficient communication, heightened stress, and low job satisfaction. Inappropriate behaviours in the workspace, such as discrimination, intimidation, yelling, harassment and/or aggression are regarded as major psychological threats with a detrimental effect on the health and wellbeing of workers (Hogh, Mikkelsen & Hansen, 2011; Jenkins, Winefield & Sarris, 2013). Furthermore, the observation and modelling of

inappropriate and/or aggressive behaviour is more likely in an organisation, particularly if such behaviour comes from management or other colleagues.

South Africa is a diverse nation, with a history of discriminatory practices, and the researcher is of the view that it is important to consider unfair and discriminatory treatment as a situational factor which could lead to workplace violence within the social work organisation. Section 6 of South Africa's Employment Equity Act (EEA, No. 55 of 1998) prohibits unfair discrimination against an employee on twenty arbitrary grounds, including race, age, disability, sex, and others. Failure to adhere to the above within an organisation will likely foster an environment of intimidation and abuse. Observing and/or modelling any form of unfair discriminatory behaviours (such as race, age, disability, sex, belief, culture, language, and birth) in the workplace could lead to a culture that allows for workplace violence.

However, according to Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara and Suárez-Acosta (2013), less is known about employee reactions to perceived acts of unfairness or discrimination towards themselves or their colleagues, as perpetrated by other employees, supervisors, or managers. It is crucial to create a comfortable and safe environment within the organisation, not only for workers but also for service users of the organisation (Johnson et al., 2018); this often requires policy-based boundaries and expectations. Within an organisation that has no workplace violence policy, it is likely that inappropriate behaviour will occur; this can be damaging for both individuals and the organisation itself. Such an environment may also decrease employee commitment towards critical service rendering, or an increase of social workers' intentions to leave the organisation.

3.3.2. Individual factors

According to Strolin, McCarthey and Caringi (2007:4) individual factors "...are the cause of turnover that stem from individual worker characteristic such as educational background and professional commitment". Webb and Carpenter (2012) define individual factors as personal traits of the worker, demographic data and levels of education/training, experience in the field, degree of satisfaction and job dedication, levels of self-efficacy and the degree of support from supervisors. Social work is labelled by its high demands regarding service in terms of clients and restricted

resources for intervention; and in this manner social workers experience feelings of contention and uneasiness (Antonopoulou, Killian & Forrester, 2017; Crowder & Sears, 2017; Travis, Lizano & Mor Barak, 2016). Therefore, work-related stressors have been labelled as the result of complex interactions between the environmental and organisational demands and the ability of the individual to cope with these demands (Collins, 2008 in Antonopoulou et al., 2017). Work related stressors such as heavy workload, long hours, and lack of safety, intimidation and aggression can lead to physical illness as well as psychological distress and mental illness. This has been confirmed in the study conducted by Calitz, Roux and Strydom (2014), in which a range of individual factors contributing to workplace violence are identified: poor working conditions, lack of resources and support, and increased demands for critical service delivery, all of which result in experiences of frustration and lack of positive intervention. It is evident that individual factors negatively influence social worker productivity and affect the individual health and wellbeing of the social worker. However, if these factors are not properly dealt with, it can be harmful not only for the social worker, but for client systems, staff, and the organisation.

It is evident that individual factors that perpetuate workplace violence are the result of lack of support, stress, lack of resources, loneliness, inadequate intervention, lack of teamwork and an overload of work (Truter, Fouché & Theron, 2017; 2018; Schiller, 2017). Social workers render critical social services to violent clients, unsafe organisations, and groups within an aggressive environment. A social worker is often expected to intervene with an involuntary client who is not interested in social work services and unwilling to cooperate. According to Enosh, Tzafrir and Gur (2012), social workers perform their job-related duties under countless constraints enforced by legal, organisational, and ideological systems. These requirements can put social workers in an unpleasant professional predicament originating from conflict between personal feelings and professional realities. The aggressiveness of the client system constitutes as individual contributory factors and negatively affects social workers on different levels such as physiological, emotional, behavioural, and physical (Enosh et al., 2013). Workplace violence inflicted on social workers is most accurately understood accurate as violence representing the external act, which emerges from numerous variables in relationships, and differing intensities, affecting both the internal and external world of the social worker. The researcher is of the view that there are a variety of forces which

endorse and hinder a specific act, however, lack of support from colleagues, supervisors, and the organisation itself results in heightened experiences of stressors and has detrimental effects on social workers as individuals. As suggested by Bandura (1977), through the so-called modelling processes, managers and supervisors should influence workers in the operationalisation and transmission of organisational values, attitudes, and behaviours. Through observing management behaviour, social workers would learn what is and is not acceptable within the profession and would be more likely to impersonate the behaviour of their manager or supervisors in practice (Bormann, 2017; Gibson, 2011; Schein, 2010). These are individual factors as proposed by several authors (Calitz et al., 2014; Strolin et al., 2007; Webb & Carpenter, 2012).

3.3.2.1. *Professional commitment*

Professional commitment has a crucial effect on turnover intention (Chang, Lee, Chang, Lee & Wang, 2019). A social worker in the profession has professional commitment, which influences service delivery irrespective of challenges experienced in the workplace. With a lack of professional commitment, a social worker in their workplace cannot reach their optimal potential in service rendering (Joubert, 2017). The inability to manage workplace violence in the social work profession leads to an inability to fulfil work-related duties and a decrease in productivity. In addition, this might lead to tension among colleagues and a decline in employee productivity. Such factors may then further encourage manifestations of aggression and unhealthy relationships in the workplace. Social workers professional commitment towards service rendering can be characterised as a level of enthusiasm a social worker demonstrates towards assigned work-related duties. Threats to the safety of a social worker in their workplace and a lack of law enforcement support also contributes to stressful working environments for social service workers (Chung & Chun, 2015). Professional commitment is a factor that contributes towards workplace violence when social workers are not willing to strive and uphold the values, principles, and code of ethics of the profession. As stated in an SACSSP (2019) media statement, the profession consists of high workload, lack of supportive infrastructure such as vehicles, poor access to other tools of the trade; this impacts on the professional and personal lives of many. The researcher is of the estimation that failure to uphold the

code of ethics of the profession is considered as a contributing factor towards workplace violence in South African social work practice.

3.3.3. Organisational factors

Strolin et al. (2007:4) characterises organisational factors “as the reasons of a turnover that stem from the organisation, for example, caseloads size, work fulfilment, hierarchical atmosphere and culture, pay, benefits, promotional opportunities and administrative burdens”. Such organisational factors are evident in literature across several different social work organisations and settings. Marc and Osvat (2013) concluded that social workers are prone to poor working conditions, lack of resources and support, and increased demands of critical service. Such challenges lead to job dissatisfaction, which impacts on work performance and the quality of social services rendered to the client (Lizano & Barak, 2015). Social workers employed at child protection organisations are at risk of work-related factors such as excessive workloads, staff shortage, exposure to violence and aggression, and high stress levels (Griffiths & Royse, 2017). Inadequate staffing within healthcare and correctional facilities is considered a challenging factor, which can make social workers feel overwhelmed by high workloads.

Major work-related organisational stressors identified by Whitaker and Arrington (2008) include insufficient time to meet client’s face-to-face, unmanageable workload, dealing with difficult clients and large number of cases. A shortage of social workers alongside high caseloads and multiple responsibilities are regarded as challenges in rendering effective intervention services; for example, social workers not being able to properly intervene within a client system due to paperwork that needs to be done at the office. Not having much time to render face-to-face intervention with clients causes more frustration in both a social worker and client; such frustration could lead to harm or aggression during intervention processes.

This risk can be further heightened by a lack of security and protective measures for social workers inside the organisation to safeguard against an aggressive client. In healthcare facilities, social workers are prone to violence when conducting home visits for ill clients, exasperated by poor resource and fund allocation and a lack of professional capacity (Ornellas, 2014). In a study conducted by Ornellas (2014), a

participants shared their experiences as a social worker within mental healthcare, indicating; “However, part of the challenge in this role is the lack of safety. Social workers are probably the most vulnerable professionals when it comes to safety, these mental health clients some of them become violent” (Participant J). As stated by Margaret Kusambiza, Director of the Eastern Cape NGO Coalition, quoted in Chibba (2011), “The profession is stressful” and social workers remain underpaid, with many leaving the country due to poor working conditions.

Supervisory elements are also characterised as reasons for turnover that originate from deficient manager support and capability (Calitz et al., 2014). Strolin et al. (2007) further relates that several organisational factors impact social work fulfilment after some time, such as self-rule, influence over choices and job, adaptability, caseload size, oversight, and expert improvement openings. The increase of demand for critical services without any help or assistance from colleagues or supervisors may have an impact on social workers ability to render quality services.

3.3.3.1. *Closed communication*

According to Keyton (2011), communication is defined as the process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another. Communication skills are fundamental to social practice (Forrester, Kershaw, Moss & Hughes, 2008). This section of the chapter reflects on closed communication at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of intervention from a social work perspective. The aim is to explore how closed communication is contributing to workplace violence at each level. The researcher is of the opinion that closed communication at the individual level (social worker) contributes towards workplace violence when a social worker does not address issues that affect her at the workplace. This includes, for example, struggling with workloads, unfair treatment, and fear of speaking out about issues that bothers the employee.

Communication problems, workplace conflicts, stress, and low self-esteem are key factors that affect work performance. Being unable to control or manage these micro level issues affects social workers at the organisational level. When the social worker has such negative experiences, this results in unhealthy relationships and affects communication between employees which may lead to workplace violence in the

working environment. A supervisor or manager for example, expects the social worker to perform work-related duties which might lead to an argument if the social worker feels unable to express their feelings of being stress and overworked; this may escalate to verbal aggression. An organisation that has closed communication between employees and employer might have issues such as lack of communication between manager and employees, and unresponsive help from their supervisors. With poor communication in the workplace comes poor service delivery due to not having access or support from supervisors, nor resources that can assist social workers to perform their job-related duties well. The researcher is of the view that an organisation with poor communication between employees and management elevates stress levels for an employee.

The macro level of social work practice involves intervention and advocacy on a large scale, affecting three spheres of the government. In this aspect, social workers are frequently found at government agencies, non-profit organisations, and advocacy groups. Closed communication takes place when an organisation is not involved in community development and does not promote structural solutions to systematic inequalities and various forms of oppression that go beyond individual adaptation and resilience (Reisch, 2017). The researcher is of the opinion that closed communication at the macro level is because social workers fail to pose questions about how problems are identified, defined, explained, and addressed. Workplace violence against social workers has become an inherent risk of the profession and undeniably one that needs to be addressed on a national scope.

3.3.3.2. *Lack of resources*

Several studies conducted within the South African social work context have identified professional challenges such as high staff turnover, poor working conditions, low salaries, and a lack of resources, which often leads to stress and burnout (Calitz et al., 2014; Kangéthe, 2014). Among factors contributing towards workplace violence are lack of support from authorities and lack of resources for social workers and service users (Hope & Van Wyk, 2018; Lizano & Barak, 2015). Lack of resources is a particular issue in South African social service rendering. Lack of resources refers to lack of offices and office space, lack of equipment, shortage of vehicles to travel to remote areas, and lack of safety measures, these complicate service delivery to client

systems. This seems to be a global challenge for the profession; for example, a study conducted by Kagan and Itzick (2019:30) outlined, “In Israel social work practice in a stressful occupational environment and conditions within the social context of a welfare state with limited resources and a deepening economic recession”.

Most South African welfare organisations are based in townships or render critical welfare services in high crime zones. A lack of resources in these settings may include a lack of security in offices and secured infrastructure in areas with high gang activity. For example, in the researchers undergraduate practice education, he was placed in a child welfare organisation; the organisation is situated in a high crime zone with drug dealers, and the researcher was told not to walk with valuable items such as phone, bags, laptops and jewellery. The welfare organisation had no security, including proper fencing or an electric gate. Further, there was a lack of telephones to call in an emergency, and only one vehicle for community work and home visits with a workforce capacity of seven staff member and seven students.

Lack of resources such as unreliable transport (for example, not being able to do home visits due to shortage of transport and sometimes having to take public transport), and staff shortages meaning the social worker must confront violent clients on their own (and sometimes with the help of unresponsive police or supervisors) puts a social worker at risk of violence.

3.3.3.3. *Caseload size, job stress and burnout,*

Organisational factors are associated with job stress, impaired production, burnout, caseloads and decrease willingness to remain in the organisation (Boyas et al., 2012; Puleo, 2011). High caseloads in social work practice leads to burnout and frustration, which results in social workers wanting to leave an organisation and having less interest in South African social service rendering (Engelbrecht, 2006). Burnout is a reaction to a prolonged exposure to stressors such as workload and insufficient resources (Day, Crown & Ivany, 2017). While job stress may arise from a specific event and/or work conditions, burnout often results from cumulative effect of chronic stress over time (Byers, 2010); this has been well documented in literature (Khamisa, Oldenburg, Peltzer & Ilic, 2015).

Burnout has become a serious issue in various occupations, and often results in a reduced enthusiasm for the subject (Mendieta & Rivas, 2011). This causes a massive migration of South African social workers to other countries that have better resource and protection measures. In the study conducted to explore migration of South African social workers to the United Kingdom, Naidoo and Kasiram (2006) confirm high caseloads in South Africa as being the most frustrating factor for social workers. This is echoed by Engelbrecht (2006) who identified that many South African social workers left South Africa to work in countries such as the United Kingdom due to challenges of high caseloads and burnout. Caseload size was also recognised by Schraer (2015) as being the most common cause of stress among social workers. High caseloads and burnout are contributing factors in workplace violence experiences for social workers. For example, clients want to be helped immediately and when this is not possible due to enormous caseloads, they may become angry and confront the social worker, thinking she is not doing her job.

In the social work profession, stress and burnout arise not only from excessive work demands, but also from direct exposure to clients' disclosure of stressful or traumatic life events. Burnout happens in any context, yet it has been predominantly studied in caregiving professions. According to Hooper, Craig, Janvrin, Wetsel and Reimels (2010) the concept of burnout was introduced in reference to a phenomenon observed among social service workers who had to deal with emotionally demanding individuals and stressful situations such as workplace violence. Such situations result in a reality characterised by resource shortages, high client demands, high caseloads and inappropriate pay (Hovav, Lawental & Katan, 2012). The social work profession is a demanding profession with long hours, low support and protection for social workers and heightened psychological distress (Hopkins & Gardner, 2012). The better safeguarding of social workers in the workplace would lead to a decline in the migration of young South African social workers, a skill which is direly needed in South Africa due to shortage of social service professionals.

The researcher is of the belief that high caseloads, stress, and burnout are contributing factors towards workplace violence due to client-focused work in complex situations and direct services to clients in traumatic and stressful contexts. These working conditions may place a social worker at risk of negative mental health outcomes such

as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and secondary traumatic stress (Benjamin, 2007; Lonne, 2008).

3.3.4. Environmental factors

As stated by Kennedy and Julie (2013:1), “violence in South African society has reached epidemic levels and has permeated the wall of the workplace”. This is evidence that workplace violence is a major issue that is particularly under-investigated within the social work profession, with limited evidence-based research into strategic intervention programmes to safeguard social workers and the organisation. Given the dynamic nature of a social work practice, it is imperative to consider what it is about the environmental setting that increases the risk for workplace violence against social workers in South Africa. According to Antonopoulou et al. (2017), environmental factors fall into three areas of organisational climate, organisational culture, and work attitudes. The researcher identified environmental factors contributing to workplace violence as including encounters with the public, working in remote and high-crime locations, and working alone.

3.3.4.1. Encounters with the public

Social workers engage with client’s systems, families, group, and community as large. According to Weyers (2011:28), “community work is defined as a method of social work that consists of different process and a social worker’s helping acts that are targeted at the community systems, as well as its sub-systems, and certain external systems, with the purpose of bringing about require social change”. Community in many ways represents a valid and meaningful social concept that has found a prominent place in social work practice (Nicotera, 2007). Social workers in community organisations help the community to function by means of direct intervention with individuals, families, and groups, and by conducting needs assessments and making referrals to resources in the community. However, on a community level, risk factors might relate to circumstances, norms in the community, resources, and networks (Truter & Fouché, 2019). South African community risk factors include protests, community violence, concentrated neighbourhood disadvantage (for example, high levels of unemployment, poverty, and high density of alcohol outlets), gang-related activity, and poor social connections.

Social workers render critical services and engage with abandoned clients, gang members, sex offenders, drug addicts and probation clients. The researcher is of the view that these clients are capable of inflicting harm on a helping professional; for example, due to legal process that a social worker needs to follow, clients can become impatient with the process and start becoming violent towards a social worker. The nature of social workers in child protection organisations requires high-risk work such as doing home visits in dangerous communities and dealing directly with the violent families and clients (Brown & Gale, 2018).

3.3.4.2. Working in remote and high-crime areas

Working in remote areas and alone puts a social worker at risk of exposure to intimidation and violence (Koritsas et al., 2010). While rendering social welfare services in remote areas is part of social work professional practice, these areas have environmental risks factors which social workers need to be aware, including gang-related activities, protests, vandalism, and community resistance to intervention. Social workers practicing in rural areas and townships are more likely to experience intimidation compared to urban social workers (Koritsas et al., 2010). Violent activities are more likely to occur in such settings due to socioeconomic inequalities, unemployment, and poverty; social workers often find themselves exposed in such areas.

An example of this is the recent protest by Nelson Mandela Bay social work staff who refused to enter high crime areas such as Helenvale, Bethelsdorp, Kwazakhele and New Brighton, amongst others, following an increase in attacks on workers (Wilson, 2020). Wilson (2020) highlights the various forms of violence experienced by these social workers through interviews, which included being held up at gunpoint, robbed and receiving death threats in their line of duty.

Alpaslan and Schenck (2012) in their exploratory study conducted in 2002, explored the issues experienced by social workers practicing in rural areas. The study finds that poor working conditions, no resources and infrastructure, lack of support from supervisors and the organisation, and lack of confidentiality are among some of the challenges resulting in risky working conditions for social workers practising in remote areas. For example, the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Social Development was forced

to shut down one of its branches in Pietermaritzburg following a surge in criminal attacks on social workers. Social development MEC Nonhlanhla Khoza said, “Departmental employees are being victimised by crime across the province. We are lucky we have not lost lives in these incidents. The brutal hijackings of departmental vehicles demoralise our employees” (Govender, 2020:03). With no measures being taken to ensure social workers safety in practice, this makes social workers prone to workplace violence when they are rendering critical services in these violent communities.

3.3.4.3. *Working alone*

It is evident in South African society that high rates of unemployment, protests, hotspot crime zones and gang-related activities exist, and social workers find themselves rendering critical service in these areas with unresponsive protection from the SAPS and SACSSP. With staff shortages and limited resources, social workers are often sent to conduct home-visits and community work alone in dangerous communities where there is a possibility of being exposed to violence in various forms (Brown & Gale, 2018). However, the reality of the profession is that social workers are often alone and unarmed in violent communities where even police themselves do not enter without convoy and fully geared. In a study conducted by Wynne (2020), a social worker noted in an interview;

“I got locked in a tik-house once with Nigerians and they wouldn’t let me out of the house, okay, and only because I had formed good relationships with the tannie on the corner by giving her rusks once a week so she could give me the gossip in the street, was I saved. Because I hate to think what type of situation I would’ve ended up in otherwise. So, when I told my supervisor I need to go into a really dangerous area, do you mind if I take someone with me to go driving, she said no, because it’s easier to replace one social worker than it is to replace two.... Like if, I think about it, like it was just ... she was, she was a devil, and you can quote me on that one I don’t even care. But she was awful in that sense”. (Participant 6).

Community risk factors are contributing factors towards secondary traumatic stress and workplace violence that social workers are experiencing in practice. A high-stress environment and lack of law enforcement protection affects social workers rendering

critical services to their client systems in these environments and creates a hostile working environment.

Reducing workplace violence towards social workers is recommended and this can be done by means of evaluating the impact of workplace violence and its implication. A welfare organisation with a safe working environment, reasonable workload, organisational workplace violence policy, supervision, and respect for work autonomy such welfare organisation can strive for improvement (Chang et al., 2019).

3.4. IMPLICATIONS OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Workplace violence against social workers is among hot rising topics neglected from the mainstream social work research. The implications of violence in the workplace could result to serious consequences on the physical, emotional, and behavioural character of the social worker (Sousa, Silva, Veloso, Tzafirc & Enosh, 2015). Social workers are at high risk of workplace violence, even though limited data available of factors contributing workplace violence in South African social work practice. While all social workers in practice are at risk of violence and violence is can be catastrophic (Enosh et al., 2013). The implications of workplace violence on social workers results in physical injury, traumatic experiences, and psychological problems (Jacobs & Scott, 2011; Schiff, 2010). The implications of workplace violence implicate self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and the social workers sense of control. In addition, this result to feelings of failure, loss of motivation and leaving the social work profession were significant findings (Gates, Gillespie & Succop, 2011; Gillespie, Gates & Berry, 2013; Van Den Bos, Creten, Davenport & Roberts, 2017). Lack of trust among colleagues and at the organisational level due to tolerance and normalisation of workplace violence (Zuzele, Curran & Zeserman, 2012). Implications of workplace violence can cause distress thoughts about work-related duties. Social workers might have trouble concentrating on their duties at work. Intrusive thoughts due to the experiences of violence in their working environments. There is a need for research and intervention to further, explore organisational policy and fundamental recommended programmes to manage and resolve workplace violence.

Studies have pointed out that the implications of all factors of workplace violence impact the potential safety and wellbeing of social workers and the organisation (Gates

et al., 2011; Rowe & Sherlock, 2005). Workplace phenomenon is a severe problem in South African workplaces. As confirmed by Calitz et al. (2014) social workers do encounter stress and burnout aftereffect of their outstanding tasks, they went to be genuinely emotionally drained and unproductive. The researcher is of the view that these factors of workplace violence have a comprehensive applicability and are not unique to South African social work practice. Victims of workplace violence went through an emotional turmoil and scared as results of violence imposed upon them. It is crucial for social service workers to give extra attention to their own safety and protection. It is crucial to implement effective workplace violence intervention programmes for sustainable change in social work practice (Borcherds, 2015; Gillespie et al., 2010).

This could prompt sentiments of unsatisfied and thinking of leaving the organisation (Griffiths & Royse, 2017; Schiller, 2017). Thusly it is significant for an organisation to address issues of workplace violence, increase support groups, supervision, and internal policy programmes to help social workers to manage stressors and keep them energised and intrigued by their calling (Mehrad, 2016; Patel, 2015; Van Breda & Addinall, 2020). Supervisors play vital role in the well-being of social workers. Social workers are knowledgeable about evidence-based interventions to achieve the goals of clients and constituencies, including individuals, families, groups, organisation, and communities (Zastrow, 2017). Consequences include increase incidences of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder psychological effects (Hetty Van Emmerik, Euwema & Bakker, 2007). Alongside individual factors that causes workplace violence, organisational factors are significant affecting components.

3.5. IMPLICATIONS OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE FOR THE SOCIAL WORK ORGANISATION

The literature review has shown that exposure to factors causing workplace violence is particularly high in service and human service sectors such as healthcare, education, correction facilities, public safety, and justice industries (Brenda & Proffitt, 2011; Piquero et al., 2013; Spector et al., 2014). As outlined above, social workers render critical social services to client systems, family, groups and in society and that is the nature of the profession. In considering these contributing factors and the notion that social work is a perilous occupation, it is evident that the risk of violence exposure

for the profession is high (Respass & Payne, 2008). Violence in social work profession covers the full range of harms embedded in interpersonal, institutional, and interrelated systems (Bjerger, Anand & Järkestig-Berggren, 2020). Workplace violence is a serious phenomenon that comes with a wide range of implications for social work practice and negatively affects all systems involved, including the client system, social workers, supervisor and managers, and the organisation.

Taylor and Zeng (2011:56) believe that “workplace violence symbolises extreme instances of workplace problems that can traumatise workers and organisations with longstanding personal and professional effects”. Experiencing violence in the workplace leads to fear, reduced interest in rendering critical services in these areas, and lack of service delivery due to multiple factors that threaten social workers in practice. Empirical evidence has shown that workplace violence can elicit a range of negative but common emotional reactions at the individual level such as anger, sadness, embarrassment, disgust, and fear (Edward, Ousey, Warelow & Luis, 2014; Lanctot & Guay, 2014). In the results of a study conducted in the Eastern Cape Province by Kheswa (2019), the social work profession is highlighted as a leading occupation in professional experiences of poor physical health, poor job satisfaction and impaired wellbeing.

The organisational effects of workplace violence are evident, including a lack of trust, cooperation, and increased negativity. The effects of workplace violence on social workers at their workplace results in poor communication, lack of trust and confidentiality amongst workers (Borcherds, 2015). Social workers might mistrust the organisation due to the absence of workplace violence policies to safeguard employees. The implications of workplace violence hinder social workers from participation at the organisation and there is no healthy relationship between the victim and perpetrator (Schindeler, 2014).

The researcher is of the idea that not only it affects only the organisation but also all other systems involved in the operationalisation of the organisation, affecting the overarching vision and mission of social work organisations in communities; this contributes to the resignation and migration of social workers. The social work profession is facing a serious problem in recruitment and retention of social workers due to unsafe working environments and a lack of organisational workplace violence

policy. Workplace violence in the social work profession may discourage students and new graduates from entering the social work workplace. Improving the provision of support, resources and implementation of workplace violence policies would enable social workers to render services without fear of being attacked in their workplace. This provides the opportunity for the organisation to introducing supportive methods for social workers to cope with the negative effects of their professional practice. Social welfare organisations are ethically committed to protect social workers from any form of workplace violence that impacts upon organisational and work-related accomplishments. However, zero-tolerance of violence in social work practice is often obligatory, it is perhaps not realistic when organisations with no workplace violence policy to safeguard against violence in social work practice.

3.6. CONCLUSION

This chapter provided an understanding of how workplace violence both arises and affects social work and its practice. The chapter has classified contributing factors in workplace violence as being either internal, as related to the social worker or client, or external in terms of the organisation or environment. Each of these factors have been explored above in terms of relevance to contributory factors within the workplace violence phenomenon. This aligns with the theoretical context of the study (systems theory and social learning theory) in addressing interrelated systems and how behaviour is moderated and learnt in practice. This study outlined that international literature confirms the prevalence of workplace violence against social workers; however, workplace violence is rarely focused on within South African social work research or practice agendas.

Workplace violence is considered as a growing phenomenon that needs comprehensive description and a plan of action in South African social work practice. The cost of workplace violence is unavoidable. However, there is a lack of scientific evidence of workplace violence related factors in the social work profession to better understand the magnitude of this phenomenon within South African social work practice. Per Koritsas et al. (2010), having clear understanding of the contributing factors that predict or predispose social workers to workplace violence might aid with the development of interventions that better safeguard social workers. Understanding the existence of workplace violence and its factors in social work practice lends to

strategic implementation to manage stressful situations in practice. Studies indicate that workplace safety and organisational workplace violence policy strengthen social work wellbeing, increase safety behaviours, and improves work quality and relationships.

The internal and external factors contributing towards workplace violence indicate a relationship that entails numerous intertwined systems and modelling of behaviours through observation. Per systems and social learning theory, social workers cannot be evaluated as a single entity but form part of the unified whole which includes the client system, the organisation, and the environment. The description and exploration of the factors that contribute towards workplace violence in the South African social work profession have thus been clearly presented. Against this backdrop, the following chapter will empirically investigate social workers' experiences of workplace violence.

CHAPTER FOUR:

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE - SOCIAL WORKERS EXPERIENCES OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

4.1. INTRODUCTION

The previous chapters looked at the factors contributing to workplace violence in social work and the implications thereof for South African social work practice. These chapters presented a literature background into this research topic of exploring South African social workers' experiences of workplace violence and consequently establishing a goal for the research study. The goal of the research is to gain an understanding of South African social worker's experiences of workplace violence, to better understand the causes and implications of this phenomenon. The literature presented explored workplace violence within a South African context and the researcher discussed the cycle of workplace violence within the set of interrelated elements functioning as a whole, thereby further exploring workplace violence through a theoretical lens in social work using the systems theory and social learning theory. One of the important points of the theoretical point of departure was the use of these two theoretical frameworks as illustrating different types of systems involved in the formation of a system as a whole and the modelling of observed behaviour by these various interacting systems that in turn influence the overall culture of behaviour within the organisation. Furthermore, the effect, impact, and implications of workplace violence on social workers and the organisation were outlined.

This chapter aims to meet the third objective of the research, as established in chapter One, to empirically investigate South African social workers' experiences of workplace violence. This will be discussed according to the implementation of an empirical study. The findings, which are based on the knowledge and experiences of the seventeen research participants will be presented in the form of graphs, tables, themes, and sub-themes where applicable.

SECTION A: RESEARCH METHOD

This section of the chapter provides an outline of and reflects upon the research methodology that was implemented throughout the study on the social worker's experiences of workplace violence. The research methodology was discussed comprehensively in Chapter One.

4.2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section of the chapter will discuss the research methodology of the study, in terms of research approach, design and method, including literature review, population and sampling, means of data collection and analysis that was implemented for the study on social workers' experiences of workplace violence.

4.2.1. Research Approach

The research approach employed in the study was qualitative. Qualitative research allows in-depth examination of the participants' experiences by using a specific set of research methods such as in-depth interviews, discussions, content analysis and biographs (Hennink et al., 2020). The prior mentioned approach was selected because the research study seeks a multifaceted and holistic view of social workers' experiences, to explore and describe causative factors of workplace violence and implications for practice (Fouché & Roestenburg, 2021). Making use of a qualitative approach enabled the researcher to explore non-numerical data that enables the description and interpretation of meaning. Furthermore, the researcher was able to highlight the participant's views, knowledge, and experiences of workplace violence as well as their recommendations to safeguard social workers in their working environment.

4.2.2. Research design

The research design was both exploratory and descriptive. By using an exploratory research design, the researcher was able to allow participants to broadly share their knowledge, experiences, views, and perceptions on workplace violence. In addition, a descriptive research design was employed to answer the questions of how and why (Creswell, 2014; Fouché & Roestenburg, 2021), leading to an in-depth examination of

the social worker's experiences of workplace violence. The combination of both exploratory and descriptive designs was selected to describe and explore the experiences of the participants with regards to workplace violence in South African social work practice. Both the designs were crucial for the study to probe for in-depth information as the variable's workplace violence experiences of social workers and implications have not been researched in South Africa (Creswell, 2007). Exploratory and descriptive designs further aim at providing insights into a phenomenon (Kumar, 2019), enabling the researcher to answer the question of 'what' social workers' experiences of workplace violence are. By implementing the combination of the two research designs, the researcher was able to develop new and in-depth knowledge on social workers' experiences of workplace violence, and in doing so, explore and describe the factors contributing to workplace violence in South African social work and implications thereof for practice and responsive legislation.

4.2.3. Sampling methods

For the purpose of the research study, purposive-snowball sampling was implemented. Maree (2016) and Kumar (2019) suggest that snowball sampling occurs when the researcher starts with one or two participants and then builds their sample by moving to other participants as recommended by the first two participants. The researcher found snowball sampling suitable for the study, as one of the criteria for participation in the study required some prior experience or knowledge of workplace violence on behalf of the social worker. Given the evidence that the experiences of South African social workers on workplace violence have not been investigated in previous research, this approach was necessary for a richer study.

The proposed criteria for inclusion of the research study were as follows:

- i. The participant must be a registered social worker with the South African Council of Social Service Professions (SACSSP);
- ii. The participant can be from any organisation, thus public or private, in the Western Cape province;
- iii. The participants may have any number of years of professional experience; the researcher is interested in any experiences of workplace violence over and above frequency or duration;

- iv. The participant must have been exposed to workplace violence or have knowledge of someone who has been exposed to workplace violence.

The sample for the study was made up of seventeen participants currently registered with the SACSSP as professional social workers. The data collected from the seventeen selected participants of the study allowed the study to achieve data saturation. Data saturation is reached when there is enough information to replicate the study, obtaining new information has been attained and further coding is no longer probable. As stated by Guetterman (2015:3) “qualitative sampling intends to explain, describe and interpret. Therefore, sampling is not a matter of opinions but a matter of richness”. The researcher could identify that the narratives from the various participants became repetitive after interview number fourteen. As a result, no new information was added and the sample size of seventeen participants was regarded as sufficient.

The researcher contacted professionals who fitted the criteria for inclusion in the research study telephonically in their professional capacity. The data collection process took four months (from April until July of 2021) and was limited to the Western Cape. The researcher conducted telephonic interviews with the first two participants; snowball sampling was then implemented to request referrals from these participants for additional social workers who also met the criteria for inclusion. Due to Covid-19 rules and regulations, the researcher had to write a formal invitation to various supervisors in respective organisations for participant recruitment and the researcher thereby invited participants through their supervisors. Most participants were keen to participate in the research study and some telephonic interviews were conducted during lunchtime; many social workers were working from home; therefore, it was much easier to conduct these telephonic interviews without any form of disturbance. Snowball sampling was implemented because some of the supervisors never replied to the formal invitation, the researcher had no choice rather than implementing a snowball sampling. The researcher found that even participants with less than two years of working experience (thus social workers within minimum work experience) could relate to the research study and some shared experiences from their time in the field. The participants with more than two years of working experiences had similar experiences. Telephonic interviews were conducted at the participant’s

convenient time. The researcher assured the participants that interviews are not about the respective organisation, and they can withdraw at any point. The researcher guaranteed the participants that the discussed information is strictly confidential; no one has access to it except the supervisor of the researcher. The interviews went well, and no participants were emotional or needed debriefing during data collection. See Annexure 5 for a general overview of the debriefing.

4.2.4. Data collection

The research study was a qualitative study; therefore, a semi-structured interview method was implemented to collect data. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because this allowed the researcher to gain a holistic view of the participants' experiences, perceptions, and knowledge about workplace violence in social work. For the study, participants were made aware that telephonic interviews will be recorded, therefore, a voice recorder was used to audiotape the interviews. Telephonic semi-structured interviews were conducted following a series of open-ended questions. See Annexure 2 for a general overview of the semi-structured interview schedule. The reason for the utilisation of telephonic interviews was because face-to-face data collection was suspended by the Stellenbosch University Research Ethics Committee due to the Covid-19 pandemic and regulations around social distancing. Nevertheless, in-depth exploration and description could still be generated from the interviews. Telephonic interviews were transcribed. Field notes were made during the interviews to assist the researcher with the analysis of the interviews to identify themes and probe into areas where the participants had experience or knowledge of workplace violence. This data collection method allowed for more flexibility between the researcher and participants and resulted in deep probing and acquiescent-rich data from the participants. Probing was based on interviews constructed around themes and sub-themes, as indicated in the interview schedule (Annexure 2). It is crucial to consider that interviews were not thoroughly conducted as displayed in the interview schedule. Rather, if an experience was given in the direction of a theme, the researcher would probe into the theme and particular experience to fully comprehend the context. This data collection tool worked well, and the researcher was able to discover more in-depth details. Findings from this data collection will be presented in this chapter.

4.2.5. Data analysis

Data analysis in a qualitative research study can be defined as the process of making sense from the research participants' views and perceptions of the situation, corresponding patterns, themes, categories, and irregular similarities (Schurink et al., 2021). Nieuwenhuis (2007:99-100) captured the essence of data analysis well when he came up with the following definition of data analysis that aids as a virtuous working description, "data analysis tends to be an ongoing and iterative process, implying the data collection, processing, analysis and reporting are intertwined, and not necessarily a successive process". After the seventeen telephonic interviews had been conducted, the point of data saturation was achieved, and the process of data analysis started. The following broader guidelines were followed during data analysis. Firstly, data was transcribed after it was tape-recorded, and the focus was more on the content rather than how it was said. Therefore, involuntary actions and repetition of words that appear habitual were all removed during transcription. Grammar was corrected where needed to give a clear concise understanding of the information provided by the participants. This was done with extra caution to avoid changing the meaning and the interpretations given by the participants regarding their experiences. Transcriptions were read and the data was extracted manually and placed into relevant themes, sub-themes, and categories. Some themes were based on and in the same sequence as the questions in the interview schedule; however, sub-themes and categories were generated from the participants' treatises. The researcher selected certain narratives to highlight the trends that were discovered after transcribing telephonic interviews. The findings of the research will be now presented in the section below.

SECTION B: IDENTIFYING PARTICULARS

This section of the research presents characteristics of the participants involved in the empirical study on the social workers' experiences of workplace violence. Below is the biographical information of the participants who took part in the study.

4.3. BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The biographical information of the participants who took part in the research study will be discussed below to create the context around the gender, years of experience in the profession of social work and description of participant working environment.

The researcher presents the biographical information of the interviewees of the study of social workers experiences of workplace violence in Table 4.1 below; this includes biographical information of the participants in terms of gender, type of organisation, position at the organisation, and the number of years in the profession of social work.

Table 4.1. Biographical information of the participants

Interviewees	Type of organisation	Gender	Position at the organisation	Number of years in the profession of social work
Participant 1 (P1)	Non-Governmental Organisation	Male	Social worker	1 year
Participant 2 (P2)	Non-Governmental Organisation	Male	Social worker	1 year
Participant 3 (P3)	Non-Governmental Organisation	Female	Social worker	15 years
Participant 4 (P4)	Non-Governmental Organisation	Female	Social worker	3 years
Participant 5 (P5)	Non-Governmental Organisation	Male	Social worker	2 years and six months
Participant 6 (P6)	Government	Female	Social worker	8 years
Participant 7 (P7)	Government	Female	Social worker	1 year and six months
Participant 8 (P8)	Government	Female	Social worker	30 years

Participant 9 (P9)	Non-Governmental Organisation	Female	Social worker	2 years
Participant 10 (P10)	Government	Female	Social worker	1 year and 3 months
Participant 11 (P11)	Non-Governmental Organisation	Female	Social worker	3 years
Participant 12 (P12)	Non-Governmental organisation	Female	Social worker	10 months
Participant 13 (P13)	Non-Governmental Organisation	Female	Social worker	1 year and 4 months
Participant 14 (P14)	Non-Governmental Organisation	Female	Social worker	4 years
Participant 15 (P15)	Non-Governmental Organisation	Female	Social worker	6 years
Participant 16 (P16)	Non-Governmental Organisation	Female	Social worker	6 years
Participant 17 (P17)	Non-Governmental Organisation	Female	Social worker	36 years

The following subdivision of section B of the chapter aims to give a detailed description of what is being outlined in Table 4.1. of the biographical information of the participants of the study.

4.3.1. Gender

The participants were asked to identify their gender at the beginning of the telephonic interview under the first section A (biographical information of the participants) of the interview schedule. An important majority of the participants (93%) self-identified as

female. The remainder of participants (7%) self-identified as male. The contribution of gender analysis to the study plays an important role as the findings indicate that all social workers irrespective of their gender have experienced and witnessed workplace violence in their line of duty. This shows the vulnerability of social workers in practice regardless of their gender. The importance of asking gender roles as the researcher was to address the perception that male social workers would experience less workplace violence. The findings indicate that all social workers are victims of workplace violence in social work practice.

4.3.2. Years of experience in the profession of social work

The participants were asked to identify their years of experience in the profession of social work at the beginning of section A (biographical information of the participants) of the interview schedule. Table 4.1. above indicates that most of the participants who took part in the research study had less than five years of working experience. It was seen that participants' years of working experience ranged from between 10 months to 36 years. Eleven participants of the study were legitimately new to social work practice because they had been practising for four years or less, while the minority of participants had been practising for more than eight years. The researcher found that the participants with less than 5 years of experience had themselves experienced forms of workplace violence in social work practice, such as verbal abuse, lack of support from senior employees, and being abused by senior employees in terms of extreme workloads and requests to meet personal favours. Evidence for this statement will be presented in the narratives of theme two in Section C of this chapter.

4.3.3. Description of participant working environment

Table 4.1. indicates that the primary organisation type represented in this study is the non-Governmental organisation. Furthermore, many participants render services in NPOs, while a minority render services for the government. There are various fields of expertise amongst the participants, including child protection social workers, school counsellors and therapists, child and youth care social workers, community development social workers, statutory social workers, and adoption social workers. As presented in the literature chapters, experiences of workplace violence amongst social workers in practice focuses on broader aspects within the organisation or among the

three interacting aspects of client, family, and community. All the participants indicated that they were working at organisations rendering services to individual clients, families, and the community. Most participants worked for child protection organisations. The reason for this majority is that the first two participants contacted to participate in the study worked for a child protection organisation and therefore referred the researcher to other child protection organisations. This is to be expected with snowball sampling, as the participants referred the researcher to other participants in similar demographic areas and fields of expertise.

The participants from NGOs were more accessible and willing to share their knowledge and experiences regarding workplace violence against social workers in practice, unlike social workers who work for the government. The researcher struggled to find social workers who worked for the government as they kept on delaying appointments frequently and the researcher had to conduct interviews at their suitable time slots. Some participants preferred to be contacted for a telephonic interview during their lunchtimes. Two participants who worked for the government gave the below responses when asked if employer-to-employee workplace violence existed:

“Yes, most of it, a lot of time. It’s a pity I cannot allude on that because, I’m in an open office structure, and our supervisors are onsite” (P6)

“Yes, it does exist like gossiping, backstabbing, covering and when something happens, you have to cover up or be in denial or blaming each other...” (P8)

The above narrative was unique to the government-based organisations, where the participants were scared to share information with regards to the occurrence of workplace violence between the employee and the employer. The researcher managed to get information from other participants who worked for the government who were not scared to talk during a telephonic interview.

SECTION C: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

4.4. THEMES, SUB-THEMES AND CATEGORIES

The previous section of the study discussed the biographical information of the research participants. Section C of the chapter presents themes and sub-themes of the data collected from the participants who took part in the study on social workers experiences of workplace violence.

A total of eight themes were identified, followed by sub-themes and categories. These themes, sub-themes and categories were identified from the participant's narratives and are presented in Table 4.2. below.

Table 4.2. Themes, sub-themes, and categories

Themes	Sub-themes	Categories
1. Definition of workplace violence in social work practice	1.1. Miscommunication and being exposed to danger	
	1.2. Emotional and verbal violence	
2. Social workers' experiences of workplace violence	2.1. Personal experiences	
	2.2. Colleague experiences	
3. Types of workplace violence	3.1. Client-related workplace violence	3.1.1. Aggression and threats
		3.1.2. Poor understanding of the social work role
	3.2. Co-worker workplace violence	3.2.1. Gossiping
		3.2.2. Lack of cultural awareness
		3.2.3. Professional disagreements

	3.3. Employer-to-employee workplace violence	3.3.1. Unfair treatment and favouritism
		3.3.2. Verbal abuse and bullying
	3.4. Relationship workplace violence	3.4.1. Lack of open communication and professionalism
	3.5 Organisational-related workplace violence	3.5.1. Lack of safety
		3.5.2. Lack of resources
		3.5.3. Personal issues
		3.5.4. Lack of supervision
4. Contributing factors of workplace violence in social work	4.1. Working environment	4.1.1. Unsafe working environment
		4.1.2. Job stress and burnout
	4.2. Service users	4.2.1. Poor client engagement
	4.3. Hierarchical practices	4.3.1. Abuse of power

		4.3.2. Structural policy
5. Implications of workplace violence for social work practice	5.1. Loss of morale	
	5.2. Service delivery hindrance	5.2.1. Fear in service delivery
		5.2.2. Poor professional image
	5.3. Professional decline	5.3.1. Social workers leaving the profession
		5.3.2. Social workers are underpaid
		5.3.3. Decline in productivity
		5.3.4. Lack of professional support for new social workers
6. Implications of workplace violence for social work organisations	6.1. Divisions within social work organisations	6.1.1. Office politics
		6.1.2. Mistrust and closed doors
	6.2. Employee negligence	6.2.1. Seeking outside help

		6.2.2. Poor staff wellbeing
	6.3. Poor organisational image	6.3.1. Misconception of the organisation within the community
7. Organisational policy and support	7.1. Policies	
	7.2. Support	
8. Professional governing policy	8.1. Lack of governing workplace violence response	

The researcher made use of the themes and sub-themes throughout the processing of narratives; however, categories were identified when the themes were multifaceted. The researcher has presented the above table before the discussion of each theme to understand the respective themes being reflected.

4.4.1. Theme 1: Definition of workplace violence in social work practice

The aim of the study is to gain an understanding of South African social workers' experiences of workplace violence, to better understand the causes and implications of workplace violence. The themes that are discussed first in this chapter provide context as to how participants view or consider workplace violence in social work practice. Therefore, definitions of workplace violence in social work practice according to participants will be discussed. Workplace violence has been confirmed in literature as ranging from physical to non-physical activities (Shier et al., 2018), including experiences of verbal abuse, bullying, threats, physical and sexual abuse (Boyle & Wallis, 2016). However, recently Malesa and Pillay (2020) provided a more inclusive definition of workplace violence as acts directed towards workers, which includes physical assaults, the threats of assault, and verbal abuse, and is widely recognised as having far-reaching consequences for workers' health and safety. The focus of this specific section was given to the definition of workplace violence according to study participants. Several topics emerged based on common patterns in the definition of workplace violence in social work practice, both in literature and as identified by the participants of the study. These included: miscommunication; violated by the circumstances in which you work; exposure to danger; occurs when there is conflict and miscommunication; not having enough support; being bullied, not necessarily physical violence but emotional violence; could be verbal or physical, mostly verbal, and emotional; very stressful, very high demanding and very deadline-based work environment. Therefore, the researcher decided to merge these factors into two overarching sub-themes.

Sub-theme 1.1. Miscommunication and being exposed to danger

After the participants responded to their biographical information, the researcher asked the participants what they consider as workplace violence in social work practice. This question was important to gain participant understanding of workplace

violence, as the nature of workplace violence varies (Cetinkaya et al., 2019). Several participants considered workplace violence in social work practice as miscommunication, being bullied, and being exposed to danger, as can be seen in the narratives below:

“I consider workplace violence usually as the social worker and client misunderstanding each other, colleagues engaging in (verbal abuse), and gossiping in the office over personal matters” (P1).

“Workplace is an environment in which you work in, I would say violence is when you are being violated in a way, sometimes you are violated by another colleague, sometimes violated by the circumstances which you work in. Sometimes violence is being inflicted by clients that are working with you” (P3).

“Workplace violence is when you are exposed to danger while rendering foster care services. For instance, in cases of child removal and biological parents refuses and intimidate you in the process. You are exposed to danger because these parents are capable of inflicting violence towards you” (P4).

These narratives describe workplace violence as being exposed to danger, being bullied, and miscommunication amongst social work colleagues in social work practice, confirmed by Cetinkaya et al. (2019). These authors confirm that the workplace violence definition varies, and these participants viewed workplace violence in social work according to their experiences and knowledge. As Winter (2012:196) enlightens: “While the phenomenon of workplace violence has been widely associated with visible, direct, physical acts and the visibility and transparency of their subject-object relations, the nature of workplace violence varies and is not always physical”. The participant’s description of workplace violence in social work practice differs according to their experiences and knowledge and this has been academically documented (see for example, Cetinkaya et al., 2019; Turpin et al., 2020; Winter, 2012). The narratives above have a strong focus on miscommunication or lack of open communication, being exposed to danger which can occur unexpectedly and the strong desire to inflict violence towards a social worker in practice.

Sub-theme 1.2. Emotional and verbal violence

Some participants during the telephonic interview described workplace violence in social work practice as not necessarily physical violence but emotional violence; this could be verbal or physical, but was mostly verbal and emotional, with very stressful, high demanding and very deadline-based work environments, as these narratives indicate below:

“I can consider workplace violence in social work as pressure, massive conflict and anything that makes a social worker uncomfortable, give mixed emotions in the workplace” (P2)

“My definition of workplace violence is that it can come anytime, anywhere and sometimes you do not expect it and workplace violence can be emotional, physical, spiritually draining and it put turmoil that can place negative strain on you as a social worker” (P9)

“Workplace violence in social work is more than just actually acts of physical violence and violence...” (P10)

“Workplace violence in social work, I consider it not necessarily physical violence but emotional violence, not everyone is treated equally. Social workers do not have enough support, supervision is very limited, such makes a negative environment towards social workers in the workplace” (P12)

“Workplace in social work could be physical, verbal. Mostly verbally and emotionally” (P13)

Based on the narratives above, there was a strong emphasis on the fact that workplace violence is more than just physical violence; it can also be emotional abuse, verbal abuse, intimidation, unfair treatment, and abuse of power. According to these scholars Boyle and Wallis (2016), Brockhill (2020), Englander (2007) and Malesa and Pillay (2020), workplace violence is defined as violent acts directed towards a worker, in this context the worker refers to a social worker. In addition, these acts include assaults, the threats of assault, and verbal abuse. However, the researcher observes that most of the participants were verbally and emotionally abused, as they did not experience physical violence in social work practice. However, physical violence does occur as some participants mentioned attempted physical attacks from a client. See the

narratives below. These experiences will be explored in more depth in the second theme of this chapter:

“For example, I remember the client in our office before the pandemic set in, the client in my office was recording without my permission. Then I processed to explain to him, that the matter is going to be referred to court, he got very violent, and he had an attempt to physically attack me” (P14)

“I had a client who was in my office with a knife which I was not aware of that until afterwards when he pulled it out to attack someone else, although it was not aimed at me specifically but the risk of violence was still there, for example, if I trigger something emotional, not only that aggression would be ended but the knife was also there and that would have been a danger” (P10).

The narratives above confirm that physical assaults from client do exist, and it has been confirmed in literature (Sicora et al., 2021; Shier et al., 2018; Turpin et al., 2020). It has been identified in the study of Winstanley and Hales (2008) that social workers are prone to experiences of physical assault as a form of workplace violence in social work practice. The minority of the participants considered workplace violence as disagreements between colleagues, clients, families, and communities which imposed danger towards social workers. Lack of support structures and resources imposes danger towards social workers in practice. These are the minority participant’s narratives below regarding lack of support, aggressiveness, and disagreements:

“Workplace violence in social work occurs when there is conflict between colleagues, supervisor and social workers, where disagreements and verbal abuse occurs. Conflict because of different ideas and different approaches to cases at work” (P5)

“Workplace violence can be considered as not having necessary support structures within the organisation” (P6)

“A social worker is exposed to aggressive behaviour of the client, dealing with agitated clients that become violent towards a social worker” (P8)

4.4.2. Theme 2: Social workers’ experiences of workplace violence

Participants were selected for the study because they themselves experienced workplace violence or had knowledge of a colleague who experienced it. Participants

were given the opportunity to describe their experiences. All the participants have experienced workplace violence themselves in social work practice. Most of the participants required probing to provide practical examples of these experiences and describe this form of workplace violence in detail.

Sub-theme 2.1. Personal experiences

The first sub-theme focused on social workers who experienced workplace violence themselves in the workplace. Some examples of the narratives are as follows:

“I have experienced myself; I have been working as a foster care social worker since 2017. For example, there was a case where parents were both fighting and I got involved and a male client bite my hand...Again in my office when a girlfriend and boyfriend fought in my office, I was heavily pregnant she pushed me, and I bumped myself on the table. Luckily my colleague was closer to me to catch me; while she was trying to help me, the lady kicked the child and the child fell on the corner of the table” (P4)

“Yes, I have experienced it myself and I am aware of colleagues who experience it. For me, I had a client who was in my office with a knife which I was not aware of until afterwards when he pulls it out to attack someone else, although it was not aimed at me specifically, but the risk of violence was still there...” (P10)

“I have experienced it myself and I am aware of many other colleagues and friends of mine who studied social work that also experienced forms of workplace violence. For example, it was more verbally and emotionally where this conflict between employer-to-employee and jealousy or favouritism because I have a close colleague and she is very close to our supervisor, now she feels superior to other colleagues” (P13)

Participants confirmed that they have experienced various forms of workplace violence, such as intimidation, verbal abuse, aggressions, unfair treatment, physical assault from clients, and lack of resources that imposed danger towards social workers (Boyle & Wallis, 2016; Sicora et al., 2021; Shier et al., 2018). These actual or attempted assaults caused traumatic experiences for the social workers, and negatively affected service delivery. It is confirmed by the mentioned literature that workplace violence does exist, and it varies according to individual’s experiences and knowledge and the participants share the same sentiments. The participants gave

practice examples of attempts or actual assault, which aligns with the literature definition of workplace violence as an actual or attempted assault (Bentley et al., 2014; Kagan & Itzick, 2019; Koritsas et al., 2010). Other scholars define workplace violence as any behaviour intended to harm social workers or their organisation (Malesa & Pillay, 2020; Sander-Philips & Kliewer, 2020; Stutzenberger & Fisher, 2014). These actual or attempted assaults described by participants could be because of the lack of safety measures and support in place safeguarding social workers in practice; this has a negative implication for the social work profession and the organisation.

Based on these highlighted narratives, indeed social workers are losing interest in the profession due to various forms of violence in practice. The issue is that no one is talking about workplace violence in the South African social work practice context; the researcher is of the opinion that these findings will be the start to address forms of workplace violence within the social work profession based on this study.

Sub-theme 2.2. Colleague experiences

The participants were asked if they themselves have experienced workplace violence or whether they are aware of a colleague who had such an experience. Participants' responses presented in this sub-theme were from those who witnessed colleagues being verbally abused and backstabbed, physically attacked, and being unfairly treated. Examples are provided in the narratives below. The narratives of participants who witnessed colleagues being violated or endangered in practice are as follows:

"I know someone in my previous organisation, like it was between the management and the worker, so what happened was, you could see that the management (supervisor/manager) does not treat the person (social worker) the same as others..." (P1)

"I am aware of the colleagues who have experienced workplace violence. For example, I went to assist a colleague with the removal of a child that was neglected, when we approached that specific community, the biological mother was under the influence of substances and the community prevented us from doing the removal..." (P6)

Participants were aware of a colleague who experienced workplace violence and they can confirm the existence of workplace violence in a broader perspective as it varies according to individuals' experiences. These participants claim that these incidents

occurred at the office, during emergency child removal and in community service delivery. Social workers render critical services with clients, families and in communities (Cabiati et al., 2020) and seek to promote change, stability, and relational continuity in the lives of communities, families, and individuals. One can imagine, when one witnesses colleagues being violated in any way or being attacked, that creates an impression that you are next; such conception results in fear, uneasiness, and an unpleasant working environment for social workers.

4.4.3. Theme 3: Types of workplace violence

This is the third theme of the findings, where participants were asked if they have experienced, or are aware of the following types of workplace violence: Client-related workplace violence (this includes individual, family and/or community); co-worker workplace violence; employer-to-employee workplace violence; relationship workplace violence; and organisational-related workplace violence. Participants were asked to present scenarios and examples of their experiences. Sub-themes and categories are discussed below.

Sub-theme 3.1. Client-related workplace violence

All the participants are aware of and had experienced client-related workplace violence. In all three aspects (individual, family, and community), violence was directed towards social workers. The categories identified within the sub-theme of client-related workplace violence were aggression and threats, and impatience.

Category 3.1.1. Aggression and threats

It is evident that social workers in practice render critical services to individuals, families, and communities; these groups can be violent, aggressive and make threats towards social workers in practice. This is explored in the following narratives:

“Yes, it does exist, in our line of work it happens a lot, there are times where the clients are not happy with the decision that a social worker takes. For instance, when it comes to removal of a parent, parents aggressive, swearing at you and become physical towards a social worker, that is why we ask the police to escort us during child removal”
(P5)

“Yes, in all three aspects it does happen, client got violent because the process that a social worker had to follow, and clients get violent when they do not get what they want” (P7).

The findings support literature which proposes that aggression and threats from individual, families and communities towards social workers do exist. In the study of Sicora et al. (2021:8), it is suggested that the “inappropriate client’s expectations, lack of human or material resources are the results of workplace violence”. This leads into the second category of client-related workplace violence.

Category 3.1.2. Poor understanding of the social work role

Participants expressed that the causes of the workplace violence could be the result of the client’s poor understanding of the social worker’s role and the consequential negativity towards social workers’ duties within communities.

Participants highlighted this as impatience; such impatience was seen as leading to violence. Impatient clients, or clients with a poor understanding of the social work role, tend to be violent towards social workers. The following narratives highlight this:

“...The working process inflicts workplace violence because clients are not willing to understand the way that social workers work. Lack of knowledge also inflicts violence...” (P5)

“...client got violence because the process that a social worker had to follow, and client get violent when they do not get what they want...” (P7)

“Yes, definitely I have experienced it myself, so a form of intimidation when a client come to my office and said he wants to adopt, when I give the client the criteria and what is expected from him, the client threatened me to report to the council” (P11)

When these incidents take place, the social worker is expected to implement the professional code of ethics, values of care and commitment to non-violent behaviour (Ferreira & Ferreira, 2015). These are articulated in the South African Council for Social Service Professions Code of Ethics, which guides professional conduct and addresses ethical challenges within the profession (SACSSP, 2004). However, there is a need for SACSSP on a national level to prevent any form of workplace violence

by means of educating the public and clients about the role of a social worker and the role of the client in the helping process.

Sub-theme 3.2. Co-worker workplace violence

Participants were asked if workplace violence existed between colleagues and co-workers. Five categories were identified: gossiping, lack of cultural awareness, professional disagreement, verbal abuse, and divisions within the organisation.

Category 3.2.1. Gossiping

Participants stated that gossiping does exist within the organisation among colleagues which can be interpreted as a form of co-worker workplace violence. The following narratives explain this from the participant's point of view:

"Employees related workplace violence, I haven't experienced a lot but talking behind each other's back, gossiping and all that stuff, it's like general thing in the workplace, but you never know who really does, you only hear from other colleagues, never like employee to employee but definitely" (P1)

"Yes, it does exist like gossiping, backstabbing, covering and when something happens, you have to cover up or be in denial or blaming each other" (P8)

"Pettiness, gossiping, swearing, backstabbing and division among social workers within the working environment" (P9)

These participants confirmed the existence of gossiping in the working environment. It has been revealed that colleagues backstab and gossip about each other; in a study conducted by De Jonge and Dormann (2003), this gossip culture is seen as having potential adverse consequences for social workers and the organisation. The findings confirm that gossiping can be regarded as one of the negative behaviours in which employees engage (Radey & Wilke, 2018).

Category 3.2.2. Lack of cultural awareness.

Participants mentioned that some colleagues at their organisation do not recognise culture. There is a need for cultural awareness in social work organisations. The following narratives stated lack of cultural awareness:

“Working in a multidisciplinary working environment, not knowing each other’s cultural backgrounds leads to workplace violence” (P2)

“As a Muslim, I have to request leave, use one of my leave days, I feel like it’s unfair because others utilise holidays without requesting leave but when it comes to me as a Muslim, I must request leave for a Muslim holiday, and we live in a diverse country, and I think our organisation does not consider culture and diversity” (P9)

The participants identified lack of cultural awareness as one of the issues contributing towards an unhealthy working environment. Section 6 of South Africa’s Employment Equity Act (EEA, No. 55 of 1998) prohibits unfair discrimination against an employee on twenty arbitrary grounds, including race, age, disability, sex, and others. Failure to adhere to the above within an organisation will likely foster an environment of intimidation and abuse. Observing and/or modelling any form of unfair discriminatory behaviours in the workplace could lead to a culture that allows for workplace violence. According to these participants, the organisation is not doing enough to be culturally competent and aware and to implement these values within the organisation as resonance of diversity. Cultural awareness is one of the key concepts that allows enculturation and cultural diversity (Danso, 2018).

Category 3.2.3. Professional disagreements

This category was identified by several participants. The following narratives outline professional disagreements experienced by participants as creating a negative working environment and resulting in verbal violence between co-workers:

“Professional disagreements on things need to happen despite policy and legislation of the organisation that can become a form of verbal violence and denying and arguing. In our profession we work with so close with social problems and family problems, everyone has different perceptive despite the fact that we are one profession” (P10)

“Yes, it can occur between colleagues, with disagreements on how to go on certain cases, disagreements on how a social worker did something, in the form of disagreements in the workplace...” (P12)

According to these participants, professional disagreements have the potential to perpetrate violence towards colleagues or between a colleague and the supervisor in a managerial position. This type of workplace violence categorised by the participants

has not been visible in the existing literature of workplace violence. Therefore, the researcher found it crucial to outline how professional disagreements can inflict various forms of workplace violence within social work practice.

Sub-theme 3.3. Employer-to-employee workplace violence

In this section of the chapter, participants were asked if employer-to-employee workplace violence exists or can supervisor or manager inflict violence towards their employees. Three categories were identified:

Category 3.3.1. Unfair treatment and favouritism

Unfair treatment within the organisation forms unhealthy working conditions for employees who are unfairly treated. When employees are being discriminated against in any form, such behaviour creates a lack of harmony, creates divisions, and fosters a lack of engagement. According to Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara and Suárez-Acosta (2013), less is known about employees' reactions to perceived acts of unfairness or discrimination towards themselves or their colleagues, as perpetrated by other employees, supervisors, or managers. See the narratives of several participants below:

"It does exist, and it depends on how you deal with it as well, I know some people deal with it in a manner of being rude to one another, make it personal to one another, I think it always depends on how you respond to it" (P3)

"Unfair treatment and favours from the supervisor also cause workplace violence and divisions among social workers in a workplace" (P5)

"Yes... a lot of the time. It's a pity I cannot allude on that because I'm in an open office structure and our supervisors are onsite" (P6)

The above participants insisted that the interview be conducted during lunch time or during a work break; therefore, when the researcher conducted the interview, the participant could not give details regarding the employer-to-employee workplace violence identified above. This had an impact in terms of data, which the researcher assumes could have been more in-depth if the interview had been conducted after work. It was unfortunate the researcher had no alternative in this regard.

Several participants were able to confirm the existence of unfair treatment from the upper managerial level of the organisation. Verbal abuse, abuse of power, demanding management, lack of supervision and lack of compliments, positive feedback and rewards were identified by participants as being forms of employer-to-employee workplace violence:

“You get the managers, which are sometimes treating employees in a way that they should not be treated. Shouting, insisting that you attend a meeting that is not in your planning for the day. Not acknowledging your expertise” (P8)

“Yes definitely, I think because I have experienced that it was attitude, breaking down a person, not approving of their work because of personal issues not necessary because of professional issues” (P10)

“Many times, in the office, where my colleagues would shout at each other because of the supervisor that has no sympathy or showing small gestures towards her employees” (P12)

“Workplace violence does not only occur between colleagues only even manager, supervisors to supervise...because of lack of education, misconception out there between colleagues, client and with our stakeholders, I don't even think the president know that we do” (P14)

Participants particularly stated favouritism as a form of workplace violence. These are the narratives of the participants indicating the existence of favouritism in the social work environment:

“Favours from supervisors, especially from management, whereby you go and ask for something to be approved and that is not approved but there is someone who is always slacking who never produces as much as you do but and person gets away with it” (P3)

“Favouritism occurs and some social workers don't get extensive feedback, and some are being sent with feedback that need to be rectified. Mixing work with friendship. Favouritism put strain on you as a social worker and I was afraid to take my report to the supervisor because I was thinking what's going be wrong now in my report” (P7).

Favouritism and unfair treatment have a negative impact on service delivery according to literature (see Howard, 2011; Kgosimore, 2004; Tepper, 2007).

Category 3.3.2. Verbal abuse and bullying

The last category of the sub-theme of employer-to-employee workplace violence was that of verbal abuse and bullying, highlighted in the narratives below”:

“There was an incident, where the supervisor was like no, you going to do this stuff and I told her, it’s not my responsibility and so in that way she was forcing me, but it was what it is” (P1)

“Our inputs are not necessarily considered other than doing your work as assigned. In that kind of form, disagreements always happen, and it create unhealthy working environment as it emotionally affects employees” (P12)

The existence of verbal abuse and bullying within a working environment is confirmed by literature as having a negative impact on social workers in various ways, depending on individual experiences (Boyle & Wallis, 2016; Chappell & Di Martino, 2006). However, research does suggest that social workers tend to normalize being unfairly treated, verbally abused, and bullied in the workplace (Beddoe, 2017; Hendricks & Cartwright, 2018), without acknowledging the effects on service delivery, the clients, the organisation, and particularly the health and wellbeing of social workers themselves.

Sub-theme 3.4. Relationship workplace violence

The fourth sub-theme identified within literature as a type of workplace violence is relationship workplace violence. Participants were asked if relationships can cause workplace violence in social work practice. The researcher made use of probing in the exploration of this sub-theme, as most of the participants asked the researcher to provide further clarity as to the type of relationship being referred to. The researcher encouraged reflection on any relationship that exists within the participant’s working environment, as well as family relationships, friendships, acquaintances, and romantic relationships. One category was identified as contributing to relationship workplace violence: a lack of open communication and professionalism.

Category 3.4 1. Lack of open communication and professionalism

The participants identified a lack of open communication and professionalism as causes of relationship workplace violence. See the narratives below:

"It does exist and also depends on you, whether you choose not to have relationships other than a professional relationship with your colleagues or the supervisor..." (P3)

"Poor communication, no sense of integrity, such can transcribe in the workplace, differences in the organisation and reactions because of poor communication. Some social workers don't take constructive criticism on a good note, they take it as an attack" (P6)

"Lack of the ability to be professional it will create a form of workplace violence" (P8)

"Too much, we tend to create boundaries, I think the older the social worker the more comfortable they are, when you are a new worker, treatment is different, for examples during lunch you are left in the office, and they formed group friendships" (P11)

"Yes, there is a lot of staff grouping within the organisation, you have your person you work with, this person has the person they work with because of differences in personality which leads to social workers being unprofessional, very difficult for professionalism to be carried through and that leads to a lot of verbal violence" (P14)

The findings confirm that per systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) one party can harm the entire team, as highlighted by the last participant narrative above which indicated that having such relationships can have an impact on the whole team. Organisations are diverse with a mixture of personalities; this contributes to the team dynamic and there are a range of interactive relationships that are present as a result. The participants suggested that poor or an overall lack of open communication and professional relationships can impose a form of workplace violence. Due to unprofessional relationships in the organisation, the level of trust and confidentiality decline, as the participants prefer not to talk because of lack of trust between colleagues and supervisors. As discussed in Chapter Three of this study, relationships are affected by interpersonal factors as well as the overall organisation in which the relationship exists and develops (Baral et al., 2013).

Sub-theme 3.5. Organisational-related workplace violence.

This is the last sub-theme for types of workplace violence. Participants were asked to share experiences on their understanding of organisational-related workplace violence. Four categories have been identified in this sub-theme, namely, lack of safety, lack of resources, personal issues and lack of supervision and disciplinary action.

Category 3.5.1. Lack of safety

Lack of safety was highlighted as one of the expressions of organisational-related workplace violence. Lack of structure within the organisation imposes danger for social workers who are accessible to clients, families, and communities. Social workers are not sufficiently protected within these organisations. One of the participants mentioned examples of a client that stoned their offices because the client was angry toward a specific social worker:

“Yes definitely, we had an incident were one of our clients was stoning our office because he was angry at one of the social workers” (P13)

South African social workers as referenced by Masson and Moodley (2019), are working in traumatic and difficult environments where there is often a lack of protection measures alongside poor public support. The two narratives below indicate the existence of organisational-related workplace violence against systems such as client, social workers, supervisors, and the community:

“The community started vandalising the building through throwing stones and we were caught up in that situation and the community aim to destroy municipal offices for poor service delivery, we were on the scene, and we did not have our social work office and the clients struggled to reach us” (P6)

“We used to drive that car with our organisation’s name on it, sometimes our cars would get stoned and when you go to the office to report, the level of empathy is not there, you are told to try a way to conduct home visit and do not go alone but when you think of the situation its risky. So, I literally understand community workplace violence” (P11)

It has been proven by research that South Africa is a violent society (see Manson & Moodley, 2019); social workers render critical services to these violent communities and can be affected by and caught up in community violence. The participant example of social workers caught in the middle when the angry community was vandalising municipal buildings for poor service delivery is one such example. Threats to safety and a lack of workplace violence policies to safeguard social workers in practice contribute to dangerous and stressful working environments for social service workers (Chung & Chun, 2015).

Category 3.5.2. Lack of resources

This category specifies lack of resources in social work organisations as contributing to organisational-related workplace violence. Lack of resources relates to shortage of social workers, lack of support, lack of collaborations, ungovernable organisations with a lack of structural support, and imbalances within the organisation.

“Ungovernable organisations are capable of experiencing workplace violence, lack of open-door policy and comfortable environment in the workplace could impose social workers in danger of being violated” (P4)

“Lack of resources for example, lack of security to protect us from being stoned by angry clients” (P13)

These participants confirm that a lack of resources for the organisation is a contributing factor of workplace violence within social work practice. It has been indicated that lack of support, differences in workload, lack of budgeting, lack of direct communication within the organisation and other factors are the cause of a stressful working environment. In the study conducted on stress and burnout among social workers (Marc & Osvat, 2013), it was confirmed that social workers are prone to poor working conditions, lack of resources and support, alongside an increase in demand of service rendering. Yet organisational-related workplace violence often results in social workers losing interest in the profession; social workers do not stay long in such organisations and change practices to other professional fields (Engelbrecht, 2006).

Category 3.5.3. Personal issues

Taylor and Zeng (2011:56) believe that “workplace violence symbolises extreme instances of workplace problems that can traumatise workers and organisations with longstanding personal and professional effects”. The category of personal issues was identified when several participants mentioned that many social workers in practice mix personal issues with work. Due to this mixture of work frustrations and personal issues, social workers will often explode within the workplace. The following narratives support this:

“Frustrations and clashing one another within the organisation do have an impact on how the organisation functions and service delivery is being impacted” (P3)

“Lack of open-door policy and comfortable environment in the workplace could impose social workers in danger of being violated” (P4)

“Lack of respect among colleagues, and unhealthy relationships, lack of open communication and lack of open-door policies that prevent any form of workplace violence to occur results to organisational related workplace violence” (P8)

“Personal issues between colleagues within the organisation can cause violence. Organisation with lack of supervision and support its employee can definitely imply organisational-related workplace violence” (P10)

“I would say, differences in workload in most cases, people tend to get involved in other people’s personal life, that gossiping, manager favouring certain people over certain employees, unfair treatment, and lot of conflict occurs between social workers and auxiliary workers, lot of unequal distribution of work, lot of social workers undermine auxiliary workers” (P14)

Unfair treatment and a lack of emotional support are the causal factors for personal breakdown within the workplace. This is because social workers get less support to deal and professional debrief. As one participant noted, *“I am privileged to have medical aid for private counselling” (P6)*. The social learning theory suggests that both environmental and personality factors have an impact on individual aggressive behaviour (Bandura, 1973; Enosh & Tzafir, 2015). The researcher has highlighted this category as something that imposes danger for social workers who already have

serious issues to deal with concerning their role within communities. This aligns with the last category of this sub-theme, lack of supervision.

Category 3.5.4. Lack of supervision

Lack of proper supervision has been identified as a significant challenge facing social workers in the South African context. It was identified by participants that supervisors lack supervision skills, and no actions are taken against senior employees abusing younger or new employees. This can occur because of favouritism which allows some employees to get away with harmful actions while others suffer because of unfairness and unfair treatment in the workplace. The below narrative gives an example of this when they were verbally attacked by a senior employee and despite raising the matter with their supervisor, no action taken:

“Where I’m currently working, in the entire office I’m the youngest and I was supposed to have meeting with this lady and I got my times wrong, when she called me the first thing, she said was you are so unprofessional, I will never trust you and you are so young. I had to call my supervisor because she bullied me, my supervisor keeps on saying we will seat down and talk about it, you know what even today my supervisor never spoken about it, and it created a sense of animosity between me and her” (P11).

According to participants’ narratives, supervisors fail to initiate employer and employee involvement, heed warning signs and provide support such as coping skills. As indicated by literature, workplace violence is a serious and fast-growing issue that affect social workers and the social work profession, and it can have various forms including physical abuse such as assault, verbal abuse, and emotional abuse, abuse of power, unfair treatment, threats, and intimidation (Sicora et al., 2021). All of these could and should be addressed in supervision.

However, the researcher finds the lack of proper supervision as a contribution to violence as an issue that has not been sufficiently addressed in literature. Workplace violence initiated by supervisors at the managerial level requires further investigation (Engelbrecht, 2019). The researcher finds workplace violence to be an issue that needs serious attention within the supervision of social workers. It is suggested that supervisors should regularly engage in discussion of matters that inflict unfair treatment, verbal abuse, and belittling of new social workers. This is a matter that

needs to be urgently addressed to create a safe environment for social workers to voice their concerns and issues that could affect their productivity.

The theme that follows further outlines the contributing factors of workplace violence within the social work profession.

4.4.4. Theme 4: Contributing factors of workplace violence in social work

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of South African social workers' experiences of workplace violence, to understand the causes or contributing factors and the implications of this phenomenon. A secondary research question of the study was to identify appropriate theories of social work practice that can describe and analyse factors that causes workplace violence in social work practice. The researcher identified systems theory and social learning theory as helpful frameworks for understanding contributing factors of workplace violence. The four sub-themes identified within this theme, therefore, were working environment, decision making, hierarchical practices and incompetence.

Sub-theme 4.1. Working environment

The empirical findings suggest that South African social workers often find themselves in working environments which are characterised by fear and stress, high levels of job dissatisfaction and turnover, limited resources and infrastructure, lack of support from supervisors and the organisation, and lack of confidentiality. The following are categories identified by participants as contributing to an unsafe working environment, namely unsafe working environments, and job stress and burnout.

Category 4.1.1. Unsafe working environment

Many participants stated that they are working under unsafe conditions. Violent clients, families and communities create a hostile working environment for social workers; this becomes worse when the organisation offers limited support for employees. It has been found that child protection and community social workers are prone to community violence. See the narratives of the participants below outlining examples of such unsafe working conditions.

“Lack of safety I regard as a contributing factor in the social work workplace. Working in remote areas that are regarded as hotspot crime zones” (P2).

“Lack of structure, like I said social workers are freely available to any person within the community, we are not protected in our offices with security. People have free access to us and that can cause workplace violence and vulnerability. Our organisation is not structured enough to protect us” (P10)

Many of the communities in which social workers render services are considered dangerous, so much so that even the police do not enter these areas without a convoy. One of the participants mentioned that they went into one such communities with a work car that had organisation branding and they were stoned by the community. This aligns with the example given in literature whereby Nelson Mandela Bay Staff refused to enter high crime areas due to the increase in attacks on social workers (Wilson, 2020). Additional research confirms that social workers are expected to render critical services in communities that are regarded as hotspots for crime, gang-related activities, community protests and high levels of unemployment (Kennedy et al., 2011; Pollack, 2010).

Category 4.1.2. Job stress and burnout

Job stress and burnout arise from specific events or working conditions social workers find themselves in (Byers, 2010; Mendieta & Rivas, 2011). This is the second category of the working environment sub-theme. It was found that job stress and burnout are among the contributing factors of workplace violence. High workload, with insufficient staff members employed within the organisation and a high demand of service rendering results in job stress and burnout for social workers.

“Being stressed and burned out, we have about 500 files and you as individual social worker have to deal with these files alone, out of those 500 files you must still do group work, community work, placements, holiday programmes for children, everything on child protection” (P3).

The high demands associated with social work practice is the one consistent working condition which had the biggest influence on stressful working environments. As indicated in Chapter Three of the study, such high caseloads have been recognised as being the most common cause of stress among social workers (Schraer, 2015).

The participant narrative above indicates the high caseload a social worker is assigned is one contributing factor for the fast turnaround of social workers within organisations. A second contributing factor is the stress that results from a tumultuous working environment where workplace violence can occur at any time.

“Workplace violence is that it can come anytime, anywhere and sometimes you do not expect it and workplace violence can be emotional, physical, spiritual draining and it put turmoil that can place negative strain on you as a social worker” (P9)

In the study of Bowman et al. (2018), the rise in workplace violence is considered a situational crisis that can occur within an ecological or multilevel framework; workplace violence by clients, between colleagues, between the employer-to-employee, at and the organisational level. It has been revealed in the study of Engelbrecht (2006) and Naidoo and Kasiram (2006), the outflow of social workers immigrating to the UK, for example, was the result of such traumatic working conditions a South African social worker finds themselves in.

Sub-theme 4.2. Service users

It was identified that the helping process between the social worker and the client can inflict violence, particularly when there is poor engagement from the client. For example, with clients taking part in the helping process, they can at times be unhappy with the procedure and demand to make decisions that are not in line with social work procedures. This is where they may become violent towards a social worker.

Category 4.2.1. Poor client engagement

It has been found that client's poor engagement in the helping process is a contributing factor to workplace violence. Clients often demand certain outputs from social workers without accepting that the social worker co-facilitates and drafts intervention contracts with goals that needed to be achieved through client participation. Child protection social workers are at high risk of work-related factors such as aggressive parents during emergency removals, violent clients who are placed in child and youth care centres, or parents who want to foster a child but are not willing to follow the procedures. See narrative examples below:

“They want to adopt a child today, and when you inform them that it can take a year to two years, they become negative, aggressive, even the manner in which they approached just changes” (P11)

“Sometimes it hinders the working process... I don't really get to the final product of the removal because of violent clients and unsupportive families and communities. There is no cooperation between the social worker and the client” (P13)

“The working process inflict workplace violence because clients are not willing to understand the way that social workers work” (P5)

The researcher considers these responses to be indicative of insufficient client understanding of procedures within the social work helping process. Both the social worker and client need to have a common understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the intervention contract.

Sub-theme: 4.3. Hierarchical practices

Within the theme of contributing factors to workplace violence within social work practice, several participants highlighted hierarchal practices in social work organisation. This sub-theme yielded two categories: the abuse of power by senior staff and supervisors, as well as poor implementation of organisational structural policy.

Category 4.3.1. Abuse of power

Participants noted abuse of power based on hierarchical positions within the organisation. Some participants expressed that senior social workers and supervisors practice unethical behaviour towards newly appointed social workers. Those with higher positions are less affected by such workplace violence. Unethical behaviour identified by the participants concerning the treatment from the upper level of the organisation consist of favouritism, verbal abuse, lack of ability to deal with situational crises, unfair treatment, and lack of protection for newly appointed social workers from senior employees.

“The hierarchal structure that is given to the social workers, abuse of power by supervisors, verbal abuse” (P2)

Some participants claim that supervisors do not reprimand or act against abuse of power by senior staff members and the younger social workers in particular feel unprotected and alone:

“Even now I don’t like working with her because I know what she thinks of me and she bullied me and as older social worker I thought she would guide me, she used her experience as a social worker and look down on me... Professional relationship was lacking because my supervisor failed to set up a meeting to discuss issues I have reported to her but I guess was because I was a new and youngest employee there” (P11)

“No one protects you from anything, you are on your own. They expect you to do the work, yet you not looking at your needs as a person as well” (P3)

Many participants had experiences and knowledge of workplace violence from senior staff and indicated that the organisation did not properly deal with such situations; it is becoming the norm that senior social workers get away with such abuses of power, including supervisors:

“There was a supervisor we all knew her; she had a personal issue with one of the social workers. When it was a time to get our bonuses, the particular social worker did not earn her bonus, when it was time for our leaves to approve, the particular social worker did not get her leaves approved” (P11)

“Yes, it does, it was myself and colleague of mine, when she was being violated by the supervisor, I actually got up of my chair and close the door, where my colleague was having supervision, I felt violated by the way my supervisor was talking to other colleagues.” (P17)

An organisation with a culture of autocratic leadership creates division within the organisation and is identified by participants and literature as a cause of burnout, job stress, abuse of employees and high staff turnover. Strolin et al. (2007:4) confirms, for example, “organisational factors as the reasons of a turnover that stem from the organisation, for example, caseloads size, work fulfilment, hierarchical atmosphere and culture, pay, benefits, promotional opportunities and administrative burdens”.

Category 4.3.2. Structural policy

Participants viewed structural policy within an organisation as a contributing factor toward conditions of workplace violence; for some, there was a lack of structural policy, for others poor uniformity and some identified a lack of knowledge of structural policy as being a contributing factor to workplace violence. Social workers are not well informed about the policies, structures and culture of the organisation which can lead to workplace violence. While such policies or measures may exist, they are not implemented and/or employees are unaware of them; structural policy, or lack thereof, can have a negative impact on the whole service delivery system if not understood or implemented correctly or uniformly.

“Lack of knowledge about the structure of the organisation” (P5)

“Lack of uniformity within the working environment, no clear communication, not being open to innovation and flexibility, not wanting change, not being open for change and new ideas” (P6)

“Lack of uniformity within the working environment” (P6)

“Inability or incompetence to do the job you are assigned to” (P8)

“Lack of structural policy, in my situation I was bullied, and nothing happened, unfair treatment is one of the contributing factors” (P11)

Situational crises and experiences of violence take place within the external environment or workplace that surrounds the social worker, client, manager, or the organisation; structural policy is critical to combat this. Therefore, it is crucial for the study to take into consideration all systems involved as well as the learning involved in understanding a system and how this may support a culture of unethical behaviours in social work practice (Hepworth et al., 2010; Littlechild, 2005; Walsh, 2010).

According to Pollack (2010), organisations should have policies and procedures in place for a fair execution of tasks and to be able to handle situations that impose danger towards social workers ethically and/or legally, despite the complicated nature of workplace violence episodes. Lack of organisation structural policy, however, is rarely focused on within South African social work research or practice agendas; therefore, there is inadequate information available on organisation-related factors

(Hope & Van Wyk, 2018; Sabbath, 2019). However, the participants above have highlighted various contributing factors, including lack of structural policy, poor knowledge of organisational structure, lack of uniformity and inability or incompetence to perform one's job. Poor knowledge of and uniform implementation of structural policy were also linked to abuse of power by senior staff toward newly appointed social workers.

Lack of routine implementation and revision of organisational policies impose danger towards social workers in practice. Structural policy including organisation culture and values, organograms and clear job descriptions should be part of the induction programme when new social workers are appointed in an organisation.

4.4.5. Theme 5: Implications of workplace violence for social work practice

The fifth theme of the empirical findings is focused on the implications of workplace violence for social work practice. According to Sousa et al. (2015), adverse consequences of workplace violence experiences could result in physical, emotional, and behavioural damage for the social worker. Jacobs and Scott (2011) argued that workplace violence outcomes could lead to serious traumatic experiences and psychological problems for employees long term.

Participants reflected on the implications that the workplace violence has on social workers. This theme is presented within five sub-themes, namely: discouraging, service delivery hindrance, social workers leaving the profession, decline in productivity, and an unpleasant working environment.

Sub-theme 5.1. Loss of morale

Participants were asked to reflect on the implications of workplace violence for social workers. Participants identified one of the implications as a loss of morale. This indicated the damage that workplace violence is causing the profession, whereby social workers become discouraged in the workplace as they experience various forms of workplace violence.

"It's very discouraging as social workers fear for their lives when they render critical services to high crime zones" (P2)

“The morale will go down for the social workers, for instance you as a social worker your morale is down, that means the rest of the things you do are not going to be the same” (P3)

“Social workers in the field are tired, burning out, few people that are positive about the profession and this is due to workplace violence they encounter during practice” (P8)

“The implication of the profession is that social workers lose hope, they want to leave the professional and yes they care about their job and clients, they are doing their job because they have passion about it but negative things surrounding the profession have negative implications on service rendering” (P12)

The above participants shared their experiences of workplace violence as leading to discouragement, burnout, and loss of hope and poor professional morale, which hinders their ability to render effective service delivery to clients. This is supported by literature which suggests that the implication of workplace violence results in a loss of motivation and a tendency for individuals to leave the profession due to unhealthy working conditions that social workers find themselves in (Gates et al., 2011; Gillespie, Gates & Berry, 2013; Van Den Bos et al., 2017). It could be argued that this phenomenon imposes significant danger for the profession, which is highlighted by the narrative below:

“Lot of social workers are falling into depression and are admitted to depression centre and resorted to substance use as a coping strategy to deal with the day-to-day issue, workplace violence is causing a massive damage, and no one is talking about it” (P6).

Although workplace violence within the social work profession has been studied abroad, there is limited data outlining the significant damage this is causing for the profession, particularly within the South African context. While several incidents have been documented in news and articles (Chibba, 2011; Govender, 2020), few academic scholars have written about this phenomenon in South Africa.

Sub-theme 5.2. Service delivery hindrance

For this sub-theme, the researcher identified two categories, namely: fear in service delivery, and poor professional image.

Category 5.2.1. Fear in service delivery

Social workers are obligated by the Code of Ethics to assist the client in dealing with personal and social problems by rendering counselling services, community services and social support programs. These services in the South African context serve in a range of settings from organisations, homes, and communities. However, even though social workers are mandated by professional ethics and values, the issues of safety, lack of support and lack of resources are hindering service delivery.

“Service delivery is definitely hindered, migration of social workers to other professions... the implication is the person [client] receiving services from the outside” (P3)

“Fear is one of the reasons that service delivery is hindered because of the threats and situations we caught ourselves in during service rendering” (P4)

“...fear of rendering social welfare services due to lack of safety within the organisation and within the organisation...” (P9)

Participants above present workplace violence as something that impedes on the working process due to fear in rendering critical services. Respass and Payne (2008) stated that social workers are mostly in high risky situations when rendering these critical services. Social workers render social work services to communities that are characterised as violent, with protests, high crime zones, lack of law enforcement and lack of safety.

“...so, a form of intimidation when a client come to my office and said he wants to adopt, when I give the client the criteria and what is expected from him, the client threatened to report me to the council. And for me it made me feel bad because, now the client is threatening me about the council” (P11)

“One particular family wanted to draw a parenting plan, but the male did not want to speak to the mother of the child and the child is young, so it was impossible for him to not communicate with the mother of the client, according to him I was taking sides and he even threatened me that I will find you and you always pass by my house when you are going home” (P4)

Being exposed to workplace violence unintentionally has negative implications for service delivery (Brown & Gale, 2018). Violent clients, families and communities result in ineffective rendering of services by the social worker due to the fear of being attacked. Schindeler (2014) confirmed the implications of workplace violence hindering social workers from rendering services to their clients and participating in the organisation, as well as a lack of healthy working conditions between the client and the social worker.

Category 5.2.2. Poor professional image

As noted in the below narratives, clients, families, and communities can sometimes hold a negative image of the social worker's role can be due to a lack of knowledge about the roles and challenges of the social worker. This can be dangerous for social workers.

"Fear of rendering services within the families and communities. Negative impression from the community members" (P7)

"Implication is that workplace violence creates a negative image for the profession, our clients see us as incompetent" (P14)

"...toxic organisational environment has negative impact, and it hinders the service delivery" (P5)

Clients may perceive the social worker as incompetent due to disagreement or poor understanding of the budgetary and resource challenges social workers face. Lack of resources, lack of support and implications of workplace violence hinder the working process where social workers take time to resolve cases and place clients in child and youth care centres due to a lack of infrastructure and resources. Clients with unrealistic expectations can act out with aggression and verbal abuse and this can escalate into assault.

Sub-theme 5.3. Professional decline

This is the third and final sub-theme identified in the implications of workplace violence for social workers theme. Participants identified several areas of professional decline, including the movement of social workers to other practices and professions because

of unsafe working conditions, high caseloads, and poor pay (Gates et al., 2011). There were four categories identified within this sub-theme: social workers leaving the profession; social workers are underpaid; decline in productivity; and lack of professional support for new social workers.

Category 5.3.1. Social workers leaving the profession

Social workers migrating to other professions was identified as a category within the sub-theme of professional decline resulting from experiences of workplace violence. The finding is that poor and unsafe working conditions are contributing factors which cause the outflow of social workers moving to other practices. Workplace violence within social work discourages students and new graduates to enter the profession. These are serious implications that the profession is currently facing if poor attention continues to be given to the damages of workplace violence. See the narratives of participants indicating the strains of rendering services in such working conditions and the resultant desire to leave the social work profession.

“The implication of the profession in that social worker loose hope, they want to leave the professional” (P12)

“A lot of social workers are resigning and leaving the profession, most of the time social workers leave the profession because of the office politics and office violence” (P14)

“The implication is that social workers are resigning, we a losing social worker in the profession, because of the trauma experiences” (P11)

Reasons provided by participants for the migration of social workers, such as a toxic working environment, loss of hope, lack of support, office politics and office violence are the direct results of workplace violence. Calitz et al. (2014) contended that contributing factors of workplace violence, such as poor working conditions, lack of resources and high demand of critical service results in trauma, frustration, and lack of positive intervention amongst social workers. It has been academically documented that social workers leave the profession and NGOs, due to unhealthy working conditions (Engelbrecht, 2006; Jacobs & Scott, 2011). However, in this study it has been found that one of the reasons for social workers leaving the profession is because of various forms of workplace violence experienced and witnessed by the social workers in practice.

Participant narrative correlates with literature (Kennedy & Julie, 2013; Malesa & Pillay, 2020) and the researcher can confirm that there is a need to address this burning issue if the profession hopes to survive. In the SACSSP (2019) statement, it was outlined that the profession consists of high caseloads with a lack of supportive infrastructure, and it is the responsibility of the NGO to deliver social welfare services. These factors contribute to social workers' decision to move to other practices with better working conditions.

Category 5.3.2. Social workers are underpaid

A second category identified by participants as a motivating factor for the decline in the profession is the fact that social workers are underpaid alongside burn out, stress and high caseloads. This leads to further frustration, irritation, stress, and can be considered as a form of workplace violence. Per Chibba (2011), the profession is under strain as social workers remain underpaid and many have left the country and/or profession due to poor working conditions. See the narratives of participants below.

"We do so much but we are underpaid, we feel violated" (P2)

"Underpaid, which is the reason why most social workers are moving from the sector to Transnet, municipality and overseas" (P3)

"We are underpaid and that puts a burden to us due to the caseloads and pressure we got in the line of work" (P5)

These participants confirm that social workers are underpaid, especially in non-governmental organisations. Therefore, social workers do not stay long in these organisations due to being underpaid with immense high caseloads, the shortage of social workers due to poor pay results in even higher caseload strain within the profession. This fact is highlighted by Margaret Kusambiza, director of the Eastern Cape NGO Coalition and referenced in Chibba (2011) - the profession is under strain and social workers remain underpaid.

Category 5.3.3. Decline in productivity

It has been identified that decline in productivity is also the result of workplace violence (Boyle & Wallis, 2016); this varies from country to country, from organisation to

organisation as well as individual experiences. Some of the participants stated that because of workplace violence experiences, there is a decline in productivity in the workplace and social workers are losing interest in service rendering due to the forms of workplace violence they encounter in practice. Decline in productivity hinders process of service delivery. See the narratives supporting the identified categories.

“The implication is that there is a decline in productivity, quality of services is affected, social workers leave organisation in a short amount of time, lack of resources and support, which increase demand due to lack of staff” (P12)

“The implication is that social workers are resigning, we are losing social workers in the profession, because of the traumatic experiences, people migrate to different fields where employees are protected, decline in productivity, the manner in which you are helping people, and the client that tried to bully you, you feel like why must I put effort” (P11)

“Having social workers that losing interest towards the career, level of productivity decline” (P6)

“The implication is that there is a decline in productivity, quality of services is affected, social workers leave organisation in a short amount of time, lack of resources and support, which increase demand due to lack of staff” (P12)

The participants in this research study indicated that workplace violence leads to a decline in productivity as social workers are demotivated and losing interest in the profession (Hope & Van Wyk, 2018; Lizano & Barak, 2015). It has been indicated in Chapter Three of the study that the implications of workplace violence have a huge impact on service delivery as it is constrained by poor quality of work due to experiences of workplace violence and loss of motivation (Gillespie et al., 2013). In addition, studies outline the implications of all factors of workplace violence impacting upon the potential safety and well-being of social workers (Gates, et al., 2011). This confirms the serious effect, damages, and implications that workplace violence can cause social workers. Therefore, loss of interest in social work practice can be confirmed as results of various forms of violence in practice that social workers encounter daily in their line of duty.

Category 5.3.4. Lack of professional support for new social workers

The implications of workplace violence as identified by participants were, as has been mentioned, loss of interest and hindering working processes. However, a further category identified was the fear of asking for help. It was found that newly appointed social workers fear to ask colleagues for help due to various forms of workplace violence inflicted on them by senior employees. Some of the participants mentioned reluctance to ask senior employees for guidance or assistance out of fear of being labelled as incompetent. Participants also indicated fear of asking for help from their supervisor because of how the supervisor reacts and treats social workers in the workplace. This was identified as hindering new social workers from learning from senior employees in practice.

“Fear of expressing yourself because you don’t know if your information or your vulnerability will be end being exposed” (P6)

“...fear of asking due to unfairness within the organisation” (P7)

“Being unable to ask help to senior colleagues due to fear of being labelled as incompetent” (P9)

“New social workers are scared to express themselves and they are being told that they are new” (P11)

This category has specifically been identified in the narratives of participants who have less than 3 years of working experience. These participants were treated in such a way that they are now scared to reach out because they were once labelled as incompetent, lazy or unwilling to learn. Senior employees in the workplace initiated this form of violence. In the literature, scholars indicated that workplace violence can take many forms (see for example, Copeland & Henry, 2017; Hipp et al., 2015; Lanctot & Guay, 2014; Truter & Fouché, 2019). However, the researcher did not identify any indication in literature that speaks to this fear of asking for help and how such fear has been formed.

4.4.6. Theme 6: Implications of workplace violence for social work organisations

This section explores the implications of workplace violence for social work organisations. A question was posed to the participants, as to their experiences of what the implications of workplace violence for social work organisations are. In this theme, three sub-themes have been identified: divisions within social work organisations, negligence towards employees, and poor organisational image.

Sub-theme: 6.1. Divisions within social work organisations

Some of the first implications that were mentioned within the theme of implications of workplace violence for social work organisations were divisions within the organisation. Two categories were identified: office politics and mistrust.

Category 6.1.1. Office politics

It was identified that workplace violence because of office politics is leading to divisions within social work organisations. The following narratives support this finding:

“Divisions within the organisation have negative implications and especially when supervisors are negligent towards employees burning issues.” (P12)

“Most social workers do not stay long in these organisations because of office violence and office politics, also because work not being done, client not getting the services that they needed, the quality of the service they need because of the workplace violence that affect the social worker, the client, the organisation and the image of the organisation.” (P14)

From the descriptive answers provided by the participants, divisions in social work organisations are demonstrated to be as the result of office politics that come from improper safeguarding of social workers from experiences of employee-to-employee and employer-employee workplace violence. This aligns with Taylor and Zeng (2011: 56), in that “workplace violence symbolises extreme instances of workplace problems that can traumatise workers and organisations with longstanding personal and professional effects”. Social workers are working in pairs or select groups within the organisation because of personal preferences, friendship, and gossip, which makes it

difficult to carry out professional practice within the organisation. Workplace violence implications for social work organisations results in divisions and affects productivity of the employee within the organisation.

Category 6.1.2. Mistrust and closed doors

A second implications of workplace violence for social work organisations is lack of trust among colleagues and supervisors or managers, resulting in organisational divisions. Lack of trust in the organisation and employees initiate an unhealthy working environment. This category alludes to the reason why social workers (participants) prefer to be inside their offices instead of engaging with other colleagues. This happens due to a lack of trust, non-confidential engagement, gossiping, and bad-mouthing within the organisation.

“...people tend to get involved in other people’s personal life, that gossiping, manager favouring certain people over certain employees...” (P14). In this context the participant, refer to social workers instead of people in general terms.

“The implications are that the workers are not fully trusting each other and including their supervisors or managers, it has negative influence on the social workers and their employers” (P8)

“Social workers close their office doors avoiding gossip, lack of engagement among colleagues and lack of trust towards the supervisor.” (P7)

“...Social workers stay inside their offices, do not want to come out for chats, no cohesion and productivity in the workplace.” (P5)

“Another implication is the fly against the wall and gossiping.” (P13)

The participant stated that the walls of the organisation have ears, and it is therefore important to remain professional and avoid any unethical behaviour because there is a “fly against the wall” and you cannot trust anyone. It is evident that colleagues are therefore talking behind one another’s backs. For this reason, participants stated they prefer to be inside their offices to avoid engaging in any unethical behaviours or office politics.

Lack of trust reduces transparency and communication between colleagues in the organisation (Borcherds, 2015). It is evident that social workers coping mechanism to avoid these forms of workplace violence within the organisation is to remain inside their office.

“The implications are that the workers do not fully trust each other and including their supervisors or managers, it has negative influence on the social workers and their employers, lack of open communication result to negative atmosphere in the working environment because they do not always treat their employees in a respectful manner.” (P8)

“...fear of reporting burning issues to the supervisor due to unfair treatment, favouritism within the organisation have negative implication because those who are in favour of the supervisors always get away with it.” (P9)

Sub-theme 6.2. Employee negligence

It has already been established that there are serious implications of workplace violence for social work organisations. The second sub-theme is negligence towards employees. Participants confirmed that supervisors often ignore burning issues related to workplace violence. Employees have attempted to address issues related to workplace violence, but there is no action taken to address these issues properly or safeguard employee wellbeing. Two categories have been identified; seek outside help and disregard of staff wellbeing.

Category 6.2.1. Seeking outside help

It was found that due to the organisation’s negligence of employees, participants felt unsafe to share their issues within the organisation and chose to rather seek help from private counselling through external psychologists and therapists.

“Social workers are more loyal to their private practice or counsellor than the support provided within the organisation” (P8)

The participant narrative gives an indication that some of the organisations have lost their employee’s trust due to a lack or absent of workplace violence implementation policies to safeguard employees. Participants shared that due to a lack of loyalty, trust among colleagues, supervisors and managers, social workers fear to share because

there are possibilities that confidential information can be used against them, hence they prefer private practice outside the organisation. This needs attention as it not only affects the organisation but the worker, the client, and the community at large.

“Implications for the organisation would be that employee will not feel comfortable in sharing their concerns with the supervisors due to favouritism, unfair treatment. Employee would prefer to seek help outside the organisation.” (P13)

The narrative above, supports the findings presented in the earlier theme that one of the major issues in these respective organisations is that the organisations themselves do not provide support for and safeguarding of employees against workplace violence.

The narratives above support the findings that lack of support, lack of teamwork and insufficient resources forces social workers to seek help outside the organisation (Truter et al., 2017; 2018; Schiller, 2017). Some of the employees are fortunate enough to afford private counselling, however most of the participants cannot afford external help and assistance.

Category: 6.2.2. Poor staff wellbeing

This is the second category identified in the sub-theme. Participants have mentioned that there is a lack of staff awareness and a disregard of staff wellbeing as they experience and witness these various workplace violence forms. This category links to earlier findings that show social workers are moving away from the profession due to poor working conditions and support measures. The implication for the organisation is an unhealthy workforce.

“These results to workers leaving the organisation due to unfair treatment and unhealthy working conditions.” (P8)

“Supervisors lack knowledge because they are not aware of who bullies who in the organisation.” (P11)

“Divisions within the organisation have negative implication and more special when supervisors are negligence towards employees burning issues.” (P12).

“There is no follow through of the workplace violence or unprofessionalism within the organisation. Social workers do not feel safe, don't feeling coming to work, they are

behind with work and too many deadlines to meet. Massive repercussions come from these implications.” (P14)

The organisation is not doing anything about rising issues that concerns the wellbeing of the social workers...” (P3)

The fact that these participants indicated that there is a lack of awareness of employee wellbeing in these organisations shows that there is a need to monitor organisations' policies that safeguard the wellbeing of employees. In the literature, awareness of staff wellbeing has limited academic record and the researcher therefore finds it hard to integrate this category with existing literature. However, systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1963) provide a helpful view of how a system can affect the whole, and how an organisation can learn through observing and modelling negative behaviour, which entrenches violence towards colleagues, clients, supervisor, and the organisation.

Leaving organisations is not a choice for many social workers but an option to avoid workplace violence. As stated by the participants in the narratives above, these prompt sentimentalities of displeased and thinking of leaving the profession to other safe professional practices (Griffiths & Royse, 2017; Schiller, 2017).

“Continuously shifting staff members and for example, staff not staying in one place long enough because security are not in place to prevent violence” (P10)

The organisation is a part of the system that formulates a whole (Hope & Van der Merwe, 2013). An organisation that is characterised as being negligent of employees will have serious implications, including employees leaving the organisation, lack of productivity within the organisation and lack professionalism. Organisations are contributing towards employees' rising issues of workplace violence in their failure to acknowledge these burning issues. Therefore, the researcher finds negligence towards employees to be a serious matter that needs urgent attention.

Sub-theme 6.3. Poor organisational image

Lack of professionalism within the organisation and workplace violence between employees, supervisors and managers were identified by the participants as presenting a poor image of the organisation within the community.

Category 6.3.1. Misconception of the organisation within the community

Workplace violence may result in a misconception of the organisation and the social workers role within the community. See the narratives of the participants below that highlight how misconception of their role and the organisational image within the community imposes a danger toward effective service delivery.

“...misconception out there between colleagues, client and with our stakeholders, I don’t even think the president know that we do.” (P14)

“We are a child welfare known as those taking children away their parents. Bad reputation as an organisation to the community. Also, when you are not doing what they want, then you become against them.” (P4)

“The organisation is not doing anything about rising issues that concerns the wellbeing of the social workers, they can’t operate their organisation in a professional manner that is inclusive and how people are going to see the organisation, they destroy the image of the organisation to the community they work with, the community will badmouth the organisation...” (P3)

The above narrative is in support of Jourbert’s (2017) statement that a lack of professional commitment in the workplace affects the whole system and hinders optimal potential service delivery. It is sad when one of the participants stated that even the president does not know what we are doing. While this might be an individual opinion, it is due to the working conditions that social workers find themselves in that such an opinion could be formed. The participants explained that workplace violence does not only destroy the client system but affects the social worker, supervisor, manager, and the organisation.

4.4.7. Theme 7: Organisational policies and support

This section explores social work organisational policies and support available to safeguard social workers from various forms of workplace violence. Participants were asked if their respective organisations have such policies and/or support in place regarding workplace violence. The experiences of participants are described below within these two sub-themes.

Sub-theme 7.1. Policies

The first sub-theme as introduced above was the need for policies in social work organisations to protect and safeguard social workers against workplace violence within practice. While some participants identified the availability of counselling and debrief, they were not aware of any workplace violence policies within their organisations.

“Yes, there should be institutions where victims can report to the supervisors or usually, at the current organisation they refer to metropolitan for counselling, I’m not so sure if there are policies except for counselling...” (P1)

“We did raise the issue support and the organisation does have debriefing channels within the organisation but there is no workplace violence policy that protects me from any form of workplace violence...” (P4)

“There is an open-door policy to address related issues but there is no policy that protects a social worker from any form of workplace violence...” (P5)

It was made it clear by these participants that in their respective organisation there are no written policies specific for workplace violence.

For some participants, they indicated that while there may be policies for protecting social workers from workplace violence, implementation of such policy seemed to be hindered by fear within organisation hierarchies.

“We do have policies in place, but the issue is trust and fear of personal information being exposed because people on the channel are yourself, supervisor and the manager” (P7)

This raises an important question; if these policies are meant to protect social workers, why are they are afraid of utilising them when they feel violated? It tells us that even though there may be policies in place, the social worker can be afraid of utilising them, particularly when employer-to-employee workplace violence occurs.

Lack of workplace violence policy in the profession imposes risk for the social workers who encounter workplace violence daily when rendering critical services. As suggested by Courtney et al. (2019), the workplace violence phenomenon requires

policies, programmes and legislations that protect social workers against workplace violence. In the United States, for example, workplace violence policy has been implemented due to high incidents of workplace violence through the Social Workers Safety Bill and Social Workers Safety (Act 111 of 2009). There is a need for such consideration within South Africa; however, the occurrence of workplace violence in the South African social work profession remains underexplored (Malesa & Pillay, 2020).

Sub-theme 7.2. Support

It was identified by several participants that some support measures are available for the wellbeing of social workers at their respective organisations, including debrief, counselling and disciplinary measures.

“I know at my previous organisation they did trauma, debriefing when you are struggling, or they provide that kind of support...” (P1)

“They have disciplinary hearing, you can report if someone does something to you, there was no policy presented to me as regard to workplace violence” (P2)

“Support such as debriefing, counselling and during supervision and the organisation does provide free therapeutic services. If a social worker feels burned out and overloaded, they request you take a leave” (P9)

However, as per the policy sub-theme, participants identified several hindrances in the use of such supportive measures.

“There is support available and it becomes an issue when social workers do not know who to report and utilise support available for them” (P5)

“We do have policies in place, but the issue is trust and fear of personal information being exposed because people on the channel are yourself, supervisor and the manager” (P7)

It seems that a lack of trust and fear of personal information being exposed may be an issue specifically when the violence inflicted is employer-to-employee. Further, for many participants, a lack of induction, education and/or consistent implementation of support was identified as an issue within organisations.

“They supposed to have measures and support in place regarding workplace violence, but I have never seen, or I was never told about such measures during induction.” (P13)

“It’s like South Africa, we have beautiful written constitution, but the reality is that it is not being implemented as it states in the written document” (P11)

“Yes, there is support, measures in place regarding workplace violence. But it hardly happens, most of the time, we have to sort it out by ourselves or not to one another for weeks” (P14)

From the above narratives while some organisations do have support structures and measures in place regarding workplace violence, these support measures are not implemented, and participants confirmed that they were not introduced to any of these support measures during induction.

For some participants, no support means were identified as being available to them:

“I would say there was no support available for me when I needed support like counselling, debriefing and measures to heal from such traumatic events” (P4)

It is sadly true that the social work profession is characterised as a demanding profession with long hours, lack of support, resources, safety, and protection for social workers (Hopkins & Gardner, 2012). An urgent change is needed to protect social workers from any form of workplace violence.

4.4.8. Theme 8: Professional governing policy

In this section, participants were asked if they aware of any governing structure in social work practice that may have policies/measures in place regarding workplace violence. The Department of Social Development (DSD) and the South African Council for Social Service Profession (SACSSP) were referenced as governing structures for the social work profession. Most of the participants were not aware, however, of any policies or legislations in place for the safeguarding of social workers against workplace violence.

Sub-theme 8.1. Lack of governing workplace violence response

Most of the participants made it clear that they are not aware of policies and measures in place regarding workplace violence within DSD and SACSSP governing structures. Narratives as confirmation of this subtheme are presented below.

“No, there is no legislation or policies that protect social workers...” (P2)

“The council has let us down for all these years I was a social worker, the only thing they cared about is our fee... DSD have but they did not consult us a social worker in the forefront, there was not visitation of the policy after 3 years and they both let us down as social workers operating in NGOs” (P3)

The researcher can confirm based on the participants narratives that most participants are not aware of broader governing policies, legislations, or measures in place for social workers concerning workplace violence. While it has been identified and recognised by the SACSSP (2019) that social workers render critical services and encounter numerous challenges in their line of duty, nothing has been done thus far to protect social workers on a national level. Lack of intervention from the national level to address such a burning issue within the profession is concerning. The role of governing structures such as DSD and SACSSP in responses to workplace violence within social work will be discussed in the conclusions and recommendations section of Chapter Five.

4.5. CONCLUSION

This chapter aimed to address the third objective of the study, which was to empirically investigate South African social workers' experiences of workplace violence. This chapter began with a clear analysis of the research methodology that was implemented in the research study. The chapter then explored the biographical information of the participants including type of organisation, gender, position at the organisation and number of years in the profession of social work. Lastly themes, sub-themes and categories were identified, discussed, and thoroughly examined. These themes include the following aspects related to workplace violence, namely, definition of workplace violence in social work practice, social workers experiences of workplace violence, types of workplace violence, contributing factors of workplace violence,

implications of workplace violence for social work practice, implications of workplace violence for social work organisations, and organisational as well as governing structure policies and support measures. The empirical findings presented in this chapter support the conclusion that South African social workers experience various forms of workplace violence in their line of duty when rendering critical services and that little has been done to address this phenomenon. Within the next and final chapter, various conclusions that were drawn from the empirical study will be presented together with the researcher's recommendations.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of this study was to gain an understanding of South African social workers experiences of workplace violence to better understand the causes and implications of this phenomenon. The first objective of the study was to conceptualise and analyse systems theory and social learning theory as frameworks for workplace violence within social work practice. The second objective was to explain and describe the factors contributing to workplace violence in social work and the implications thereof for social work practice and organisations, particularly within the South African context. These objectives were reached in Chapters Two and Three of this study. Chapter Four addressed the third objective of the study, namely, to empirically investigate South African social workers' experiences of workplace violence. For this objective, data was collected from seventeen participants employing semi-structured telephonic interviews. The findings were then presented and analysed using various themes, sub-themes, and categories. This chapter presents conclusions and recommendations for social workers, organisations, and policymakers to better safeguard South African social workers against workplace violence.

5.2. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This section of the chapter presents conclusions and recommendations based on the empirical findings of the research study. The conclusions reflect upon the themes and sub-themes established in Chapter Four and highlight key findings for each section. The researcher then presents recommendations, with the primary objective of bringing about changes that will allow for the better safeguarding of South African social workers against workplace violence.

5.2.1. Biographical information of the participants

All participants were social workers, rendering critical services in various sectors namely, child protection social workers, school council and therapists, child and youth care social workers, community development social workers, statutory social workers, and adoption social workers. Most of the participants (fourteen) self-identified as female, while the minority (three) identified as male. The participants differ in their years of experiences, and their experiences and/or knowledge of various forms of workplace violence in these respective organisations or within their line of duty. Most of the participants have less than five years of working experience as social workers and it has been found that all participants have experienced or witnessed various forms of workplace violence.

5.2.2. Theme 1: Definition of workplace violence

Workplace violence definition varies according to individual experiences; the participants' definitions of workplace violence were, likewise, based on their own personal experiences. It was found that violence occurs between clients, employees and employer, relationships and organisational. Per the findings, participants define workplace violence as a misunderstanding between the client, co-workers, employer-to-employee, as well as relationship and organisational-related circumstances; all these systems in which disagreements can occur have the potential to escalate to threats, verbal, emotional and physical abuse.

Recommendation

- A South African social work definition of workplace violence should be formulated by a regulating body such as the SACSSP, to contribute to policy formulation and legislation on workplace violence within the social work profession.

5.2.3. Theme 2: Social workers experiences of workplace violence

The study shows that all participants have either personally experienced or witnessed workplace violence in their line of duty. It has been concluded that social service workers therefore need and deserve to be adequately prepared for the dangers they

face and have the support of their agency in effectively dealing with incidents when they occur. Most of the participants indicated that they have been violated by their clients, colleagues, and employers in their line of duty. Therefore, organisations might provide more professional supervision or continuing education opportunities for social workers to identify and cope with their traumatic experiences of workplace violence. Workplace violence in social work practice causes short and long-term emotional, psychosocial effects. These experiences of workplace violence put a strain on social workers as individuals and hinder their service delivery. Social service organisations render critical services to communities, in which social workers constitute a large proportion of the workforce. Shortage of social work personal results in high caseloads and significant effects on the quality of services rendered.

Recommendations

- Social workers need to be adequately prepared throughout their studies in the phenomenon of workplace violence and should have the support of their organisations in practice in effectively dealing with violent incidents when they occur.
- Education and in-service training and safety precautions should be in place by any organisation employing a social worker. This includes structures for open communication, sharing experiences of violence, and sufficient resources and strategies to prevent recurrence of workplace violence.
- To ensure a safe and comfortable workplace for social workers in both private and public organisations, it is essential to address and abolish any form of threats and harassment from the internal and external workplace environment. This can promote a healthy work environment that promotes job satisfaction and professional commitment.

5.2.4. Theme 3: Types of workplace violence

The five types of workplace violence were identified as follows; client-related workplace violence; co-worker workplace violence; employer-to-employee workplace violence; relationship workplace violence and organisational-related workplace violence. The participants identified the types of workplace violence that occur most

frequently as client-related workplace violence and employer-to-employee workplace violence. The other workplace violence types do exist but are not as frequent.

Recommendations

- Employers need to ensure the safety of social workers. Regular debrief and check-in sessions about issues social workers face in their line of duty may be helpful toward this.
- Employers need to follow up on reported forms of abuse within the organisation and initiate a professional relationship and open communication within the organisation.
- Proper induction of newly qualified social workers on organisational structure, policy and resource availability is essential, including any workplace violence-related policies and support measures. Such induction would benefit from including mentorship commitments from senior employees to assist newly appointed employees and allow room for learning.
- Supervisors in organisations need to activate and create a harmonic working environment that allows social workers to be free to share, ask for assistance, and develop an interest in their work and the profession.

5.2.5. Theme 4: Contributing factors of workplace violence

It is evident that South African social work practice is a demanding profession, range with high caseloads, rendering critical services in an unsafe environment and lack of protection structures and measures. These factors cause strain on the health of social workers and are exacerbated by the lack of support from organisations, which causes a decline in the professional commitment. There is a need for the implementation of policies to protect social workers in their workplace. To effectively do so, it is important that the causes of workplace violence within social work practice are properly understood.

There are various contributing factors to workplace violence in social service organisations. These factors include the relationship between employer and employee, workload, poor supervision, high turnover, burnout, poor job performance, absenteeism and inconsistent or non-existent organisational policies and

programmes. The recognition and understanding of the variety and complexity of the factors that contribute to workplace violence is important for effective prevention and control programmes. Utilising and understanding these factors informs and shapes the strategies, policies and actions related to workplace violence prevention and mitigation. The scope of workplace violence shows that social workers, client systems, management and the organisation at large are affected by workplace violence either verbally, physically, or emotionally.

Recommendations

- Social work organisations should have practical measures in place such as security guards, alarms, cameras (CCTVs), and other measures to ensure the safety of social workers in practice. When social workers conduct home visits or community work, organisations should have tract systems that can be used to alert social workers and managers to any form of workplace violence.
- Unfair treatment, favouritism, lack of respect, and poor professionalism in the social work profession and/or workplace should consciously be eliminated within the organisation.
- Organisations should implement specific programmes to educate clients, families, and the communities about the role of social workers and welfare organisations, as well as the role of the client, families, and communities within service rendering.
- Organisations should specifically put programmes in place to address cultural competences and understanding in their work environments.

5.2.6. Theme 5 and 6: Implications of workplace violence for social work practice and organisations

The participants of the study, after they identified factors that cause workplace violence in the South African social work practice, were able to identify the implications of workplace violence for social work practice and the social work organisation. It has been concluded that the contributing factors of workplace violence have negative implications for social work practice. The public social work image has been negatively affected as a result. This hinders the recruitment of students to study social work, retention of staff, service delivery, and community engagement. These factors are

contributing to the migration of social workers to other professions. The implications of workplace violence for social workers are a rise in traumatic experiences, fear of asking for help, demotivation in rendering services as well as a loss of interest in the profession. It negatively affects social workers' self-esteem, confidence, and ability in their line of duty.

Recommendations for social workers

- Social workers should advocate for the right to workplace protection and be aware of there are channels within the organisation to address workplace violence.
- Social workers need to be alert as well as being vigilant as workplace violence can occur unexpectedly. This can include measure such as asking a colleague to go out with them when doing home visits or community work.
- Social workers should report any form of intimidation experienced within the workplace. This may require an active commitment to improving their assertiveness and communication skills.
- Social workers are encouraged to practice self-care, seek help and be aware of their emotional wellbeing and mental health. This includes identifying the form of support or debriefing that works best for them, be that professional, spiritual, or both.
- Social workers should be acquainted with the code of ethics of the SACSSP, as well as with their rights as an employee.

Recommendations for organisations

- Providing a secure working environment for social workers should be the priority for organisations. This includes regular staff meetings, team building, and non-discriminatory and fair treatment.
- Organisations should involve and engage all their employees on a regular basis in practical ways of working to safeguard their safety.
- Organisations need to specifically address issues of workplace violence through support groups and helpful supervision. Instil structures and processes of debriefing and therapeutic services for employees, specifically with regards to workplace violence

- Effective communication to avoid workplace violence in social work practice could be employed as follows: the organisation may create a communication platform for its employees, specifically to report workplace violence, with a set process of reporting, engagement, feedback, and implementation.
- The organisation needs to understand workplace violence from the victim's point of view as well as the factors contributing towards this phenomenon and should appropriately formulate tangible strategies to manage stressful situations and employee wellbeing.
- Organisations should appoint a structure for social workers where they can report workplace violence issues.
- Senior employees need to be prohibited from taking advantage of newly qualified social workers.
- Where possible, organisations should attempt to have a gender-balanced workforce to avoid sending junior female social workers to dangerous areas.

5.2.8. Theme 7: Organisational policies and support

Different views were given regarding the existence of measures and support at both the organisational and wider professional governing levels. Some respective organisations do provide support for social workers who experience workplace violence; however, many do not. Further, workplace violence policies do not exist in many organisations. An organisation with protective measures to prevent workplace violence would better enable social workers to fulfil their responsibilities and support the vision and mission of the organisation.

Recommendations

- Organisations need to improve the ability of social workers to cope with and prevent workplace violence, by designing specific training programmes for social workers to prevent and curb the physical and psychological harm caused by workplace violence.
- Social workers in organisations should lobby with one another as well as organisation management to formulate and activate context-specific and practical policies regarding workplace violence.

- If an organisational workplace violence prevention programme is not currently in place, administrators and social workers should advocate for the creation of one and for the funding needed to maintain such a programme.
- All qualified social workers and student social workers should be made aware of workplace violence policies to gain an understanding of prevention measures, rights, and reporting processes.
- Interagency collaboration (involving social work agencies, researchers, legislatures etc.) on issues of social work safety could provide valuable feedback and insight into effective measures for safeguarding the profession and can encourage communication between organisations to identify similar problems or to share best practices.

5.2.9. Theme 8: Professional governing policies and support

Different views were given regarding the existence of workplace violence policy and support within professional governing groups such as DSD and SACSSP. Such policy response was found to be largely non-existent.

Recommendations

- DSD should regard and encourage the safeguarding of social workers as part of the supervisor job description and role. The supervision framework of DSD should include guidelines for supervisors on how to protect social workers, as well as how to engage with social workers regarding their workplace violence experiences.
- The SACSSP should set minimum standards for organisations regarding policies for workplace violence that should be in place when employing a social worker.
- DSD and the SACSSP must act and implement policies that protect social workers on the ground. Discussions at the district, regional and national levels are needed on the phenomenon of workplace violence with the aim of formulating a practical workplace violence policy, applicable and appropriate to all social workers in South Africa.

5.3. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study aimed to gain an understanding of South African social workers' experiences of workplace violence, to better understand the causes, contributing factors and implications of this phenomenon. This was achieved through the study objectives by employing a theoretical lens of workplace violence namely, systems theory and social learning theory in Chapter Two. These theories were appropriate, valuable, and applicable as a backdrop to explore and describe violence or contributing factors of workplace violence in social work practice. Thereafter the researcher was able to identify clusters of contributing factors of workplace violence, namely internal factors, situational factors, client-related factors, and external factors in Chapter Three. Chapter Four empirically elucidated the experiences of social workers.

The following research questions were thus answered:

- What are South African social worker's experiences of workplace violence?
- What would be the appropriate theories of social work practice that can describe and analyse factors that causes workplace violence in a comprehensive and effective way to serve as a guide for future practice?
- What can be done to address workplace violence among South African social workers to safeguard their workplace?

The key recommendation from this study is that workplace violence policy and legislation should be formulated and implemented in the South African social work profession on national level, as an instrument to protect, prevent and safeguard social workers from various forms of workplace violence. This will guide and protect subsequent systems including organisations, supervisors, and social workers themselves from workplace violence. It is further recommended that social work organisations provide necessary support for their employees and collaborate with the DSD and SACSSP to address violence in the workplace.

Given the fact that there is limited literature and research available regarding workplace violence in the South African social work profession, more research should be conducted regarding this matter. Considering the results from the empirical investigation about the social workers' experiences of workplace violence, it is suggested that further research should focus on the views of supervisors as middle managers to investigate why workplace violence policies, measures and support are currently not successfully implemented in social work organisations. This investigation could help social workers who are experiencing workplace violence to be supported and protected in social work practice.

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ANNEXURE 1



STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Consent for social workers to participate in the research focusing on the “social workers’ experiences of workplace violence”

You are invited to take part in a study conducted by Xola Lucas Fayo from the Department of Social Work at Stellenbosch University. The results will contribute to the abovementioned thesis. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a practicing social worker and have experiences in and/ or knowledge on the study topic.

1. PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of social workers' experiences of workplace violence. The study aims to explore and describe factors causing workplace violence in social work and implications thereof for social worker's practice. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- engage in a discussion of the consent form;
- sign the consent forms; and,
- be available for a telephonic interview at a convenient time determined and agreed upon by you and the researcher.

Should you require any further information about the research you can contact me in this number 071 833 9057 or email at xfayo@gmail.com or 19204817@sun.ac.za

2. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

No harm is foreseen during or after the research. However, the research can be considered as medium risk in terms of Research ethical considerations (REC) because you may be reminded of a traumatic incident. All interviews are regarded as confidential, therefore no personal details of yourself will be included in the research. If there is any discomfort for you as a participant, I will refer you to Mrs E. Hoffman (074 888 4088). She will be providing debriefing to participants of the study should any discomfort be experienced during the research process. Debriefing services will be free of charge for all study participants.

3. PROTECTION OF YOUR INFORMATION, CONFIDENTIALITY AND IDENTITY.

Interviews will be conducted in private, and I will not record any personal identifying information of yourself. Any information you share with me during this study and that could possibly identify you as participant will be protected. This will be done by means of recording our telephone interview, and only my supervisor will have access to these recordings. In addition, data collected from you will be stored on a password protected computer and OneDrive Cloud, and hard copies will be stored in a locked cabinet at the researcher's home. Confidentiality will be ensured as no one else will have access to the identifying details of participants except if it is necessary for a third party such my supervisor to have access to the information.

4. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you agree to take part in this study, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences. You may refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. Your involvement in this study is completely voluntary. I will withdraw you from the research study if the circumstances warrant doing so.

5. RESEARCHERS' CONTACT INFORMATION

Should there be a need for further information regarding the research study, you may contact me directly to this number 071 833 9057 or via email at xlfayo@gmail.com or 19204817@sun.ac.za If you have any questions or concerns about the research study,

feel free to contact the supervisor, Prof L.K. Engelbrecht, the chairperson of the Department of Social Work, Stellenbosch University via email at lke@sun.ac.za or by telephone 021 080 2073.

6. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

I will be responsible for the cost of the research and no costs will be expected from you as a participant of the study. You will not receive remuneration from me for your participation in the research study. Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary.

7. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact Ms Maléne Fouché [mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622] at the Division for Research Development.

DECLARATION OF CONSENT BY THE PARTICIPANT

As the participant I confirm that:

- I have read the above information and it is written in a language that I am comfortable with.
- I have had a chance to ask questions and all my questions have been answered.
- All issues related to privacy, and the confidentiality and use of the information I provided have been explained.

By signing below, I _____ (*name of participant*) agree to take part in this research study, as conducted by _____ (*name of the researcher*).

Signature of participant

Date

DECLARATION BY THE RESEARCHER

As the researcher, I hereby declare that the information contained in this document has been thoroughly explained to the participant. I also declare that the participant has been encouraged (and has been given ample time) to ask questions. In addition, I would like to select the following option:

	The conversation with the participants was conducted in a language in which the participant is fluent.
	The conversation with the participant was conducted with the assistance of a translator (who has signed a non-disclosure agreement), and this "Consent form" is available to the participant in a language in which the participant is fluent.

Signature of researcher

Date

ANNEXURE 2

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. SECTION A: Biographical information

- 1.1. Gender;
- 1.2. Years of experience in the profession of social work;
- 1.3. Give a description of your work environment.

2. SECTION B: Social workers' experiences of workplace violence.

- 2.1. What do you consider as workplace violence in social work? Motive your response in detail (different types of workplace violence).
- 2.2. You are selected as participant to this study because you have experienced workplace violence yourself or are aware of someone who experience it. Give an example of this experience and describe this workplace violence in detail.
- 2.3. Have you experienced, or are you aware of the following types of workplace violence, and if so, present an example if it:
 - 2.3.1. Client (individual/family/community)-related workplace violence
 - 2.3.2. Co-worker workplace violence
 - 2.3.3. Employer-to-employee workplace violence
 - 2.3.4. Relationship workplace violence
 - 2.3.5. Organisational-related workplace violence
- 2.3. In your opinion, what are the causes (contributing factors) of workplace violence in social work?
- 2.4. In your experience, what are the implications of workplace violence for social work practice?
- 2.5. In your experience, what are the implications of workplace violence for social work organisations?

- 2.6. Does your organisation have a policies/measures/support in place regarding workplace violence? Describe and elaborate.
- 2.7. Are you aware of any organisation/institution/governing structure in social work practice that have policies/measures in place regarding workplace violence? Describe and elaborate.

3. SECTION C: Recommendations.

- 3.1. What are your recommendations to safeguard social workers from workplace violence (refer to yourself/ the work of social workers):
 - 3.1.1. On a personal level (micro level)
 - 3.1.2. Organisational level (mezzo level)
 - 3.1.3. National level (macro level)

4. SECTION D: Conclusion

- 4.1. Thank you for taking part in the study. Do you have any further input to add before we close?

ANNEXURE 3



UNIVERSITEIT
STELLENBOSCH
UNIVERSITY

NOTICE OF APPROVAL

REC: Social, Behavioural and Education Research (SBER) - Initial Application Form

12 November 2020

Project number: 18800

Project Title: SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Dear Mr. Xola Fayó

Your response to stipulations submitted on 10 November 2020 was reviewed and approved by the REC: Social, Behavioural and Education Research (REC: SBE).

Please note below expiration date of this approved submission:

Ethics approval period:

Protocol approval date (Humanities)	Protocol expiration date (Humanities)
22 October 2020	21 October 2021

GENERAL REC COMMENTS PERTAINING TO THIS PROJECT:

INVESTIGATOR RESPONSIBILITIES

Please take note of the General Investigator Responsibilities attached to this letter. You may commence with your research after complying fully with these guidelines.

If the researcher deviates in any way from the proposal approved by the REC: SBE, the researcher must notify the REC of these changes.

Please use your SU project number (18800) on any documents or correspondence with the REC concerning your project.

Please note that the REC has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

CONTINUATION OF PROJECTS AFTER REC APPROVAL PERIOD

You are required to submit a progress report to the REC: SBE before the approval period has expired if a continuation of ethics approval is required. The Committee will then consider the continuation of the project for a further year (if necessary).

Once you have completed your research, you are required to submit a final report to the REC: SBE for review.

Included Documents:

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Budget	ANNEXURE 3	22/09/2020	1
Informed Consent Form	Consent Form (ANNEXURE 2)	22/09/2020	2
Letter of support_counselling	Mr. Fayó Debriefing	22/09/2020	1

Data collection tool	Interview Schedule (ANNEXURE 1)	22/09/2020	1
Default	Mr Fayo (2020-18800) RESPONSE LETTER	10/11/2020	1
Research Protocol/Proposal	Research Proposal docx	10/11/2020	2

If you have any questions or need further help, please contact the REC office at cgraham@sun.ac.za.

Sincerely,

Clarissa Graham

REC Coordinator: Research Ethics Committee: Social, Behavioural and Education Research

National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC) registration number: REC-050411-032.

The Research Ethics Committee: Social, Behavioural and Education Research complies with the SA National Health Act No.61 2003 as it pertains to health research. In addition, this committee abides by the ethical norms and principles for research established by the Declaration of Helsinki (2013) and the Department of Health Guidelines for Ethical Research: Principles Structures and Processes (2nd Ed.) 2015. Annually a number of projects may

ANNEXURE 4

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR RESPONSIBILITIES

Protection of Human Research Participants

As soon as Research Ethics Committee approval is confirmed by the REC, the principal investigator (PI) is responsible for the following:

Conducting the Research: The PI is responsible for making sure that the research is conducted according to the REC-approved research protocol. The PI is jointly responsible for the conduct of co-investigators and any research staff involved with this research. The PI must ensure that the research is conducted according to the recognised standards of their research field/discipline and according to the principles and standards of ethical research and responsible research conduct.

Participant Enrolment: The PI may not recruit or enrol participants unless the protocol for recruitment is approved by the REC. Recruitment and data collection activities must cease after the expiration date of REC approval. All recruitment materials must be approved by the REC prior to their use.

Informed Consent: The PI is responsible for obtaining and documenting affirmative informed consent using **only** the REC-approved consent documents/process, and for ensuring that no participants are involved in research prior to obtaining their affirmative informed consent. The PI must give all participants copies of the signed informed consent documents, where required. The PI must keep the originals in a secured, REC-approved location for at least five (5) years after the research is complete.

Continuing Review: The REC must review and approve all REC-approved research proposals at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk but not less than once per year. There is **no grace period**. Prior to the date on which the REC approval of the research expires, **it is the PI's responsibility to submit the progress report in a timely fashion to ensure a lapse in REC approval does not occur**. Once REC approval of your research lapses, all research activities must cease, and contact must be made with the REC immediately.

Amendments and Changes: Any planned changes to any aspect of the research (such as research design, procedures, participant population, informed consent document, instruments, surveys or recruiting material, etc.), must be submitted to the REC for review and approval before implementation. Amendments may not be initiated without first obtaining written REC approval. The **only exception** is when it is necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants and the REC should be immediately informed of this necessity.

Adverse or Unanticipated Events: Any serious adverse events, participant complaints, and all unanticipated problems that involve risks to participants or others, as well as any research-related injuries, occurring at this institution or at other performance sites must be reported to the REC within **five (5) days** of discovery of the incident. The PI must also report any instances of serious or continuing problems, or non-compliance with the RECs requirements for protecting human research participants.

Research Record Keeping: The PI must keep the following research-related records, at a minimum, in a secure location for a minimum of five years: the REC approved research proposal and all amendments; all informed consent documents; recruiting materials; continuing review reports; adverse or unanticipated events; and all correspondence and approvals from the REC.

Provision of Counselling or emergency support: When a dedicated counsellor or a psychologist provides support to a participant without prior REC review and approval, to the extent permitted by law, such activities will not be recognised as research, nor the data used in support of research. Such cases should be indicated in the progress report or final report.

Final reports: When the research is completed (no further participant enrolment, interactions or interventions), the PI must submit a Final Report to the REC to close the study.

On-Site Evaluations, Inspections, or Audits: If the researcher is notified that the research will be reviewed or audited by the sponsor or any other external agency or any internal group, the PI must inform the REC immediately of the impending audit/evaluation.

ANNEXURE 5



T 074 888 4088 M 084 549 9152 F 086 638 4443

E elthetherapist@gmail.com

Practice

Number:

0020974

06 July 2020

To whom it may be concerned

MASTERS STUDY: XOLA LUCAS FAYO

Herewith I, Elmari Hoffman-Van Rooyen, confirm that I will be available to offer debriefing services to participants in connection to the research carried out by Mr. X.L. Fayon on "Social Workers' experience of workplace violence".

My involvement in this medium-risk study was explained to me by Mr. Fayon and all questions regarding my involvement were sufficiently answered.

Kind regards,

Elmari Hoffman van Rooyen

ANNEXURE 6

INDEPENDENT CODER DECLARATION

I, Diago Niccoh, hereby declare that I read through the semi-structured interviews and empirical research chapter of Xola Fayo (the researcher). My findings correspond with the themes, sub-themes, and categories as suggested in the empirical study



02/07/2021

Signature

Date

ANNEXURE 7

REFLEXIVITY REPORT

Reflexivity in qualitative research is regarded as contextual as it occurs within a specific time and place between two or more people (Dodgson, 2019). Reflexivity practices can be some of the most challenging and important work in qualitative research (Mitchell, Boettcher-Sheard, Duque & Lashewicz, 2018). If the researcher clearly describes the contextual intersecting relationships (e.g., race, socio-economic status, age, cultural backgrounds, experiences, emotions and values) between participants and themselves, it is not only increasing the credibility of the findings (Berger, 2015) but also deepens our understanding of the work (Dodgson, 2019). Berger (2015: 220) clarifies that the “researcher needs to increasingly focus on self-acknowledgment and sensitivity; better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge; carefully self-monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on the research; and maintain the balance between the personal and the universal”.

1. What personal experience do I have with my research topic?

At the time of embarking on this master’s thesis, I was a newly qualified social worker who had recently graduated with an bachelor’s degree. Coinciding with my research, I started working for the Department of Social Work as a first-year supervisor and junior lecturer. While I personally have not experienced what the participants shared during telephonic interviews regarding various forms of workplace violence, I am afraid to be a grassroots social worker due to the experiences and struggles shared by the participants.

2. How did I come to study the specific topic in the field?

This topic was proposed by my supervisor, and I developed an interest in the topic as I explored it further. I never heard of anyone before talking about workplace violence in the social work profession, therefore I knew that the study and its findings would be interesting and beneficial for the South African social work profession. After conducting research to construct the initial literature review, it became apparent that social workers’ experiences of workplace violence in South African social work profession

are neglected, even though it is equally evident that social workers are prone to experiences of violence in their line of duty. It is crucial for the South African social work profession to be protected by policies and legislations to safeguard social workers in their line of duty.

3. What is my relationship to the topic being investigated?

At the time of conducting the study, I had no real understanding of research and where or how to begin. I therefore had mixed feelings at the beginning of the research study, unsure as to whether I was undertaking the research correctly. I felt nervous and scared to be a grassroots social worker based on the research findings. The knowledge gained in the study, however, will enable me to educate other social workers in practice on how to protect and safeguard themselves against various forms of workplace violence.

4. How did I gain access to the field?

I gained access to the participants within this study using my professional network. I was a newly qualified social worker who had recently graduated, and thus knew many other social workers who studied with me. Many of them who were already employed at the time of data collection and were willing to participate in the research study and eager to recommend and refer other possible participants who fit the research criteria for inclusion. This was done through telephonic interviews, as Stellenbosch University had suspended face-to-face data collection due to COVID-19 restrictions.

5. How does my own position (age, gender, class, ethnicity, economic status, etc.) influence interaction in the field and the data collection process?

As previously mentioned, I am a newly qualified social worker, who has not yet been employed within practice and has no personal experience of workplace violence. However, my understanding of the profession through my studies, and my personal relationships with social workers who had studied alongside me, allowed me to show empathy during interviews. This encouraged data collection, as participants were open to sharing experiences and knowledge regarding workplace violence in the social work profession. I personally focused on the interview schedule and tested this prior to the initial telephonic interview, to better understand the role of the self in the creation of

the interview schedule. I practiced self-monitoring throughout the study to minimize the impact of my own biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on the research, and maintain the balance between the personal and the universal.

6. What is my interpretation perspective?

During data analysis it became evident that I took on a subjective perspective, as I noticed myself agreeing with, responding to, and even judging narratives. This is due to my perspective being embedded within the research process as opposed to being detached. As a result, I had to consciously analyse narratives and use member checking through an independent coder to ensure I was not biased in my interpretation of the findings.