

# **OCCUPATIONAL STRESSORS OF NEWLY QUALIFIED SOCIAL WORKERS IN NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS: EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES**

by

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The crest of the University of Stellenbosch is centered behind the text. It features a shield with a red and white design, topped with a crown and a banner. The Latin motto "Veritas subleuant oculus recti" is inscribed on the banner.

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## **Declaration**

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## SUMMARY

An exploratory and descriptive research design, in combination with quantitative and qualitative research approaches were utilised to elucidate the experiences of newly qualified social workers in NGOs, with regards to occupational stress and the coping strategies employed by these workers in response. The motivation for this study came from a distinct lack of research related to the experience of occupational stress by newly qualified social workers working within NGOs. The goal of this study is thus to gain a better understanding of the experiences of occupational stress by newly qualified social workers practicing in NGOs, as well as elucidating the coping strategies they employ, so as to make recommendations focussing on key areas, where alleviation of occupational stress is vital.

The literature study first focussed on the South African NGO, and the newly qualified social worker within the NGO, to provide a contextual basis for the experience of occupational stress by newly qualified social workers. The literature study then explored the range of occupational stressors that might be experienced by newly qualified social workers, to gain a better understanding of the diversity of stressors present within NGOs, and their aetiology. Lastly, the literature study focussed on the variety of coping strategies available to newly qualified social workers, for coping with, and alleviation of occupational stress.

The researcher utilises a purposive sample of 20 newly qualified social workers, These workers had practiced for up to 24 months, in the Boland area of the Western Cape. An interview schedule was used as measuring instrument.

The result of the investigation confirmed that particular occupational stressors affecting newly qualified social workers Whilst there were a wide spectrum of stressors experienced by newly qualified social workers on an occasional basis, occupational stressors such as very heavy workloads, unsatisfactory remuneration and the multivariate problems of the client population stood out as stressors experienced on a very frequent basis. The second conclusion to be drawn from this study was that personality traits may play less of a role than expected in determining

how much newly qualified social workers experience occupational stress. The third conclusion to be drawn from this study was that a wide range of coping strategies were not only available to newly qualified social workers but that a great deal were effective in helping newly qualified social workers to alleviate their occupational stress.

Recommendations made by this study pointed to the importance of NGOs as well as government targeting stressors such as heavy workloads and remuneration, with the aim of retaining skilled social workers just entering into the industry. Another recommendation focussed on the fact that newly qualified social workers have to take ownership over their occupational stress, and actively work to alleviate it in a positive manner.

## OPSOMMING

'n Verkennende en beskrywende navorsingsontwerp, sowel as 'n gekombineerde kwantitatiewe en kwalitatiewe navorsingsbenadering is benut om die ervarings van pas gekwalifiseerde maatskaplike werkers in nie-regeringsorganisasies se werkstres en streshanteringstrategieë te ondersoek. Die studie is gemotiveer deur 'n gebrek aan navorsing oor die ervarings van werksverwante stres by pas gekwalifiseerde maatskaplike werkers wat by NROs werkzaam is. Die doel van die studie was dus om 'n beter begrip vir die ervarings van werksverwante stres by pas gekwalifiseerde maatskaplike werkers in NROs te ontwikkel, sowel as om die betrokke maatskaplike werkers se streshanteringstrategieë te belig, ten einde aanbevelings te kan maak oor sleutelareas waarop gefokus behoort te word in die verligting van werksverwante stres.

Die literatuurstudie fokus op die NRO-sektor in Suid-Afrika en die pas gekwalifiseerde maatskaplike werker, ten einde 'n kontekstuele grondslag vir die ervarings van die betrokke maatskaplike werkers se stressors te bied. Die literatuurstudie eksplorieer voorts die reeks van stressors wat deur die betrokke maatskaplike werkers ervaar kan word, ten einde 'n beter begrip van die diversiteit van stressors en die etiologie van die stressors te ontwikkel. Die studie fokus ook op die verskeidenheid strategieë wat beskikbaar is aan pas gekwalifiseerde maatskaplike werkers, om hulle werksverwante stres te verminder.

Die navorser het 'n doelbeswuste steekproef van 20 pas gekwalifiseerde maatskaplike werkers benut. Hierdie werkers is almal die afgelope 24 maande werkzaam in die Boland area van die Wes-Kaap. 'n Onderhoudskedule is as navorsingsinstrument benut. Die bevindinge van die navorsing bevestig dat die pas gekwalifiseerde maatskaplike werker wel spesifieke werksverwante stressors beleef. Alhoewel 'n groot verskeidenheid stressors soms aanwesig is, kom werksverwante stressors soos groot werksladings, onbevredigende numerering en die verskeidenheid van die verbruikersstelsel se probleme meer algemeen voor. Die tweede bevinding vanuit hierdie studie dui daarop dat persoonlikheidstrekke speel waarskynlik 'n mindere rol as wat verwag word, in die aanwesigheid van stres by die

pas gekwalifiseerde maatskaplike werker. Die derde bevinding dui daarop dat 'n groot verskeidenheid stresverligtingstrategieë beskikbaar is om werksverwante stres te verlig en dat hierdie strategieë wel effektief aangewend kan word.

Die aanbevelings vanuit hierdie studie wys op die belangrikheid daarvan dat NRO's en die regering stressors soos groot werksladings en numerering verlig, ten einde pas gekwalifiseerde maatskaplike werkers vir die praktyk te werf. Ander aanbevelings fokus op die feit dat pas gekwalifiseerde maatskaplike werkers eienaarskap van hulle werksverwante stressors moet aanvaar deur aktief hulle werkstres op 'n positiewe wyse te hanteer.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

Stress can be defined as the state or condition that develops when energy is required to meet the physical, social, psychological and emotional demands of one's environment (Dewe, 1987:490; Verwey, 1996:102-107). When taking this into the workplace specifically that of the social worker, this stress can be described as occupational stress as it is subject to the rigours of the role as social worker (Clegg, 2001:102).

Whilst statistics regarding the level of prevalence of occupational stress and burnout amongst South African social workers have been difficult to obtain, international research indicates that there are several studies or examinations of occupational stress amongst social workers that prompt further inquiry into the phenomenon. One such study, completed in Australia (Higgins & Stevens, 2002) points to the notion that workers may experience high levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, as well as low levels of personal accomplishment. The study also suggested that these experiences, as well as worker efficacy, may have been affected by interpersonal, intra-individual and job resource factors, and not simply the efficacy of their coping skills (Higgins & Stevens, 2002). This prompts one to examine the possible individual stressors and their aetiology in the local social workplace; in the hopes of having the workers themselves identify the nature of the stressors experienced, as well as their origins.

There is evidence to suggest that there are factors related to the role as worker, which may contribute to the occupational stress experienced by social workers. These variables have a pronounced effect on the environment of the social worker. Lecroy and Rank (1987:22-26) make mention of variables such as low levels of job satisfaction, low levels of professional self esteem, perceived lack of work autonomy, the discrepancy that arises from the afore mentioned esteem and autonomy, the workers ability to cope and the assertiveness of the worker, in terms of being able to

set professional limits within their practice. All of these variables have been shown to have an effect on occupational stress of social workers.

A recent study (Bakker, Lewig, Van der Zee & Dollard, 2006:31) has also suggested that whilst there are situational factors which may contribute to occupational stress, there may also be elements of the worker's personality which connotes how much stress is experienced within the worker domain. Within the above study, five personality traits are made mention of. Extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and intellect/autonomy were all personality traits researched. It is thus suggested that the state or prevalence of these personality traits within workers may have an effect on how they handle and cope with occupational stress and burnout.

Often the physical environment of the actual occupation may have an influence of the stress experienced. Workers that are less educated or whom have less experience and thus hold a lower position in their organisation, may experience problems within their own workplace such as role conflict, role clarity, strained relationships with other staff, and the participation in decision making (Itschaki, 1994). These problems may in turn also contribute significantly to the occupational stress of experienced workers, whilst also being stressors that are most often experienced by newly qualified social workers.

The newly qualified social worker is the focus of this study. In 2005, social workers between the ages of 20 and 29 years of age constituted roughly 27% of the total amounted social workers in South Africa (Earle, 2008:46). What is interesting to note, is that 26% of total social workers in 2005 were between the ages of 26 and 29, whilst those between the ages of 20 and 24 only comprised just under 3% of the total. This highlights a great disparity between the amounts of social workers in practice, and those that have just entered into practice. For the purpose of this study, newly qualified social workers are defined as those workers who have worked up to 24 months in practice. Newly qualified social workers are particularly vulnerable to occupational stress, as they are in a period of transition into the workplace, abandoning previous roles and expectations, whilst taking on new roles and expectations, as professionals. It is for these reasons that the newly qualified social

workers, and their experiences of stress become relevant, as it is these workers that will go on to constitute the upper echelons of the welfare industry over time.

Thus there are many spheres in which consideration is due with regard to the experiencing of occupational stress by newly qualified social workers. It is the intent of this study to examine the merit of these spheres in greater detail, as well as examine the experiences of newly qualified social workers as to how each sphere affects them in terms of occupational stress. It is in stating this that the importance of the ecological perspective and within this, *systems theory* becomes apparent. Systems theory highlights how different systems interact with one another in complex ways (Payne, 2005:142-144). Individuals, such as social workers, exist as part of different systems, which may overlap and interact with one another. Systems theory is pertinent within the study, as the perceptions or experiences of newly qualified social workers with regard to occupational stress are linked to their part within certain systems, for example: their own organisation, and their role as social worker. All of these are in themselves systems that the workers find themselves interacting with, and in turn, they interact with each other through the worker. The interactive model of stress can also be linked to this theory, as the reactions of the individual, their cognitive appraisal, as well as environmental stimuli should be viewed together to gain some idea as to the nature of stress (Furnham, 2006:357; Jones & Fletcher, 1991:444).

To identify the scope of local research on newly qualified social worker stress, an examination of the Nexus database, detailing completed research on the topic, showed only three other studies, or works. The first details the incidence and handling of work stress in social workers (Marquard, 2004). Since this study focuses on the coping with stress by social workers, and not expressly their perceptions of occupational stress, the relevance of this study remains intact.

Another study detailed the social worker perceptions of occupational stress, within a specific local Regional Department of Social Development (Soji, 2005). This study was conducted at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in the Eastern Cape. Whilst this study aims to achieve a semblance of the objectives that will be highlighted within this study, relevance of this study remains intact, as there is insufficient research completed on newly qualified social workers.

The last example of current, completed research locally, details the factors contributing to occupational stress of social workers in a correctional facility in the Gauteng area (Ntlhe, 2006). Whilst this is a recent study, and thus its relevance is beyond question, its considerations specify factors contributing to occupational stress of workers within the Gauteng area, as well as within the correctional services sphere, whilst this study aims to elucidate those factors, as well as worker experiences of those factors within an NGO environment. Thus, in terms of the current completed research, the viability and necessity of this research study remains plausible, as there is room enough to permit such a study to highlight considerations that have not been made within a specific local sphere, specifically with regard to those newly qualified social workers practicing within Non-Governmental Organisations.

Earle (2008:48) stated that in 2005, only 20% of social workers nationally could be found in Non-Governmental Organisations. This means that in 2005, social workers within NGOs were only a fifth of the national total. Despite these low figures, Earle (2008:48) also points out that 3% of all social workers in 2005 left the country to practice in the U.K. When viewed in context, this equates to roughly a sixth of all social workers in NGOs having left the country to practice in the U.K. When viewed in conjunction with figures highlighted by the "Survey of Social Work Recruitment and Retention in the Western Cape", completed by the Department of Social Development (2007), which states that 60% of NGOs are unable to recruit and retain staff, the low amounts of social workers within NGOs becomes prolific. This Survey also states that 60% of NGOs have vacancies, waiting to be filled by social workers.

In response, social work within South Africa has been determined to be a scarce skill, with a large number of workers still required to meet the needs of the social context and its problems (Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Social workers, 2006:2). In light of the fact NGOs are enjoying very low numbers of practicing social workers, high amounts of vacancies, coupled with the fact that there is a high demand for social workers locally, it is essential that the experience of newly qualified social workers with regard to occupational stress be explored, so as to gain a better understanding of those factors which may be contributing to a lack of available workers within NGOs. In this way, it may be possible to identify problem areas that may serve as focus points for the increase of social work retention, and

the alleviation of social worker stress in general. It is also important to note that NGOs in the community are often grass-root hubs of welfare that exist as provision points of service, where social workers deal directly with the communities they serve. In this sense, NGOs, and the social workers practicing within them are vital to the provision of welfare on a local level. Taking this into account, it is crucial that the occupational stressors experienced by newly qualified social workers within these organisations be highlighted and understood, so as to combat their effects, and maintain positive provision of service to the community.

## **1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

This study aims to turn its attention towards newly qualified social workers, working specifically within Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) as the occupational stress experienced within NGOs are often indigenous to this sphere, and vary from governmental welfare organisations. For the purposes of this study, a newly qualified social worker will be defined as those workers that have entered and been in practice for a period up to 24 months. With regard to this focal group's experiences of stress in an NGO, this study aims to ask several questions: What is the current context of the South African NGO, as well as that of the newly qualified social worker within these NGOs? What are the experiences these workers have of their occupational stress? What coping strategies do newly qualified social workers, within NGOs, employ to deal with or alleviate this stress? Answers to these questions could be helpful to gain an understanding of the mechanisms necessary to alleviate the occupational stress experienced by newly qualified social workers, as well as increasing the retention of skilled social workers entering the welfare industry.

## **1.3 AIM AND OBJECTIVES**

The aim of this study is to gain an understanding of the experiences newly qualified social workers have, with regard to their occupational stress, as well as the coping strategies they employ to address this stress. The following objectives have been formulated to achieve this aim:



- To highlight the characteristics and role of South African NGOs, as well as to contextualise the newly qualified social worker practicing in NGOs, within the Boland area of the Western Cape.
- To explain the range of factors that might contribute to occupational stress of newly qualified social workers within an NGO.
- To describe the coping strategies employed by newly qualified social workers in reply to occupational stress in the workplace.
- To investigate the experiences of newly qualified social workers practicing in NGOs, with regard to occupational stress and the existing coping strategies they employ.

## **1.4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS**

The following section will focus on the research methods employed in this study, the sources of information utilised for the purposes of this study, as well as the sampling and data gathering employed within this study.

### **1.4.1 Research approach**

A mixture of qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed in this study (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delpont, 2002). Quantitative methods are to be employed in order to illuminate quantifiable results in the experience of occupational stress of social workers, which may then be used to make conclusions and recommendations. Certain assumptions may be made of quantitative research, which may aid the purposes of this study. The first is that scientific knowledge is not self evident, in that often there are too many sources of error in a simple social work knowledge base (Thyer, 2001:30). Thus sound knowledge requires objective procedures. Another assumption of quantitative method is that there is an order to the phenomena of the world, and thus a pattern that a social work researcher may detect (Thyer, 2001:30). Thus, even though the experiences of different individual social workers might differ slightly, there should remain a pattern to be discerned.

Connected to this idea, that experiences amongst a group of relevant individuals are, to some extent shared (Thyer, 2001:31). Whilst there can be no objective true reality, as no two people are the same, there can be a common understanding of the experiences people share, and this can be shown through quantifying these experiences.

Qualitative methods were used within this study, as a means to represent personal views by social workers of their experiences of their own occupational stress, as well as their views concerning coping strategies (De Vos *et al.*, 2002:79). These views may simply help add a human touch to the data, ensure triangulation, as well as provide some form of insight for those not accustomed to the rigours of social work.

#### **1.4.2 Research design**

For the purposes of this study, an exploratory and descriptive design was utilised, as it aided in gaining insight into the newly qualified social workers experience of occupational stress (De Vos *et al.*, 2002:109). The reasons for this are many. Firstly, there was not a great deal of literature pertaining directly to the topic, and thus certain insights were tested on the part of the researcher, by means of later quantitative and qualitative research methods. An exploratory and descriptive design was also pertinent in this case as occupational stress of social workers needed be discussed and viewed from many viewpoints, and in light of the research findings, some might have been more valuable or pertinent than others.

#### **1.4.3 Research method**

##### **1.4.3.1 Literature study**

A literature study is necessary to gain a better understanding of the research field being explored (De Vos *et al.*, 2002:127). A literature study was conducted concerning the research field to provide a framework, with which to reference other literature, as well as provide literary comparison to other findings within the field. The literature study focussed on the following aspects: the newly qualified social worker in a local context, as well as the role and characteristic of the South African NGO;

the variety of potential occupational stressors which may be experienced by newly qualified social workers; and coping strategies available to newly qualified social workers, to deal with occupational stress. Review of international and local literature was conducted by utilising the JS Gericke Library (*University of Stellenbosch*) and the Electronic databases and Journals available through membership to the JS Gericke Library.

#### **1.4.3.2 Population and sampling**

The population for this study could not be determined and thus, a purposive sample of 20 newly qualified social workers was chosen, working within Stellenbosch, Somerset West, Paarl, Strand, Franschoek and Elsie's River areas, within NGOs in the Western Cape. For the purposes of the study, "newly qualified social workers" were defined as those workers that had been in practice within an NGO for up to 24 months. The sample of 20 newly qualified social workers was decided upon to maximise sample size and thus increase validity of results. The sample was chosen purposively due to the fact that all respondents could be defined as newly qualified social workers, and all were practicing within NGOs (De Vos *et al.*, 2002:334). Respondents were chosen from the Stellenbosch, Somerset West, Paarl, Strand, Franschoek and Elsie's River areas, as they all border on one another, and fall within a general catchment area. All organisations visited to seek respondents were Non-Governmental Organisations, and all workers within these organisations had been in practice up to 24 months, were considered newly qualified, and thus viable for this study. This ensured that although the sample was small, in terms of a generalisation to the population, the patterns and similarities between the experiences of respondents was evident through situational analysis.

#### **1.4.3.3 Method of data collection**

##### *(a) Preparation of data collection*

Each respondent was selected for a purpose, because of the unique position of the sample elements (Grinnel & Unrau, 2005:165). This suited the purposes of this

study, as each social worker respondent was selected and approached, and, in terms of a semi-structured interview, questioned as to their experiences of occupational stress. In this way, the researcher ensured the validity of the data, as, only a registered social worker could claim to have social worker experiences, ensuring the purpose of the study. It must also be noted that whilst NGOs were a contextual focus within this study, the focus was not on NGOs as a criterion for inclusion, but rather the characteristics of social workers within NGOs and the generic nature of the work connected to their role as newly qualified social worker within these NGOs. Respondents were contacted telephonically, and informed as to the nature of the study being conducted. Respondents were then asked whether they would take part in a semi-structured interview where their experiences of occupational stress would be documented, as well as the coping strategies they employed to help alleviate stress. Prior to interviews, the researcher informed respondents as to the confidential nature of information provided. Where respondents were willing, the researcher proceeded with the interview. The interview duration was between forty five minutes and one hour.

*(b) Research instrument*

Data was collected in a semi-structured interview with the aid of an interview schedule. This interview schedule contained all the relevant instructions, rapport and layout, moving from concrete questions to more abstract questions, and finally the correct follow-up procedures (Alston & Bowles, 2003:98-102). The interview schedule contained closed-ended questions reflecting the quantitative method, as well as appropriate opportunity for comment or elucidation to gather qualitative data. A Likert rating scale was used for closed ended questions. The common feature of rating scales is to measure individuals, objects or events on various traits or characteristics, at a point on a continuum or an ordered set of response categories (Grinnel & Unrau, 2005:118). These scales enabled the respondents to rate the importance of specific factors in contributing to occupational stress. The interview schedule was utilised in semi-structured interviews conducted with respondents at their place of work. In this way efficiency, as well as timely execution of the data

gathering was ensured. All data gathered within afore-mentioned interviews was noted down on separate interview schedules for each respondent.

#### **1.4.3.4 Method of data analysis**

Data gathering is the process of structuring and assigning meaning to a mass of collected data (De Vos *et al.*, 2002:339). For the purposes of this study, data was analysed in the following way. First, numerical information was tallied, and then organised according to category and theme. Qualitative data was also drawn out and categorised according to themes. The researcher then summarised and interpreted the data in the research report by comparing it to existing data from the literature review. Finally data was presented in tabular and narrative form.

#### **1.4.3.5 Method of data verification**

According to De Vos *et al.* (2002:351) research must answer to norms that ensure the trustworthiness of a study. These norms were observed as follows:

##### *(a) Credibility*

To ensure that the subject was accurately identified and described, the researcher maintained credibility of the inquiry by making use of various interviewing techniques such as paraphrasing, probing, focussing, clarifying and summarising. The researcher also gained input from his supervisor with regard to the content of the interview schedule, and its applicability in obtaining the aims and objectives of the study.

##### *(b) Transferability*

By providing a thorough description of the research methodology employed, the researcher maintained transferability, and the studies generalisability to other groups and contexts.

(c) *Reliability*

Reliability was maintained by ensuring that all numerical data was accurately recorded, as well as tallied and accrued in a manner which represented respondents replies correctly.

(d) *Confirmability*

The researcher maintained confirmability by ensuring that the manner in which data was collected, and then analysed, resulted in findings which could be confirmed by another study.

## **1.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

This research conducted for the purposes of this study was conducted in a professional, structured manner. Every respondent was voluntary, and no coercion was used to obtain involvement in these one on one interviews. Respondents were interviewed in their own personal capacity, and the appropriate consent was obtained with regard to the conducting of said interviews. Confidentiality was ensured during research with respondents, as respondents were informed that their identities, as well as those of their specific organisations remain anonymous. Respondents were also made aware as to the nature and aims of this study, before interviewing commenced. In this light, all respondents gave informed consent to taking part in the research process.

## **1.6 LIMITATIONS OF STUDY**

One limitation that presented itself for consideration was the undeniable fact that each respondent social worker interviewed on their own experiences of occupational stress, was a unique individual in their own right, with their own value systems, as well as their own unique experience of the world around them. Although this was a limitation, in the sense that their experiences of occupational stress could not be considered expressly objective, the assumptions discussed earlier, referring to quantitative research methods, should have allowed for an overarching pattern of

experience to emerge. Supporting this, was the fact that all workers would have had their professional workplace within the Boland area of the Western Cape, and thus their professional experience of occupational stress presented a shared local experience of the phenomenon of occupational stress.

In relation to these facts, a similar limitation presented itself. The fact that this study concentrated solely on workers within the Boland area of the Western Cape, arguably limited its relevance in a national, or even international context. However, this limitation, in itself, was a connotated implication of the study. Since other studies have taken place in other regions of South Africa, this study hoped to supply an image of the social worker experience of occupational stress from a Western Cape point of view, and in that sense, this limitation became acceptable for the purposes of the study.

The most pressing limitation of this study was the size of the sample, at 20 respondents. Although the sample could be considered small, and thus generalisation of findings could be seen as limited, the aims and objectives of the study were still reached. It should also be mentioned that the amount of newly qualified social workers within NGOs in the Western Cape was very small at present, and this mitigates the small sample to some extent.

## **1.7 PRESENTATION OF THE STUDY**

This research study is divided into six chapters. Chapter One serves to provide an introduction to the study, as well as the motivation for the study. The research methodology utilised within the study is also contained in this chapter. This introductory chapter highlights the importance of the study, as well what it aims to achieve, and the manner in which it will do so.

Chapters Two, Three and Four serve as the literature review for the study. These chapters provide a literary basis for the situational analysis within this study. Chapter Two provides an introductory context for the newly qualified social worker in South Africa, as well as the definition and role of the South African NGO. Chapter Three goes on to define the various aspects of stress, as well as the particular stressors that may be encountered, within the workplace, by the newly qualified social worker.

Chapter Four provides an overview of the various forms of coping, and specific coping strategies that may be employed by newly qualified social workers to assist them in reducing occupational stress.

After the literature review, the empirical analysis follows in Chapter Five. This chapter includes an analysis and interpretation of data accumulated within interviews with respondents. Chapter Six follows this, with conclusions and recommendations based on the data analysed in the empirical analysis.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND NEWLY QUALIFIED SOCIAL WORKERS: A CONTEXTUAL REVIEW**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

In light of the fact that this study aims at elucidating the experiences and perceptions of newly qualified social workers in NGOs, with regard to occupational stress, it is important that the context of newly qualified social workers within NGOs be clarified, as well as the character of South African NGOs be determined. This chapter will highlight the socio-political history with regards to present day NGOs, as well as attempt to paint an introductory picture of the context in which current newly qualified social workers find themselves. This will serve to illustrate that there is a growing potential within South African welfare NGOs for the experience of occupational stress by newly qualified social workers. This chapter will also serve as an introductory basis for following chapters, where the conceptualisation of potential stressors newly qualified social workers may encounter in their field, and the coping strategies available to them in dealing with these stressors, will be dealt with.

#### **2.2 NEWLY QUALIFIED SOCIAL WORKERS: A CONTEXTUAL INTRODUCTION**

In 2003, the Minister for Public Service and Administration declared the field of social work a “scarce skill” (Department of Social Development, 2006:2). This has the obvious implication that the current demand for social workers within South Africa is not being met, in terms of the amounts of social workers currently practicing within the country. Social work aims to enhance the social functioning and well being of individuals within society through empowerment, as well as promoting social change and problem within human relationships (Hare, 2004). Social workers make up the working core of most NGOs concerned with social service delivery, in that they are the main proponent of service delivery to the public. For the purposes of this study, the term “newly qualified social worker” shall be utilised many times. Within the

parameters of this study, a newly qualified social worker can be defined as those workers who have spent up to 24 months, or two years in the field of practice. It is the purpose of this study to examine the wide variety of perceptions and experiences these newly qualified workers have with regard to occupational stress within their field.

In terms of the South African context, becoming a registered social worker requires four years of University training, including the components of theory, practice education and research (Earle, 2008:2). These workers have to register themselves with the South African Council for Social Service Professionals. Whilst those entering into the profession are almost guaranteed employment, due to a vast need for new social workers in the field, the contemporary social work environment is complex and challenging. With the advent of the 1994 general elections, and the introduction of democracy, the target client population of social workers increased tremendously, with high rates of unemployment, poverty, a lack of education and a lack of basic amenities, all becoming factors which social workers would have to address (Habib & Kotze, 2002:8). With the political change post 1994, the importance of human rights and the emergence of new target systems for social work practice, such as the very poor and previously disadvantaged communities, a shift in the social service paradigm had occurred (Matlhaba, 2001:60). With new government policy relating to social service, rehabilitation is now the focus of social work. This need for a dual focussed practice perspective, where therapeutic, as well as developmental aspects must be catered for by the newly qualified worker means that workers must be proficient in not only individual intervention, but also community and group work, where target groups of clients within the community at large, must be identified, their needs and problems highlighted, and then catered to, by the newly qualified social worker.

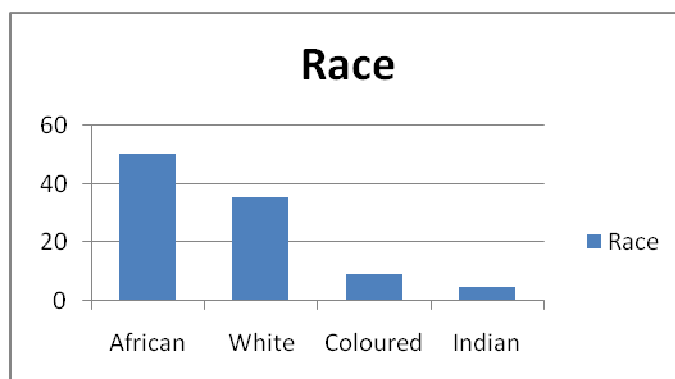
### **2.2.1 Local demographics of South African social workers**

With the above challenges in mind, the current local sphere, with regards to social workers must be examined, for the purposes of understanding the present context. Earle's "Social Work in Social Change, The profession and Education of social

workers in South Africa”, gives a comprehensive picture of the current state of affairs within present day South Africa (Earle, 2008:46).

### 2.2.1.1 Race

By 2005, of the 11 111 registered social workers in South Africa were African (50,2%), making up half of the South African social worker workforce. The other 50% of registered social workers were more unevenly distributed amongst the countries other racial groups. Of those, 35,6% were White, 9,1% Coloured and only about 4,9% Indian making up the rest of demographic respectively (Earle, 2008:46). The fact that this racial distribution of social workers is not essentially representative of the countries natural racial distribution, with African’s actually making up a far larger percentage of the population indicates that fewer individuals within the African community are entering into the social work field. At the same time however, it might be argued that this is due to previous inequalities under the Apartheid regime, and point to a current lack of resources within the African community, with many African individuals unable to obtain the professional qualifications necessary to enter the social work field.

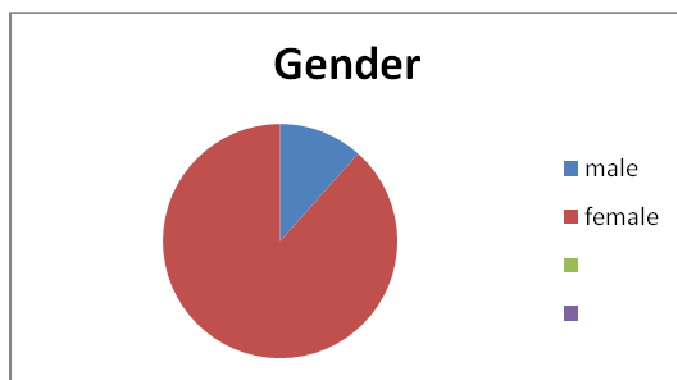


**Figure 2.1: Race distribution of South African social workers**

(Adapted from Earl, 2008)

### 2.2.1.2 Gender

Of those social workers registered with the SACCP in 2005, the majority of those remained female. In 2005, 89,3% of registered workers were female (Earle, 2008:46). Inversely, the implication of this is that only 11,7% of the remaining workers were male. This indicates a highly female dominated service industry within the South African welfare service. Whilst this cannot be construed as a negative aspect of the local social work sphere, it could be argued that a less irregular distribution of workers in terms of gender, might benefit the industry, with the stigma of social work as a female profession reduced.



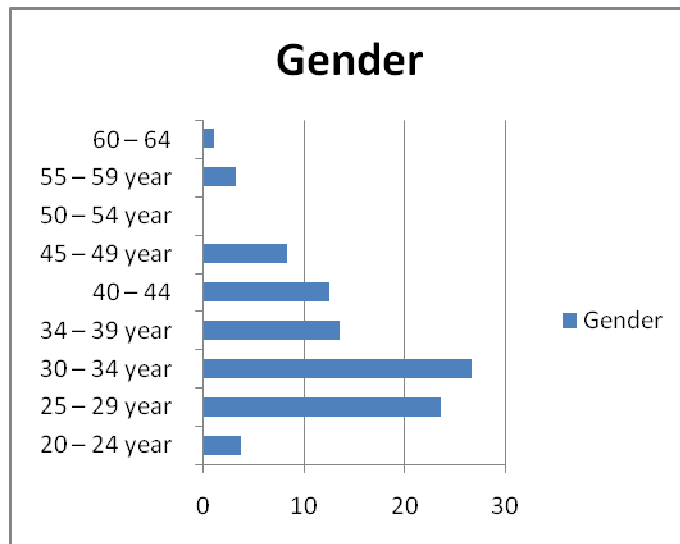
**Figure 2.2: Gender distribution of social workers in South Africa**

(Adapted from Earl, 2008)

### 2.2.1.3 Age

The distribution of social workers according to age, in 2005, can be broken up into several categories (Earle, 2008:46). In the 20-24 year category, there were only 3,7% of workers; in the 25-29 year category 23,5% of workers. There were 26,6% of workers, a slight majority, in the 30-34 year age group. In older age categories, the amounts of workers present begins to dwindle, with the 34-39 year and 40-44 year age groups having only 13,5% and 12,5% respectively. In the older age groups the numbers begin to lessen even more drastically, with 12,5% in the 45-49 year group, 7,7% in the 50–54 year group, 3,2% in the 55-59 year group and 1,0% in the 60-64 year age group. Whilst there will be exceptions, the majority of newly qualified social workers fall between the ages of 20 and 24 years of age. In 2005, only 3,7% of all social workers fell within this age category: a total of 411 workers. It could be argued

that the low numbers of newly qualified workers actually entering the field is representative of the current climate within social work. High levels of occupational stress and few buffers to this stress could be cited as reasons for such low numbers having recently entered the social work field.



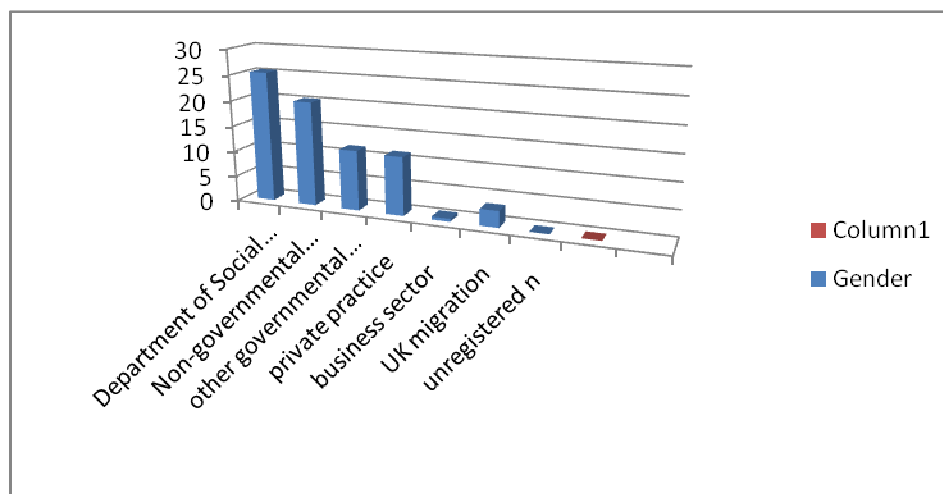
**Figure 2.3: Age distribution of South African social workers**

(Adapted from Earl, 2008)

#### **2.2.1.4 Work sphere**

In 2005, the distribution of social workers in known working spheres was the following (Earle, 2008:48). Of those that are known, 25,4% were found working in the Department of Social Services. Respectively, 20,3% of known workers were found in Non-Governmental Organisations. With these two spheres making up the majority of this group, the rest were found in other areas, with 11,7% in other governmental agencies, 11,4% in private practice, 0,6% in the business sector, just over 3,2% having migrated to the U.K. to practice and a remaining 4,2% remaining unregistered, non-practicing social workers. These figures indicate that although the majority of accounted-for social workers can be found within the government sphere, a good number of social workers can be found within the NGO sphere also. This implies that the current atmosphere and potential climates of stress within NGOs are indeed important when thinking of social work as a scarce skill, as well as the fact that a large number of accounted workers can be found within NGOs. It can also be

argued that the large percentage of unaccounted for social workers points to grey areas within these demographics where qualified workers may have left the service industry for more profitable, more stable ventures in other countries, a phenomenon currently labelled the “brain drain” (Engelbrecht, 2006), where professionals migrate away from South Africa in search of better salaries or a more stable working climate. With already 3% of these figures ascribed to work in the United Kingdom, it can also be assumed that numbers of social workers might have left South Africa for other countries.



**Figure 2.4 Work spheres of South African social workers**

### **2.2.1.5 Requirements for qualification as a social worker**

To achieve the qualification and title of social worker, a learner must meet specific requirements in terms of their tertiary academic performance. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) has enabled South Africa to develop its own National Qualification Framework (Lombard, Grobbelaar & Pruis, 2003:1). A qualification as social worker is awarded when a learner achieves the prescribed number and range of credits at the National Qualification Framework level. These credits are based on specific outcomes that learners will be able to achieve at the exit level. These exit level outcomes state the knowledge, skills and values a learner will have acquired at the point of leaving their learning program (Lombard *et al.*, 2003:7). Each of these outcomes has its own set of assessment criteria that guide

the demonstration of the particular tasks and tools. All newly qualified social workers would thus have achieved the same exit level outcomes in the future.

## **2.3 NEWLY QUALIFIED SOCIAL WORKERS AND STRESS**

Stress within the workplace and particularly within the sphere of social work, is most evident where newly qualified social workers are concerned. The multivariate sources of stress discussed later in Chapter Three are made more manifest because of the nature of the shift a newly qualified worker must make as they establish themselves in the arena of “work”. As a graduate takes on their new occupation a transition occurs. This transition involves the abandonment of their self perceived role as “student”, and the adoption of the self perceived and expected role as “professional social worker” (Matlhaba, 2001:59). This change in roles, as mentioned above, is in itself a stressful experience, and how the newly qualified social worker will adapt to their new role will depend on their capacities to appraise and cope with stress. How these workers experience this transition and the amount of stress involved, is dependent on several factors within contemporary South African social work practice and will be discussed in the following sections.

### **2.3.1 The shift in the social work practice environment**

With the political change in post 1994 South Africa, the importance of human rights and the emergence of new target systems for social work practice, such as the very poor and previously disadvantaged communities, a shift in the social service paradigm has occurred (Matlhaba, 2001:60). This need for a dual focussed practice perspective, where therapeutic, as well as development aspects must be catered for by the newly qualified worker means that workers must be proficient in not only intervention, but also community and group work. Although worker education includes all aspects of this dual focus, it can still be assumed that newly qualified workers may find it stressful incorporating varied skills within a new occupation they may still have to adapt to. In the following section, the historical developments that have most recently shaped the public health domain, and social service delivery in

general shall be discussed, as well an elucidation of the South African Welfare NGO and the context within which newly qualified social workers find themselves faced with within these NGOs.

## **2.4 THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF PUBLIC WELFARE SPHERE**

The advent of the 1994 General election saw an official end to Apartheid, and the ushering in of democratic change in South Africa. Whilst this was a proclamation of true independence and a celebration of freedom, the true state of the nation saw the majority of South Africans living in a country with high incidences of poverty, crime, unemployment, lack of education and a concrete lack of basic services and amenities (Habib & Kotze, 2002:8). This state of affairs, one which necessitated attention, prompted the new government, now run by the African National Congress (ANC), to put into action a social developmental plan, the Reconstruction and Development Programme or RDP (Russel & Swilling, 2002:4), with the intention of addressing the developmental problems facing the then-new state. This programme provided for a strong non-profit organisational role, with regard to social development, but in the same instance, it called for a very central role from the state.

For the two years that the RDP existed, the state took complete control of all social developmental plans, in many instances to the detriment of community based organisations already instituting developments of their own (Habib & Kotze, 2002:9). Because of the enormous resources such a programme required, and the obvious deficits in the states holdings, the South African government turned inward to the private sector. With the abandonment of the RDP and the adoption of the Growth Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR), which allocated new roles for the private sector in economic growth and service delivery, the non-profit sector was summarily attached to poverty alleviation (Russel & Swilling, 2002:4). It was for these reasons that policy making by government was shared with large proponents of the private sector, and the non-profit sector ignored. It must be stated that GEAR, itself, has not attained its objectives with regard to the needs of the populous. Foreign investment has, to a certain extent been deterred by crime, relaxation of exchange controls have allowed money to flow out of South Africa and the delivery of physical and social services has slowed over the recent years (Habib & Kotze,



2002:12). The current state of affairs is one of increasing poverty and a greater divide between the rich and the poor of South Africa. It is a state that creates complex challenges for those NGOs attempting to serve public interest, and those social workers delivering that service. Since the release of the 1997 White Paper for Welfare (Department of Welfare, 1997b), the Department of Social Welfare has not been able to optimally build on the capacity of local NGOs, in terms of the development needed to cope with the challenges and demands of local needs and problems (Boshoff, 2007:4).

This shift in Social Development, and the context it creates within South Africa cultivate an atmosphere ripe with potential stressors for newly qualified social workers. Increased levels of crime and poverty have a marked impact on the day to day occupation of the South African Social Worker, as these facets of our Society directly influence the people and communities that are served by social workers, making them more volatile, increasing their needs and indeed aggravating the problems they are faced with. All of these facts can be seen as cultivating additional occupational stress for newly qualified social workers.

## **2.5 THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR AND NGOs IN SOUTH AFRICA**

In order to better highlight the nature and characteristics of present day NGOs in South Africa, as well as lay out the extent of their functionality within the South African service industry, it is necessary to first define the Non-Governmental Organisation, and then highlight its place in welfare. It is with a greater understanding of the nature of the South African NGO that the context of the newly qualified social worker, as well as the challenges they face, can be highlighted.

### **2.5.1 Definition**

In terms of defining an NGO, Russel and Swilling (2002:7) provide a variety of definitions that have evolved to suit the welfare environment. The first and perhaps the simplest defines an NGO as *"...private, self governing, non-profit distributing organisations, operating, not for commercial purposes but in the public interest for*

*the promotion of social welfare and development, religion, charity, education and social research*". This definition emphasizes the NGOs role in serving public interest and promotion of social welfare and development. This gives a clear indication as to the nature of an NGO, as well as its ascribed purpose.

The Non-Profit Organisations Act of 1997 (Department of Welfare, 1997a) gives a more recent definition of an NGO. Within the act an NGO can be defined as "*...a trust, company or other association of persons established for a public purpose and the income and property of which are not distributable to its members or office bearers except as reasonable compensations for service rendered*". Whilst this definition is fairly comprehensive, it does not conclusively define what public purpose is. This is due to the fact that the legislators could not decide what the scope of public purpose entailed.

Russel and Swilling (2002:9), do however, provide a more comprehensive list of the structural criteria for defining an NGO. These criteria can provide a greater operational definition. This list includes the fact that NGOs must be organised, or institutionalised and that within this formulated goals, structures and activities. The second criterion they give us is that NGOs must be private, and although they can receive funding from the government, must remain separate from government. The third criterion is that NGOs must be self governing, in that they must control their activities in accordance with their own procedures. The second last criterion is they must be non-profit, in that all profits made must be ploughed back into the basic mission of the organisation, and not distributed amongst its members or directors. The last criterion in Russel and Swilling's list is that membership of the organisation must be voluntary and without compulsion.

From the definitions described above and the criteria denoting the characteristics of an NGO, it is apparent that the most important features of an NGO remains that it is separate from government, that it has a mission that serves the public and social welfare, that its own voluntary members do not profit from its activities. This definition must then also be linked to idea of such an organisation delivering service within the social service industry, where social workers would form a large part of the staff of such an organization.

### **2.5.2 The role/purpose of an NGO**

In defining the characteristics or nature of an NGO, it becomes evident that the nature of these organisations implies a certain role or function within society. The existence of these organisations connotes a tacit obligation to fulfil this function. The final draft of the Integrated Service Delivery Model for Developmental Social Services (Department of Social Development, 2005:53) describes the role of NGOs with regard to their own function within South African welfare, and will be described in the following section.

According to the Integrated Service Delivery Model (Department of Social Development, 2005:53), NGOs involved in social services delivery, must fulfil several roles. The first of these is working alongside government to render services to the public. This includes the rendering of both generic and specialised services. NGOs must also identify service needs within the realm of social welfare and set their own priorities accordingly. NGOs are also required to take an active part in lobbying and advocacy on the part of their client system. Additionally, NGOs are required to effectively market themselves, as well as take part in the raising of funds for the rendering of services to the public. NGOs must also take part in research with the aim of better understanding their client, as well as supervise their own personnel effectively. Lastly, these organisations should also take part in the training of their personnel to better render services, as well as partner themselves with emerging organisations so that the transfer of skills may take place. The implications for newly qualified social workers are that they become functionaries of these NGOs, and must fulfil these roles within their practice.

Whilst many of the tenets of this list are more obvious, such as fund raising, training and research, the most emphasized role or function of NGOs seems to reside in the services they render to the public. To better understand the functionality of the NGO sector in South Africa and by implication the work environment of the newly qualified social worker in this environment, it is necessary that a brief synopsis of these services be highlighted. The Service Delivery Model for Developmental Social Services (Department of Social Development, 2005:31) divides the services rendered by NGOs into five distinct categories.

### **2.5.2.1 Promotion and prevention services**

Promotion and prevention services aim to enhance the capacity of individuals, with regard to how much control they have of factors that impact on their well being. Prevention services aim specifically to address all factors, be they environmental, social and individual, which contribute to problem development. These services are focussed on upliftment of individuals and communities.

### **2.5.2.2 Probation services**

Probation services: These services aim to protect the well being of individuals and families. These services aim to create a nurturing environment for individuals and families where their rights are promoted and their well being is ensured.

### **2.5.2.3 Rehabilitation services**

Rehabilitation services: These services aim at the improvement and maintenance of the functioning of those whose functioning has been impaired due to injury, disability or chronic condition. In addition, these services aim to help individuals maximise their functional ability, whilst minimising the impact of their impairment.

### **2.5.2.4 Continuing care services**

Continuing care services: These services aim to improve the physical, psychological and social wellbeing of those that cannot care for themselves, with the hope of improving their quality of life and independence.

### **2.5.2.5 Mental health and addiction services**

Mental Health and Addiction services: These services aim to provide prevention, treatment and aftercare in the areas of mental health, addiction and family violence

with the intention of providing care and support, so that the individuals affected within these areas can lead optimal lives.

### ***2.5.2.6 Implications for newly qualified social workers***

As a result, newly qualified social workers have a responsibility to deliver these aforementioned services as part of their role as social within social work organisations.

## **2.6 FACETS OF THE LOCAL PUBLIC WELFARE INDUSTRY AND THEIR IMPACT ON NEWLY QUALIFIED SOCIAL WORKERS**

In the following section, the context of the Local public welfare industry will be discussed, with regard to the manner in which it impacts on newly qualified social worker, as well describe how the current atmosphere within this industry contributes to the occupational stress of newly qualified social workers.

### **2.6.1 Vacancies and demand for social workers**

In the 2005 public sector, only 82,1% of national social work positions were filled. This implies that 17% of positions were vacant nationally. Additionally, the Western Cape had only 82,5% of its public positions filled. This again implies that 17% of positions were vacant. In addition to this information, Earle (2008) has also shown that by the end of 2008, there will have been around three hundred and sixty workers that will have left the industry because of retirement (0,5%), death (1,7%) and emigration (1,02%).

The fact that demand for social workers locally is increasing, as the population grows, makes the issue of vacancies one of great concern. The “Survey of Social Work Recruitment and Retention in the Western Cape” (2007), completed by the Department of Social Development, details that within the non-profit sector, 60% of organisations were unable to recruit and retain staff. This is a very high percentage. This survey also shows that the same percentile of organisations have vacancies, waiting to be filled by social workers. Given that these are such high incidences of

vacancies, one would assume that a large amount of marketing would be essential for the retention of workers, but in actuality, these recruitment attempts are often unsuccessful. According to the survey of the Department of Social Development (2007), organisations have very limited response to advertisements of vacant posts. Posts may remain vacant for months, with minimal applications for the post received. This remains testament to the difficulties of recruitment, and the severity of the amount of vacancies currently within the social work sphere. The current surplus of vacant social work posts remains an indication of not only the fact that additional social workers are required within South Africa, but also that many existing social workers do not want to work in these positions because of the stressful nature of social work within NGOs in South Africa. In light of these vacancies, newly qualified social workers do not have a shortage of career opportunities within the social work sphere in South Africa.

### **2.6.2 Funding and salaries**

Earle's (2008:50) work gives a very succinct picture of the current demand for social workers in South Africa, as well as the vacancies that exist within the local sphere. Whilst her work only examines the public social work domain in terms of vacancies, it can be expected that, due to disparities in salaries between governmental and NGO workers, that the vacancies existing within NGOs are even higher. Salaries within NGOs range from between R4000 to R6000 per month, whereas workers within governmental organisations can expect up to R11000 a month in salary. This shows a sharp contrast in what newly qualified social workers can expect to receive in remuneration if they are employed by an NGO, as opposed to their governmental counterparts.

According to the Policy on Financial Awards to Service Providers (Department of Social Development, 2004:24-25), eligibility for government subsidies rests on several factors. An NGO must be registered under the Non-Profit Organisations Act of 1997 as a non-profit organisation, as well as provide services to people or communities that are in line with the Department of Developments criteria. The NGO must also demonstrate that it can use these funds efficiently and effectively, as well as being able to account for the financial awards received by it from the Department

in a manner that is consistent with the precepts of the Public Financial Management Act 1 of 1999.

The funding of NGOs remains a problem within the South African social work sphere. The “Survey of Social Work Recruitment and Retention in the Western Cape” (Department of Social Development, 2007) provides that only 22% of organisations describe their staffing situation as “stable”. Because of a lack of funding from the Department of Social Development, many organisations cannot afford to recruit new staff, even though the positions are required. As a result these organisations cannot ensure job security to their newly qualified social workers, and the afore-mentioned vacancies increase. The disparity in salary between government based workers and those in NGOs result in a constant loss of workers from these NGOs to governmental organisations, as salaries and benefits are better. Higher subsidies for these organisations would mean more workers within their organisations, and indirectly, lower caseloads (Survey of Social Work Recruitment and Retention in the Western Cape, 2007:7).

As a result of the above atmosphere, newly qualified social workers, can expect little job security, in newly attained positions, and in many cases, within NGOs, remuneration that may not be very substantial, in comparison with governmental positions.

### **2.6.3 Retention**

The above mentioned facets of the current social work environment in South Africa indicate that, not only is the demand for social workers very high, but the supply of new workers meeting this demand is inversely low. Within the Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Social workers (Department of Social Development, 2006), various strategies are discussed, with the intention of creating a plan for retaining the services of existing and future social workers in South Africa. In the following section, some of these retention strategies shall be highlighted briefly, with the intention of elucidating the areas in which the current social work sphere can be improved, as well as better explaining the reality for newly qualified social workers in South Africa. It should also be mentioned that the fact the South African Government has

identified the need to make marked changes within the social welfare sphere for the express purpose of retaining these welfare professionals, is testament that there are definite problems within this sphere that need to be addressed.

### ***2.6.3.1 Compensation and remuneration***

Government aims to increase the monetary benefits accruing to social workers, with the intention of creating better job security and job satisfaction. The Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Social workers notes there have been compensation-related insufficiencies in the field of social work, and that these insufficiencies must be addressed. These changes will be made in the form of salaries, benefits, as well as funding to NGOs.

### ***2.6.3.2 Improvement of working conditions***

Noting the growing numbers of social workers taking up contract in countries such as the UK, New Zealand and Australia, the government have turned their attention to retaining their workers. One aspect of importance with regard to this is “working environment”. Working environment is defined by the Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Social workers (Department of Social Development, 2006) as “encompassing such factors as safe and healthy working conditions, future opportunity for continued growth and security, fair and equitable compensation among all employees”. It is noted within the draft, that these healthy working conditions are lacking within South Africa, a fact that bears remedying. This lack of healthy working conditions can be seen as a stressor detrimental to those newly qualified social workers emerging from tertiary institutions to take up positions within this sphere of work.

### ***2.6.3.3 Promotions and career opportunities***

This facet within the draft focuses on the promotions and possible growth for workers within an organisation. The Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Social workers



gives special mention to certain facets of promotion such as an enhancement of individual and organisation skills, improved utilisation of personnel, commitment on the part of the individual to Public Service, the recognition of unique abilities, skills and needs as well as increasing employee loyalty. Whilst considering these merits of promotion within an organisation, the Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Social workers does recognise the fact that the Public service industry is very rigid in structure and therefore, there is little room for vertical promotion, especially within the domain of social work. In this light, the Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Social workers recommends that specialisation within the field of social work may be a solution to the rigidity of promotional opportunities. This rigidity within the field of social work, can also be seen as a potential stressor for newly qualified social workers, entering a profession where promotion and pay increase may not be seen as viable possibilities.

In light of these stipulations, newly qualified social workers have no defined promotions prospects as social workers. This, in itself creates a stagnation in those already new to the occupations, and is a stressor in itself. Newly qualified social workers have to consider specialisation, other posts, or other industries, in the hopes of receiving promotion.

## **2.7 CONCLUSION**

This chapter has examined the nature of South African NGOs, and the newly qualified social workers who deliver services within them. It has been highlighted how the transition to democracy has changed not only the climate in which NGOs themselves exist, but also the local context within which newly qualified social workers must practice. The characteristics of NGOs have been discussed, as well as their role in the South African social welfare context. This chapter has also dealt with the current spectrum of South African social workers, and how the newly qualified social worker fits into the larger social work paradigm. This chapter has also elucidated the reality of social work within South Africa, in terms of the trends currently existent within the local social work sphere and the potential problems these trends represent. Possible methods of retention have also been discussed, with the intention of demonstrating that government has acknowledged the

seriousness of the present undercurrent within the social work sphere. This serves to act as a contextual foundation or basis for following chapters that will aim to identify potential sources of stress for newly qualified social workers, as well as highlight potential coping strategies they may employ to manage their stress. It is with this in mind that a situational analysis of newly qualified social workers perceptions of occupational stress may yield results that could better inform as to how to approach occupational stress in beginner social workers, and thus recommend strategies for the alleviation of that stress.

In the following chapter, the multivariate stressors that newly qualified social workers encounter within practice shall be discussed.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND NEWLY QUALIFIED SOCIAL WORKERS**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

In the context of the newly qualified social worker, there is a large amount of scope for potential occupational stress. In the following chapter, the nature of stress itself will be highlighted, as well as the particular effects this stress may have on newly qualified social workers, both in a physiological sense, as well as in a mental sense. This chapter will also deal with the spectrum of causes and sources of stress, with the intention of highlighting the combination of external and internal factors that give rise to incidences of occupational stress in newly qualified social workers. It is the aim of this chapter to describe stress, highlight its effects, and then retrospectively identify how this stress evolves within the workplace. It is with this framework in mind, that the aetiology of newly qualified social worker perceptions of stress will be elucidated.

#### **3.2 THE DEFINITION OF STRESS**

The phenomenon of “stress” can be defined as the physiological, psychological, emotional and behavioural response to internal and external demands or pressures (Dewe, 1987:490; Van der Merwe, 2004:13). This response to these demands and pressures often evokes a reactionary adaptation by the person experiencing them, as they attempt to move towards a state of equilibrium. Whilst the term stress can and is associated with psychological pressures or demands, scientists use the term to describe anything that leads to the impairment and stability of balance and homeostasis in the body (Van der Merwe, 2004:14). Because individuals differ in the way they perceive things, a situation may appear stressful to one, but simply challenging to another (Ross & Deverell, 2004:302). In this sense, stress can be additionally defined as the psychological and physiological reaction to certain life events or situations (Aamodt, 2004:474; Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Furnham

(2006:355) goes on to add that one must view stress as a symbiosis between stimulus and response, and that in fact these two facets make up the notion of stress as a whole.

Because of a willingness to ascribe objective or subjective meanings to stress, the notion of stress is nonetheless difficult to define. In contrast to the afore mentioned definitions Kinman and Jones (2005:101) point out that perhaps stress must be broken up into the appraisals made of environmental demands, and the resources available to cope with said demands. They go further to state that these demands should be made separate from individual responses to them, when attempting to define "stress". Occupational stress, itself, can be linked to this idea, as it can be defined as a force that pushes a psychological or physiological factor beyond its range of ability, and in doing so creates strain in the individual (Clegg, 2001:102).

### **3.3 THE STRESS REACTION**

Above, stress is described as a reaction or response to internal and external pressures or demands. This can be defined as a stress reaction (Van der Merwe, 2004:24). It is in this way that the body and the mind are affected by these external and internal pressures. In this stress reaction, the senses of the body, such as sight, smell, hearing, touch, taste, and intuition, perceive the triggering stressor, and a message of danger is sent to the limbic centre, pituitary glands and hypothalamus of the brain (Palmer & Dryden, 1995:9). From the brain, hormones and neural messengers are sent into the bloodstream. The body's response to this is to secrete adrenalin, noradrenalin and cortisol from our adrenal glands, and as a result, the major organs, as well as the muscles become prepared for the fight or flight response (McKenna, 2000:597). If we were to be exposed to a perceived external or internal trigger on a daily basis, for extended periods of time, such as in a work environment, our bodies would be reacting to this trigger in much the same way, but for prolonged periods of time, which would have a negative effect on these major organs primed for our fight or flight response (Palmer & Dryden, 1995:1).

Taking definitions of stress into account, as well as its mental and physical implications for the human body and mind, there are certain features or facets of

stress that must be clarified so as to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon. The first facet is that stress can be seen in both a positive and a negative light, as there are a wide variety of things that can be seen as contributing to stress levels, and thus be termed stressors (Fontana, 1994:3). It is only in the inability of the person experiencing these stressors to handle them in an appropriate manner that stress becomes negative. The second facet of stress, and this has been touched upon above, is that it is not the actual events which determine whether one is stressed or not, but rather the manner of the reaction to these events. The earlier definition of stress touched upon the internal and external demands placed upon a person. These demands are placed upon one's capacities. It is in the scope of one's capacities to deal with these demands, that connotes how we respond to these demands, and thus determines whether the stress experienced can be seen in a positive or a negative light (Fontana, 1994:3).

It must be stated at this point that there are no set parameters concerning the amount of demands or capacities involved when examining stress. Demands placed upon the body and mind will vary from situation to situation, as will the capacities present in the person experiencing these demands (Fontana, 1994:3). It may even be reasonably concluded that the same person experiencing the same demands at different times, such as various times in a single year, may respond to this demand differently as their capacities vary from time to time. In this way, stress can be seen as a function of an individual's appraisal of a situation (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:42). People do not necessarily respond to a stimulus the same way because they are, in fact, responding to the meaning they ascribe to the stimulus. This is why people react to these stimuli differently. Thus it is not necessarily the events or conditions in the environment that are in their own essence stressful, but the perception of them by the individual as stressful that induces the stress reaction. This can be referred to as "appraisal" (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:42).

Homeostasis and equilibrium were mentioned earlier. It is when the capacity within one is sufficient to accommodate the demand placed upon one, that equilibrium is maintained and homeostasis achieved. It must be added however that one can never escape from stress. It is an unavoidable facet of life, and it is something that has become a part of our culture, being linked to social status and functioning (Fontana, 1994:4). It is in this light that we must consider the actual sources of stress

and the stressors that culminate in this phenomenon, so as to better understand possible avenues for the coping of stress, and the increase of our capacities to deal with it.

### **3.4 THEORETICAL APPROACHES: SYSTEMS THEORY, THE INTERACTIVE MODEL OF STRESS AND THE P-COMPONENTS OF SOCIAL WORK**

In the following sections, several theoretical approaches will be discussed, with the intention of highlighting a perspective with which to view stress, and the newly qualified social worker as a proponent that experiences this stress. These theories are linked, in that systems theory provides a context whereby several systems in the newly qualified social workers life interact with each other. The interactive model of stress focuses on three of these systems: namely, external pressures/environment, the cognition of the individual, and lastly, the stress reaction of the individual themselves. The P-components of the social paradigm, then contextualise these varying systems into a framework where they can be viewed within the social work sphere. This serves as a theoretical basis underlying the stressors experienced by newly qualified social workers, and the manner in which they experience them.

#### **3.4.1 Systems theory**

Within the ecological perspective, the system's theory postulates that different systems interact with one another in complex ways (Payne, 2005:142-144). The perceptions and experiences of newly qualified social workers can be linked to the different systems that these workers are a part of. The newly qualified social worker is a part of various systems, which overlap and interact with one another, as well as with the worker themselves. These systems all play a role on how and why the newly qualified social worker experiences occupational stress.

### 3.4.2 The interactive model of stress

One of the fundamental tenets of an interactive model of stress, is that environmental stimuli, individual differences in cognitive appraisal, as well as the stress reactions of the individual, must all be viewed simultaneously when considering stress (Furnham, 2006:357; Jones & Fletcher, 1991:444). In this lies a determination to accept that the environment, as well as the individual within that environment are both part of a process of appraisal. It is within this process of appraisal, that stress is experienced. Another important facet of the interactive model of stress, is the notion of support of the individual. Stress occurs when the demands upon the individual are too high, in relation to the support the individual experiences (Storey & Billingham, 2001:661). In light of this model, stress can be thought of as complex interactions between many variables, not merely a causal relationship between one or another. It is with this in mind that the multivariate factors, which may contribute to the experiencing of stress in beginner social workers, shall be highlighted in the following section.

### 3.4.3 The P-components

The P-components were initially developed by Perlman (1957:3), later adapted by Kadushin (1992:142), and then modified by Botha (2002:107) within a supervision context. The P-components is a paradigm whereby the fundamentals of social work practice can be described. Perlman's (1957:3) description of "A *person* with a *problem*, comes to a *place*, where a *professional* representative helps him by a given *process*" is adequate on elucidating the core components of social work. By examining the components of social work, potential stressors faced by newly qualified social workers, can be clustered within these components of place,, person, problems, process and personnel, to better illustrate how stressors can be linked to the role of the newly qualified social worker, and the context in which they be experienced.

### **3.5 SOURCES/CAUSES OF STRESS**

There are various sources or causes of stress, and these stressors have different origins. There are stressors that originate in the world external to our bodies and minds and there are stressors that originate from the internal. Given that an interactive model has been adopted for the sake of examining stress within this study, both those external stimuli and the internal facets and responses of individuals must be taken into consideration when elucidating potential sources of stress. These elements, as well as the levels of support surrounding the individual must be viewed in the same light, so providing a more complete picture of the aetiology of stress in newly qualified social workers. In the following section, the multivariate components of stressors, whether internal or external, shall be discussed. Because many of these stressors are dependent on not only external facets of the environment, but also internal perceptions or appraisals by the individual, they have been clustered within the framework of the P-components (Perlman,1957:3), of social work, so as to highlight the different spheres in which they occur, as well as the fact that they form part of overlapping systems within the newly qualified social workers life.

It is important to note that the following exposition of stressors will not be totally complete, as it would be foolish to claim to discuss all potential stressors experienced by newly qualified social workers. This exposition shall focus on those most often experienced by newly qualified social workers.

#### **3.5.1 Place**

The following section shall focus on the “place” component, and thus concentrate on those stressors, which can be ascribed to the environment encountered within the social work workplace, as well as within the occupation of social work.

##### **3.5.1.1 *The workplace***

There are a variety of ways in which the workplace itself can be a source of stress. The concrete design of the workplace can have a negative impact on workers and over time, contribute to long term occupational stress (Aamodt, 2004:479).



Considering that the newly qualified social worker will spend a great deal of time on reports and written administration that goes hand in hand with their interaction with clients, it can be assumed they will spend a great deal of time within their office or workspace. Bad lighting, as well as an excess of noise in a workspace can be considered sources of stress over time (Furnham, 2006:369). Occupations that require long hours within such workplaces can compound stressors already experienced by workers. Currently, South African social workers will work, on average forty hours a week. When one considers that this is the actual amount of time they spend within their workplace, it is not difficult to identify the association between stress and unsavoury workplace conditions. The productivity of workers also tends to decrease after the forty hour a week mark has passed (Statt, 2004:94).

The workplace conditions within Social work organisations in South Africa are also of a generally poor standard (Earle, 2008:131). There is a consistent lack of resources within social work organisations. These resources are fundamental and intrinsic to the practicing of such a profession. There is a lack of availability to resources such as stationary, office furniture, computer equipment, office space, administrative support, vehicles and supporting institutions. These facts could easily be seen to be instrumental in changing the manner in which beginner workers form a perception of their job, and the expectations they themselves have with regard to their occupational responsibilities. Role conflict and disillusionment aside, it is logical to assume that with current salaries, such a lack of access to resources could easily create an atmosphere of frustration amongst beginner workers, thus increasing anxiety and decreasing the sense of job satisfaction within the workplace.

One must also consider the fact that often the newly qualified social worker shall find their workspace within the community they serve, as they render intervention or protective services to that community. The reality of these communities within South Africa is that they are exceedingly poor, with high levels of crime and may not actually welcome the attentions of social workers (Botha, 2002:198). This other aspect of the newly qualified social workers workplace can also be considered a source of stress.

### **3.5.1.2 *The meaning of work and job satisfaction***

An important dimension of the amount of stress experienced within the workplace is that of the meaning the work has for the individual, as well as the satisfaction they take from it. People for the most part, cannot have a choice in the amount of hours they have to contribute to their job. Despite this, workers have found a certain measure of comfort in their work (Huxley, Evans, Gately, Webber, Mears, Pajak, Kendall, Medina & Katona, 2005:1070). Be it from either disputes or strife in their private lives, individuals use their job as a sanctuary from their alienated private life. In looking for this happiness within their work lives, newly qualified social workers may often alienate their own support systems by focussing entirely on their profession, and giving little attention to their private lives. Long hours, high caseloads and large portions of administration make this a feasible avenue for newly qualified workers to escape.

In addition to this, a sense of community has dissipated within the working world, and competitiveness and self promotion have become more of an accepted culture within this world (Peterson & Gonzalez, 2005:71). Thus, a sphere is being cultivated where people are immersing themselves in a social system where there is little support, long hours and a sense of one-upmanship as a guide to life. The meaning the work has for these individuals does not include a sense of fulfilment. Because of this and the culture of work, alienation and role conflict reduces the meaning of work for newly qualified social workers and so then reduces the satisfaction they feel they have gained from their jobs (Powell, 1994:235). The effects of stressors experienced within the job can be aggravated by this climate within the workplace. The lack of a support system in a newly qualified social worker's private life can accentuate the stressors experienced within the workplace (Statt, 2004:94). This supportive element of one's private life or the lack thereof can have consequences in terms of negative behaviours associated with the experience of occupational stress, such as alcoholism. The lack of such a support system greatly elevates the effects of such stress, as there is no buffer between said stress and the personal life of the individual. A lack of job satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment can lead directly to "depersonalisation", and newly qualified social workers may feel distanced or separated from their own occupation (Powell, 1994:235). These feelings of depersonalisation can help to increase the overall stress levels experienced within

the workplace and decrease the job satisfaction taken from the job by the individual (Coffey, 1999:440).

### **3.5.1.3 Over-load and under-load**

One of the most evident or obviously discernable causes of stress in the workplace is “over-load”. Over-load refers simply to having an inordinate amount of work, with regard to the amount of time available to do it in. Essentially, this simply refers to have an impossibly large workload. Newly qualified social workers who find themselves faced with this conflict in the workplace on a more regular basis will experience higher levels of stress (Statt, 2004:91). High workloads, with minimal time frames for the completion of such loads contributes greatly to the experience of stress in the workplace (Dillenburger, 2004:222). This is confirmed by Noblet (2003:357) who lists overwork, and the lack of time for deadlines, as one of the major external, job related causes of stress. The crux of this situation lies in the fact that it is a decision that must be made by the individual about how to approach their problem. The quantity versus quality dilemma is then a further source of stress (Huxley *et al.*, 2005:1067). Should the professional focus on the quantity of work completed with scan regard for its quality, or should the quality of work be focussed upon, with its quantity being disregarded? These are questions that must be resolved when faced with an over-load situation in the workplace. “Over-stimulation”, another term for over-load, may also incorporate not only a large workload, but also a large amount of data that must be mentally processed. Over stimulation can be linked to diverse physical and mental symptoms for the newly qualified social worker, such as stomach ulcers and skin disorders, as well as an increase in alcohol and cigarette consumption. Over stimulation can also be associated with increased levels of noradrenalin and adrenalin in the bloodstream, hormones linked to the hardening of arteries in the body (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:47). These can all be seen as contributing to the stress experienced by the newly qualified social worker.

Another source of workplace stress for the newly qualified social worker is “under-load”. This refers to a scenario where an individual’s skills or expertise are underutilised. When newly qualified social workers within the workplace feel their abilities are not be tested or utilised to the fullest capacity, they feel that they have to

provide their own means to do this, to feel comfortable within their own workplace (Statt, 2004:91). This is a common occurrence within the workplace as many occupations focus on a very specific skill set, which may, more often than not, only touch on a very small portion of the newly qualified social worker's skill set. This may lead to a certain frustration felt by an individual within the workplace as the newly qualified social worker might not feel duly appreciated for their work (Statt, 2004:91). This lack of appreciation may also deepen the gap between a worker and their organisation, and increase the alienation between the two. Under-load can also be seen as "under stimulation", where the work involved underutilises skills as well as being very repetitive (Kinman & Jones, 2005:110). Apathy, boredom and a decrease in worker motivation are common symptoms of under-stimulation. In an "emergency stress response", a readjustment of attention must be made on the part of the newly qualified social worker, when they realise that they have drifted off, due to repetitive work. The continued shifts involved with repetitive work on a frequent and regular basis can lead to a detrimental effect on health, as there is physiological "wear and tear" involved during these shifts in attention (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:47). This wear and tear can be ascribed to increased heart rate and noradrenalin levels.

#### **3.5.1.4 Remuneration**

Whilst the profession of social work aims to better society by developing, nurturing and rehabilitating those sectors of society that require services, workers focussing their attentions with regard to this, remain employed to do so. Thus the issue of salaries remains a constant consideration when taking on a new job. Beginner workers employed by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) may find the remuneration afforded by these organisations a source of stress rather than alleviation to it. Salaries within NGOs range from between R4000 to R6000 (Earle, 2008:130). A beginner social worker with no previous work experience can expect to receive the lower end of the salary scale. The fact there are no additional benefits such as medical or a car allowance, coupled with the fact that there is very limited scope for promotion and salary increase mean that this is the financial picture beginner social workers must accustom themselves with upon entering their new profession. This low level of income, received after having completed a four year

tertiary degree could certainly aggravate the feelings of disappointment and disillusionment felt by beginner workers upon entering their new profession.

### ***3.5.1.5 Lack of effective management/supervision***

The lack of effective management and supervision can be seen as a potential stressor for newly qualified social workers. According to Botha (2002:200), managers and supervisors who do not actually possess the knowledge and skill to provide, either supervision, or management to social workers, can greatly contribute to the additional stress of those social workers. In this light, management and supervision, two facets of welfare organisations that are intended to provide guidance and certainty, with regard to those under them, then become sources of tension and stress, because they are ineffectively applied, or because they are lacking in some way. Newly qualified social workers, in particular, are vulnerable to a lack of effective management and supervision, because they are inexperienced, and thus require the most guidance and support from those more experienced and senior within their organisations. When this guidance is ineffective or absent, it is these inexperienced workers who may experience the most stress as a result.

## **3.5.2 Person**

The following section will focus in the “person” component, and thus, will concentrate on those stressors that have their origins in the particular individual.

### ***3.5.2.1 Emotional labour***

In occupations where newly qualified social workers have to deal with their service user on a regular basis, another cause of stress in the workplace can be identified. “Emotional labour” is the term that can be ascribed to the particular face or demeanour a worker must present to their service user as they provide or render service. This can be linked to not only the “face” they must wear, but the emotions felt so as to do this convincingly (Statt, 2004:92). This brings to mind the image of

the smiling, ever friendly, ever interested salesman/woman but is true of most service-orientated professions where the service user is directly interacted with. In such situations, the newly qualified social worker must assume a particular role. This “acting” out of a particular role can be stressful for the actor as there are expectations with regards to their clients but also to their own job (De Jonge, Le Blanc, Peeters & Noordam, 2008:1462). This role is that of the person that interacts with the service user, and there is often a discrepancy between the individual that interacts with this service user, and the person behind this who continues to have emotions and thoughts that might not necessarily coincide with the tenets required to fulfil this role. This discrepancy often causes feelings of exhaustion and a lack of motivation on the part of the newly qualified social worker, and this can contribute greatly to perceived stress (Arches, 1991:202; Mirambell, Ivanez & Terol, 2003:520; Pascual, Perez-Hover, Mirambell, Ivanez & Terol, 2003). This emotional exhaustion causes a lack of energy and general weakness (Ogresta, Rusac & Zorec, 2008:265). Thus role conflict also forms part of the emotional labour dilemma (Statt, 2004:92). It is for this reason that newly qualified social workers may feel alienated by their job; because they do not necessarily, as a person coincide with their job persona.

### **3.5.2.2 Language**

Language can also be seen to be a potential source of stress for beginner workers. Within South Africa there are eleven national languages, and a broad spectrum of different cultures behind these languages. Language, within specific situations may act as a barrier to social workers practicing within certain parts of the country, especially those parts that are considered more rural in nature (Earle, 2008:135). Many beginner social workers may not be able to speak a particular language, Zulu for example, associated with a certain region of the country. This might prevent them from taking a job or working successfully within a job where the predominant language of their targets systems are Zulu speaking. Being constrained by a language barrier can be seen as a source of stress for beginner workers as it narrows the options available to them in terms of potential target areas, as well as act as a hamper to successful service delivery once working within an area where the accepted language is not their home tongue.

### **3.5.2.3 Gender**

Another aspect of the South African social work climate, which may be a possible stressor to newly qualified social workers, pertains to “gender”. Whilst this could be considered a contentious issue in an industry dominated by women, there is evidence to suggest that male beginner social workers might be experiencing stressors based on their gender (Earle, 2008:140). There are certain facets of the social work sphere such as community work and administrative work that are considered to be more masculine fields, and others such as intervention with an intention to deliver therapeutic service which are considered to be more feminine. This consensus may hamper the ability of male beginner workers to be involved in more therapeutic realms of social work. This may cause frustration and influence competency issues for male workers who would be more involved in such endeavours as opposed to community work or administration. There is also a homosexual stigma attached to being a male social worker (Earle, 2008:139). In a woman-dominated industry, the client system’s views on sexuality, and their idea of what gender a social worker should be may seriously influence their belief in a beginner worker’s abilities when that worker is male. The fact that homosexuality, especially amongst poorer and more rural communities is a negative one, a stigma of homosexuality attached to male workers could affect those workers’ ability to successfully work within such communities, as well as their own perception of efficacy and competence as a worker.

### **3.5.3 Problem**

The following section will focus on the “problem” component, and will thus concentrate on those stressors that have their origins, or are related to the client population.

#### **3.5.3.1 Lack of understanding and Information**

Within the general public there is a lack of understanding with regard to the amount of resources available to social workers in South Africa, as well what social workers are actually required to do (Earle, 2008:131). Because there are a very limited amount of social workers within a sphere that requires far higher numbers to be effective, workers find themselves having to take part a wide variety of work with little opportunity for specialisation. This then contributes to a workplace environment with very high caseloads, a lack of emotional empathy, increased burnout rates and inefficiency (Earle, 2008:131). These facts all contribute to the stressors felt and experienced by newly qualified social workers just entering the profession.

### ***3.5.3.2 The communities attitude towards the newly qualified social worker***

The attitude of the community can be viewed as a potential source of stress for the newly qualified social worker (Botha, 2002:198). Some communities may view newly qualified social workers as interfering or controlling, in their attempts to bring about positive change within said community. Because there is this sense of not only distrust, as well as a lack of confidence in the workers ability to provide a positive influence within these communities, the newly qualified social worker may find that the community is unwilling to assist them in delivering service. This can become very stressful for the newly qualified social worker as it may hamper attempts to deliver services in the best interests of the communities, as well as create an unproductive relationship between members of the community and the worker, thus making it even more difficult to address the problems within these communities.

Linked to this are the contemporary problems of those communities themselves, such as poverty, crime, child abuse, rape, unemployment and crime, which may be seen as potential sources of stress for the newly qualified social worker (Botha, 2002:207). These facets or characteristics of these communities may cause newly qualified social workers anxiety or feelings of stress, as they remain problems that social workers aim to combat and relieve, yet are problems that are societal in nature, and not easily resolved by a single social worker.



### **3.5.4 Process**

The following section will focus on the “process”, and will thus concentrate on those stressors that can be ascribed to getting to grips with the actual social work role, as well as the processes involved in doing so.

#### **3.5.4.1 Role conflict**

“Role conflict” and “role interaction” are directly linked to an individual’s perceptions about their occupation with regard to themselves. The activities that are incorporated into one’s job are a function of the role that person occupies within it (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:43). A role can be seen as the behaviour expected from a certain position or persona. Role ambiguity can be considered a source of stress in the workplace. Newly qualified social worker that do not have a clear notion of what is expected of them, can find that this may lead to tension and anxiety (McKenna, 2000:605). Role ambiguity is more prevalent in occupations where many roles are expected of one occupation. Social work in South Africa is an example of this, where workers have to deal with cases that are vastly different in nature, and thus expect different roles and skills from them. This is especially true of newly qualified social workers, who have to become familiar and acquainted with various roles, such as that of enabler, educator, helper, facilitator, as well as more subtle roles, such as that of supervisee, supervisor and constant administrator to their own professional affairs.

Taking the roles that are expected within the organisation, and impressing these roles on the outside world is also a source of stress and can be linked to the “emotional labour” mentioned earlier. These expectations are “boundary spanning roles” (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:43). Social work often incorporates boundary spanning roles into its expected work practice, as multivariate tasks have to be performed in environments which are constantly in flux, with parties external to the organisation, who in turn have their own role expectations of the worker.

“Multiple role conflict” can also be identified as a source of stress, as people often see themselves not only in light of their professional roles, but also those of their private lives. Often individuals’ occupational roles may compete with those familial roles in their private life (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:44). This can be a source of

tension and anxiety for the newly qualified social worker, as these roles may conflict with one another in a manner that seeks to identify which role should take preference in the newly qualified social worker's life.

#### **3.5.4.2 Uncertainty**

An important source of job related stress is "uncertainty" (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:45). It often underlies many of the stressors outlined thus far. When considering the appraisal individuals make of experiences perceived to be stressful, uncertainty can be considered a core facet of that appraisal concluding in a negative or stressful light (Huxley *et al.*, 2005:1070). The unknown, and fear of the unknown, can contribute greatly to the negative stress experienced by the individual (Aamodt, 2004:477). At the heart of this dilemma, the importance of decision-making becomes apparent. Competent decision-making can reduce the uncertainty felt when appraising a situation or experience. However, because of this fact, decision making itself can become a source of stress (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:44). Decision making stress exists because individuals faced with an imminent decision may become aware of possible gaps in their knowledge or expertise, as well as fixated on the possible negative consequences or repercussion of such a decision (Bergh, 2007:442). This stress in itself may reduce the competency of the individual's decision making. This stress is particularly true of social work. Social workers must make various decisions with regard to intervention or a course of action with regards to clients. Many of these decisions will lay out a plan for service quite comprehensively. There is obviously a certain degree of responsibility then associated with these decisions as they will have a concrete and marked effect on the clients life and future functioning. Thus it is acceptable to assume that there will be a certain amount of stress associated with the making of these decisions.

### ***3.5.4.3 The transition into social work and the workplace***

When beginner workers make the transition into the workplace, they have little knowledge about the practicalities of the job. Many beginner workers may take on jobs with the express intention of “having a job”, merely to satisfy the expected norms of society, as well as their own need for security. However, many of these workers may discover that their particular choice is either above or below their own capacities for social work (Matlhaba, 2001:61). This in itself can lead to various forms of stress reaction, in the sense that they may be disappointed or disillusioned with their new job. In such a period of change and expectation, being disappointed or disillusioned with finding oneself in a position that required such an important decision may be very stressful for a beginner worker who is still in a process of role change and role identification. The worker may not even be able to fully incorporate the role of professional worker into their identity as they are disillusioned by the expectations required of that role.

### ***3.5.4.4 Experiencing loss***

When entering their new profession beginner workers may experience various types of “loss” that may increase stress in their lives, as well as influence or impede their ability to appraise stressful situations within their workplace (Matlhaba, 2001:61). Beginner workers may feel a loss of security. This feeling of not having complete control of one’s life directly influences perceived self control and can be seen as a major source of stress in itself, as well as its ability to erode major appraisal and decision making capabilities. These workers may also experience a loss of competency. This experience influences their perceived self efficacy, their own picture of how they can meet expectations in their workplace. This may also affect the workers appraisal as they encounter other stressors within the workplace and increase the perceived effects of these stressors. Newly qualified social workers may also experience a loss of relationships that they had previously enjoyed or maintained as a student. The transition from study to work may sever the ties previously held, as the practicalities of their job may not allow these relationships to continue. Loss, or lack of a support system has been mentioned earlier as losing that

buffer between the individual and the stress that they encounter in the workplace. Without this buffer, especially in this transitory period, the loss of this buffer may severely aggravate any newly encountered stressor within the workplace. Lastly, newly qualified social workers may experience a loss of their boundaries, be they physical or psychological. This loss of the basic environment that they would have internalised as being “normal” or “familiar”, means that these workers now have to establish new boundaries, in terms of the space they find themselves in and the people they interact with on a day to day basis. This may increase uncertainty within the workplace dramatically, and so increase the other possible stressor such as decision making, competence, and role conflict. Essentially, a profound change in one’s life can be considered extremely stressful, because all perceptions of security are lost, and the new, very unfamiliar environment may seem, to the new worker, as a very hostile and threatening place, one potentially full of stressors (McKenna, 2000:606).

#### **3.5.4.5 *The application of social work theory***

Newly qualified social workers are required to have, at their disposal, a particular skill set, which, to a large extent, includes the theory associated with casework, group work and community work. Essentially this means that they should, through the application of these theories, be able to assist and empower individuals, families, groups and communities and enhance their social functioning and problem solving capacities, as well as help these target groups maintain their social functioning, and help them accomplish tasks, prevent and alleviate distress and use resources effectively (Lombard *et al.*, 2003:9). Newly qualified social workers may experience stress when the application of these theories becomes difficult or impractical. Often, this arises from a lack of concise policy within the organisation, as well as a lack of clear-cut rules, often contained within a manual, on how to approach such situations (Botha, 2002:199). A lack of such guidelines within the organisation can be seen as potentially stressful for newly qualified social workers because there are often multivariate, complex situations that have to be dealt with, and the application of afore-mentioned theory does not always apply to specific situations in the same way.

### **3.5.5 Personnel**

The following section will focus on the “personnel” component, and thus will concentrate on those stressors that arise from expectations a newly qualified social worker may have of themselves as professionals, as well as those of their co-workers.

#### ***3.5.5.1 Responsibility***

The first facet of general workplace stress can be identified as differing levels of “responsibility”. Even within the same occupations, it is evident that professionals that have chosen or whom have been given higher levels of personal responsibility directly related to their job, experience higher levels of stress (Statt, 2004:90). Often people who are in a supervisory position might experience higher amounts of job related stress because they have a responsibility towards those under them (Furnham, 2006:367). This almost implied duty creates a sense of obligation felt by those people in such positions, and this sense of duty or obligation has shown to have a greater effect on the day-to-day stress levels. In this way, additional stress is experienced by the newly qualified social worker because they have to carry the added pressures of obligation to real people instead of things or objects (McKenna, 2000:606).

#### ***3.5.5.2 Generalised self efficacy***

Self-efficacy refers to the belief one has with regard to his/her own competence. Simply put, this refers to how well a person thinks he/she can perform behaviours necessary for a prospective situation (Judge & Bono, 2001:96). Generalised self-efficacy refers to how well a person believes they can perform in terms of a wide variety of situations. As this is a form of self appraisal, it has direct bearing on how an individual will appraise a possible stressor. In this light, a newly qualified social worker will find a possible situation more stressful if they do not believe they have the means to deal with it. Thus, by appraising them-self as unable to perform in the correct manner with regard to a given stressful situation, or one they deem as a

stressor, they increase the amount of stress experienced within the situation or by the stressor (Stetze, Stetze & Bliese, 2006:50). What is also of importance is that, whilst low self efficacy is stressful when challenges present themselves, consistent levels of high self efficacy, on the part of the newly qualified social worker, can also be stressful when considerable challenges and obstacles present themselves in a consistent manner (Liu, Siu & Cooper, 2005:570), as the newly qualified social worker perceives them-self as having the means to handle said challenges, and this may not necessarily be the case.

### **3.5.5.3 Control**

Another facet of work-related stress is the concept of “control”. This concept is related more specifically to the notion of perceived lack of control a person has within their working life. Those, whom are more likely to perceive a greater level of self-control in their workplace, or as having more control in their workplace, experience less stress within the workplace (Statt, 2004:91). Inordinately, those who are employed on large construction lines, more affected by industrial restructuring, as opposed to those who are self employed, would feel as though they had less control over their workplace, thus contributing to increased levels of stress associated with this (Huxley *et al.*, 2005:1067). Thus, workplaces with that demand a great deal will be a great deal more stressful for those newly qualified social workers with lower perceived control (Powell, 1994:235; Searle, Bright & Bochner, 2001:330). Linked to control is “locus of control” (Judge & Bono, 2001:97). Locus of control refers to the beliefs individuals have with regards to the causes of events in their lives. If an individual’s believes that the causes of events are due to luck, destiny, or are under the control of other individuals other than themselves, it is referred to as “external locus of control”. When an individual believes that events and their causes are the express result of their own behaviour it is referred to as “internal locus of control”. Those individuals who have an external locus of control feel that their life is beyond their own control will experience stress more acutely, as they will firstly ascribe a stressful experience as occurring from a source extraneous to themselves, but also that they are helpless to do anything about this source of stress. Those with internal locus of control will appraise a stressor differently in that they might take

responsibility for its occurrence and thus take ownership of the stressful experience as well as understanding that they are not helpless with regard to its occurrence and the manner in which they deal with it. Additionally, when one has high internal locus of control, but suffers from lower levels of self efficacy (described in the previous section), the combination offers higher levels of stress for the newly qualified social worker, as they perceive a greater ownership of the challenge faced, but do not believe they can overcome it (Stetze *et al.*, 2006:51). This combination increases occupational stress experienced by the newly qualified social worker.

#### **3.5.5.4 Personality factors and stress**

Personality plays a large role in the experiencing of stress within the workplace. Individuals with very similar skill sets might choose to place themselves in very different spheres of work, where the pace is different, responsibilities are greater or lesser, where the rewards of the job differ in nature and where the demands on the worker vary in complexity (Statt, 2004:96). This implies that there are differences in individual's personalities, differences which prompt them to seek out or prefer a certain realm or sphere of work. These same differentiations in personality can affect the way they experience, not only their job and the work they do within it, but also the way they experience stress (Caron, Corcoran & Simcoe, 1983:54).

There are several assumptions that can be made with regard to personality (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:61). The first is that although individuals are unique, they also show a consistency in the way that they develop. A child with a lively, bright personality will grow up to be a lively, bright adult. The second is that there are only several demarcated areas where personality in an individual varies. These areas can be identified by assuming that these differences can be observed to be normally distributed. A conventional bell shaped curve would display these differences with regard to the individuals expressing them in a sample (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:62). It is by these assumptions that scientists have been able to identify and map the differences in personality, as well as clarify the main areas in which people differ with regard to personality. Personality can be defined as the "relatively enduring combination of traits which makes an individual unique and at the same time produces consistencies in his thoughts or behaviour" (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:62).

By using “nomothetic” descriptions, where traits are applied universally, standardised assessments of groups of individuals can be made. There are several traits of personality that may have bearing on how an individual experiences work and stress within the workplace (McCrae & Costa, 2003). The following section will focus on personality traits, applicable for newly qualified social workers.

(a) *Extraversion versus introversion*

There are a number of traits that display the differences between introversion and extraversion (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:69). “*Venturesomeness*” means that extraverts are more socially confident, as well as more easily projected within groups, whilst introverts lack this social demeanour. “*Affiliativeness*” refers to the fact that extraverts are more receptive to others in their warmth and friendliness, whilst introverts seem more detached, and even cold to others. This often has bearing on the size of the support system in the individual’s life. “*Energy*” refers to the fact that extraverts would welcome a wide variety of tasks with which to busy themselves, whilst introverts would rather turn their attention to a single task. “*Ascendance*” refers to the fact that extraverts are more willing to stand by their opinions and convictions, and remain assertive within a group, whilst introverts would shy away from this dominant position and remain out of the centre of attention.

These facets of extraversion versus introversion have implications for the experience of stress within the workplace. Extraverts, being more socially confident may find it easier to develop a strong support system, not only in their private lives, but also within their workplaces (Grant & Langan-Fox, 2006:721). This support system would act as a buffer for the stressors they experience at work, and thus increase their efficacy in coping with this stress (Besser & Shackelford, 2007:1335). Introverts on the other hand, might find it more difficult to develop as strong a support system, and thus would lack the mediating effects of this buffer, in terms of the stress they experience. In addition to this, social confidence within the workplace may be instrumental in providing opportunity for promotion and a sense of fulfilment within the workplace. The lack of this due to reduced social confidence on the part of introversion may reduce self-efficacy and the satisfaction taken from the job, thus increasing the tendency to appraise experiences negatively or as stressors.



The fact that extroverts enjoy a wide variety of tasks that challenge their abilities means that these individuals would find more diverse challenging occupations preferable to those less so. Thus, longer hours calling for a higher degree of adaptability would suit extraverts. This, however, can be seen in a negative light when an extravert may find him or herself in a occupation where repetitive tasks and under stimulation occur, as the general day to day workings of their job may be experienced as being stressful. On the other end of the spectrum, introverts may find such an environment fulfilling, in the sense that they can concentrate on single tasks, and avoid the need to adapt regularly. Similarly, an introvert compelled to cope with a wide array of tasks, calling for adaption may find their job much more stressful as a result.

As decision-making has been highlighted before as a manner in which stress can be relieved or heightened, it is none the more evident when examining this in the light of extraversion – introversion. As extraverts tend to remain fixed in their opinions, willing to challenge norms, they might find the decision making process easier to feel confident with, whilst introverts on the other hand might feel an even greater amount of stress associated with making important decisions. This in turn could heighten their sense of a lack of control within their profession, so increasing their experienced stress as a result.

This area of personality trait has particular relevance with regard to the sphere of social work and the newly qualified social worker. In an occupation where there is a need to communicate with many different people, complete and manage a wide variety of different tasks on a day to day basis, remain adaptable within this field of practice and face many instances where important decisions must be made with regard to clients, it is clear that the range of introversion and extraversion existent within a particular newly qualified social worker, would have significant bearing on their own perception of their job, as well as the manner in which they find their job stressful.

(b) *Neuroticism versus stability*

The second personality factor to be considered is neuroticism versus stability. Whilst also being normally distributed, where the majority of newly qualified social workers will fall somewhere near the middle of the two extremes, there are a variety of traits associated with this factor (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:70). The first of these traits is “*anxiety*”, where people with high neuroticism experience higher levels of long and short term anxiety than those with low anxiety. The next trait is “*tenseness*”, which can be linked to anxiety. Neurotics tend to be more tense and irritable more of the time, whereas their colleagues who are more stable show much lower levels of this irritability. “*Self esteem*” means that those suffering neuroticism are less confident within the workplace, as well as having less assurance of the resources inherent in them to cope with problems, whilst the opposite is true of stability. Neuroticism in individuals also lends itself to “*guilt-proneness*”, where there is a tendency to blame themselves more often for failure in and inclination to be more self critical. Those who have a neurotic personality also tend to show low “*emotional control*”, and will lose their tempers more easily in a stressful situation. “*Irrationality*” is also experienced by these personalities, and problems that are minor in nature, often get blown out of proportion, with individuals forming a distorted reality of events. This is not the case regarding the more stable personality. As neurotics tend to experience more “*shyness*” than their stable counterparts, social interaction is a more stress-filled experience, as they attach a certain amount of fear to these interactions.

It is evident to note how this personality factor may have an influence on the manner and amount of stress that is experienced by a newly qualified social worker within the workplace (Chamorro-Premuzie, Ahmetoglu & Furnham, 2008:262). High levels of anxiety are in themselves an indicator of increased stress levels, and for an individual more prone to experiencing anxiety on a regular and prolonged basis, the possible reaction stressors experienced within the workplace would be increased tangibly. Those newly qualified social workers with a more stable personality would react to these potential stressors in a manner which prompted less of a stress reaction (Vearing & Mak, 2007:1752). Linked to this is the irrationality that stems from neuroticism, which would exaggerate each stressor and so exaggerate each stress reaction. This distorted view of the reality of the stressor would contribute significantly to the management of general workplace stress, as the appraisal of

each potential stressor would be biased by a skewed perception of the nature of the stressor (Furnham, 2006:369). More stable personality types would be in a position to more accurately appraise stressors and thus react in more conducive or productive manner.

Neurotic personalities might experience more stress as a result of their low self esteem (Grant & Langan-Fox, 2006:721). Any decision making necessary when appraising stressors, or a potentially stressful experience, would be hampered by the tendency to undervalue their own potential resources with regard to coping and managing said experience. The lack of confident decision making, whilst in itself stressful, could prompt a significant stress reaction because of the uncertainty the individual might feel with regard to how to cope with the stressor. Stable personalities, once again, would be in a more positive position, with regard to actually deciding upon a solution to the presenting stressor, in a manner which might actually provide assurances to the individual about their own coping abilities. The proneness neurotics have towards guilt can be linked to self esteem in the way that they experience stress. Any failure experienced by said individual would be evaluated far more critically than their stable counterparts, and as a result (Furnham, 2006:369), the stress reaction arising from such a failure would be considerably more pronounced. Where a stable personality might be more rational about such a failure, and learn from it in a certain manner, the guilt ridden neurotic might actually alter their own perception of their self esteem as a result of the failure, making them even more self critical as a result.

Neurotics also tend to have low emotional control. This means that they have a tendency to react to stress in a manner that is less controlled than their stable counterparts. Neurotics are more prone to giving up, rather than facing a difficult situation (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:71). This increases the chances of finding positive recourse when faced with a stressful situation. Neurotics might find it immensely taxing to be involved in professions where emotional labour is required, where a specific role must be taken on and presented to the outside world, even if it might not necessarily be an accurate reflection of the true individual. Low emotional control might seriously hamper the individual's ability to reconcile their own emotional state and the state required of them to perform their job. A stable personality type might not be as conflicted about the disparity between their own role

and the role expected of them within their job, as they have greater reign over their emotions, and can thus make a decision to commit themselves to a specific role within their job for the sake of being productive within their occupation.

The propensity neurotics have towards shyness might also increase their potential stressors in the workplace. With unwillingness for social interaction, these individuals might find it more difficult to develop a sure support system, both within their private lives and their workplace. As mentioned earlier, a positive support system acts as buffer for stress, and the lack of this accentuates the effect of stress within the workplace. Neurotics might also find it increasingly stressful in professions where day to day dealings with other systems and individuals is a prerequisite of the job. Unwillingness to interact with others would increase the stress experienced by having to interact with others on a regular basis. The opposite would be true of more stable counterparts, who might not experience this interaction as being stressful.

The application of these traits and their consequences in terms of social work is evident. Positive decision making, regular interaction with others, problem solution and the ability to be confident in one's own ability to perform one's job are necessities within social work. The neurotic newly qualified social worker would encounter many aspects of the profession, which are intrinsic to the performance of the job, highly stressful by their very nature. A more stable newly qualified social worker would not have the same stress reaction to many of the facets intrinsic to the social work profession, and might be more capable of performing their job associated tasks positively.

(c) *Conscientious versus expedient*

The next personality factor that may have an influence on how an individual experiences stress within the workplace is "conscientious versus expedient" (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:72). A newly qualified social worker who scores higher on the conscientious side of the factor will impose a greater sense of obligation on themselves, as well as be more aware of the expectations other people have of them (Grant & Langan-Fox, 2006:721). Those that score lower and are thus more expedient are more individualistic, and have less self imposed standards. They are also less concerned with the rules and regulations around them, and the

expectations people have with regard to these. Conscientious newly qualified social workers will plan more within a workplace environment, and are more concerned with a systematic path to their goals. Expedient newly qualified social workers care less for such an orderly plan, and will take each tack as it comes. These workers tend to deal better with goals or tasks that are not expressly stated, as well as work environments that are more energy filled and unpredictable.

It is quite reasonable to expect that both extremes or types, conscientious and expedient, may find specific types of workplace more stressful. A conscientious type may find a profession that calls for more adaptability and spontaneous decision making far more stressful than an expedient person, who can more readily make these in the moment decisions (Vearing & Mak, 2007:1752). This might not be true in a workplace environment where procedure and regulation govern the day to day tasks within the workplace. A conscientious type would thrive in such an environment, whilst an expedient type would find this stifling, under stimulating and restrictive. Role conflict is a possibility when confronted with these differing workplaces. A conscientious type may feel stressed at the possibility of not living up to the role expectations his/her peers have with regards to their performance. Responsibility can also become a problem, in terms of a conscientious type feeling pressured to perform in a manner which actually conforms to their own standard of work. The same could be true of an expedient type, where colleagues of the individual's role within the workplace have certain expectations, but this individual does not place such a high level of importance on these expectations. Their perceived role may then differ from that expected of them by not only their peers but their seniors. Thus role conflict may occur, and stressors and perceived stressors may increase.

In terms of a social work context, this personality factor has some noteworthy implications. A conscientious newly qualified social worker might find the need for spontaneous decision-making and the adaptability required for changing environments more stressful than an expedient newly qualified social worker. The unpredictable nature of clients within the social work sphere may also serve as a source of stress for conscientious newly qualified social workers as it does not always cultivate an atmosphere where a set plan of action will solve the presenting problem. In many cases action plans must be changed or redirected to cater for a

change in the client system or the client worker relationship. This may serve as a regular source of stress for such a personality type. The expedient newly qualified social worker, on the other hand, might find the administrative and procedural nature of social work under stimulating and restrictive. This might not coincide with their inclination to complete tasks in a spontaneous and independent manner. The fact that supervision also plays an integral role in social work practice may also become a source of stress for expedient personality types, as supervision serves to clarify roles and expectations senior social workers have of subordinates, and these expectations may clash with those self-imposed roles or expectations an expedient may have of themselves and their work. Thus, supervision may bring about role conflict in a person with too much of an expedient personality.

*(d) Open to experience versus closed to experience*

The next personality factor is “open to experience versus closed to experience” (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:73). Within this personality factor, newly qualified social workers that tend to be more open to experience seek out new and more varied experiences, whilst those closed prefer experiences that are more readily identifiable and more familiar to them. Because of this, those more open to experience tend to enjoy new concepts, and the theoretical nature of understanding these new concepts more, they tend to be more artistic and creative in their approach to problem solving (Grant & Langan-Fox, 2006:721). Those more closed to experience will tend to be more focussed on the practical aspects of concepts, and how this can be related to a practical, pragmatic solution to a problem. In the workplace, this can have positive and negative consequences for both types of personality. Newly qualified social workers who are very open to experience may not have a clear, grounded idea of the nature of a problem, as they might view it in a light that is too abstract, and thus, some of the less interesting, but nonetheless important facets of the tasks may be lost on them. Conversely, those that are too closed to experience may make it difficult for them to remove themselves from the problem, and examine possible solutions in a broader, more conceptual light.

Once again, there are implications for these personality factors with regard to social work. One of the predominant essences of social practice is the marrying of social

work theory with the practical nature of applying this theory in practice, with real people and real concrete problems. It is in understanding the crucial elements of theory, necessary to developing a plan of action, and then employing this theory in a practical solution that lies at the core of social work service. Those newly qualified social workers that are too open to experience may find it difficult to come to grips with the practical application of theory in an environment that is mutable and potentially ever changing. An abstract idea with regard to a problem's solution may not necessarily work as it might have in theory, when applied to a practical, concrete situation. These individuals may find the nature of such scenarios very stressful, as it may decrease their self-esteem, their own perception of their competence, and increase their uncertainty as to their own limitations with regard to their workplace role. At the same time, those newly qualified social workers that are too closed to experience may be fixated on the practical concrete problem/situation, that they may find it difficult to incorporate their idea of the problem into an abstract, concept that can be linked to appropriate theoretical solution. The results with regard to competence, self-esteem and uncertainty would be the same.

(e) *Agreeable versus hostile*

The personality factor to be considered can be termed "agreeable versus hostile". This factor has a great deal to do with the manner in which a newly qualified social worker interacts with others (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:74). Those with an agreeable personality type tend to be more cooperative, friendly, good natured and trusting, whilst those with the hostile personality type tend to be more stubborn, headstrong, more easily irritated and less trusting of others. The implications of these differences are marked. A hostile newly qualified social worker need not necessarily be seen in a negative light. These individuals tend to be less likely to be misled by others, and thus are not as easily fooled. They are also more likely to focus on their workplace tasks as a priority, before workplace relationships. They are also more willing to expect the worst of people, and thus are seldom disappointed when let down. This also means they are in a better position to deal with conflict. Those newly qualified social workers with an agreeable personality work effectively within a team. Their agreeableness makes them far more capable of adaptation to a certain situation, as

well as being able to form lasting relationships with peers. In this way it is also easier for them to share expertise, and learn from others (Grant & Langan-Fox, 2006:730).

In terms of stress, it is evident that both of these above-mentioned types have positive and negative aspects with regard to the experiencing of stress. The more hostile newly qualified social worker will find conflict filled situations less stressful than their agreeable counterparts, who may not deal with these situations as effectively. This may have positive or conversely negative implications for self-esteem and efficacy of the individuals involved within these scenarios. Types that are more hostile may find that stress may be aggravated by the lack of a support system, whilst agreeable types stress may be buffered by their willingness to cultivate such support systems. Agreeable types may also find challenging and changing environments less stressful, as their agreeable nature may be more conducive in adapting to handle this change more positively. This lack of adaptability may make such environments more stressful for a hostile type who finds it more difficult to make concessions and adapt.

### **3.6 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter a variety of stressors and potential stressors that may be experienced by newly qualified social workers in the workplace have been discussed. It has been noted that stress is an unavoidable facet of the working environment, as well as everyday life. Whilst this stress may be a positive force, yielding productive and energised work practices, it has been emphasised that the many different forms stress may take within the workplace may have a definitively negative impact on the work related practices of newly qualified social workers, as well as their mental faculties with regard to this work. It has also been shown that the stress reaction may take on many physiological symptoms, which are decidedly negative for newly qualified workers. Appraisal has been highlighted as being instrumental in the manner in which newly qualified workers perceive experiences as being stressful in nature and that an individual's ability to appraise an experience as being stressful connotes the nature of the stress experienced.

Amongst the factors discussed influencing and acting as sources of stress, a wide variety involve the individuals' perception of the workplace and their own identity



within that realm. Self-efficacy, control, uncertainty, competence, responsibility, role conflict, emotional labour, and under and over stimulation are all facets of the individuals appraisal of their place within their occupation, and all of these factors may have an influence on the nature and amount of stress experienced by newly qualified social workers.

The conditions in the workplace itself have also been highlighted as a concrete source of source for newly qualified social workers. The personality of beginner workers has been broken up into a number of different facets with the intention of elucidating how beginner workers with specific personality types may experience greater amounts of stress, due to extremes or combinations of traits. These traits, namely introversion – extraversion, neuroticism – stability, conscientious – expedient, open or closed to experience and agreeable – hostile all form a very specific image of personality within an individual, and it is this picture of personality which connotes how that individual may act or react within the workplace, as well as how they experience stress.

The South African social work sphere has also been discussed with the intent of highlighting how the changing social work environment, the actuality and reality of social work in South Africa and perceptions of social work in South Africa may contribute to the amounts of stress being experienced by newly qualified social workers. These distinctly South African facets have their own place next to the aforementioned sources of stress to create a definitive image of the sources of stress facing beginner social workers in South Africa.

In conclusion, this chapter has highlighted the fact that the causality of experienced stress within the workplace, with specific regard to newly qualified social workers, must be viewed as an amalgamation of different factors, be they external to the workers themselves, or alternatively resident within said workers. All of these external and internal facets give their own particular donation to the amount and nature of the stress experienced, and thus must be viewed as a single transitional process. It is in this light that the coping factors employed by newly qualified social workers should be viewed. In the following chapter, these coping strategies shall be discussed.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **COPING STRATEGIES FOR NEWLY QUALIFIED SOCIAL WORKERS**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

Stress is a part of every individual's life. It is an unavoidable phenomenon that must be managed in a positive manner: one which sees that individual free from the negative effects of stress. It is the aim of this chapter to highlight the coping strategies that may be employed by newly qualified social workers. In this chapter, the cognitive approach to coping with stress will be dealt with within the context of a newly qualified social worker. The cognitive approach can be divided into solution focussed and emotion focussed coping, as well as the activities that go hand in hand with these coping methods. Social support will also be highlighted to describe the buffering effects of social support. The support function of social work supervision will also be elucidated to demonstrate how effective use of supervision, may aid in coping with stress by newly qualified social workers. Concrete coping methods newly qualified social workers can employ will also be discussed in this chapter. These varied facets of the coping processes available to newly qualified social workers have been focussed upon in the coming chapter, as they encompass the cognitive facets of the social worker, the support networks available to them, the resources within their own profession, as well as activities they can immerse themselves in their daily lives.

#### **4.2 DEFINING COPING STRATEGIES**

Coping strategies, employed by individuals for the purposes of dealing with stress can be defined as "any effort, healthy or unhealthy, conscious or unconscious, to prevent, eliminate or weaken stressors, or to tolerate their effects in the least hurtful manner" (Matheny, Aycok, Pugh & Curlette, 1986:509). Within the workplace, coping can be seen as being part of the transaction that takes place between the individual and the environment where that transaction is appraised to be stressful (Dewe, 2000:5). Within this transactional framework, coping can be seen as being an

integral part of the appraisal process. This process reflects the importance of the relationship the individual has with the environment. Coping can be defined as managing demands that have been appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person (Taylor, 2003:219). Coping involves efforts to manage internal and external demands and conflicts on the individual. Coping strategies thus involves a complex process of thoughts and actions on the part of the individual (Dewe, 2000:6).

### **4.3 THE COGNITIVE APPROACH TO COPING**

This cognitive approach to coping with work related stress to coping is based on several premises regarding the individual, the environment and coping. The first of these is that the manner in which the individual copes is dependent on the way in which that individual appraises a situation, whether they evaluate this situation as benign, threatening or challenging (Aldwin, 2007:115). Threatening situations will evoke attempts to solve or ward off the problem, whereas a situation that involves harm or loss will evoke reactions of trying to decrease the negative emotions evoked by the stressor.

The cognitive approach also assumes that the individual is flexible with regard to their coping strategies, and can adapt and modify these strategies as the demands of the stressors change (Aldwin, 2007:115). This implies that coping is not a uniform, static activity, but rather one that changes from person to person, as well as from stressor to stressor, and environment to environment. Folkman and Lazarus' (1984) transactional model of stress divides coping into two distinct categories: solution focussed coping, and emotion focussed coping which will be discuss in the next section.

#### **4.3.1 Solution focussed coping**

The social constructionist perspective of reality highlights that the reality we experience around us, is "invented", and we assimilate and accommodate new knowledge from the environment to invent it (O'Connel, 2001:22). When we

experience new knowledge, we are altered by it, and we adapt accordingly. Because this is a completely subjective process, people adapt and accommodate to experience in unique ways. In light of this, stress can be seen as something which is created by the individual, as they attach meaning to certain emotions, thoughts and behaviours (O'Connel, 2001:22). Thus, when a stressor is "constructed", it challenges the abilities people have to deal with it. If the stress is too great, the construction overwhelms these abilities, and their sense of competence and reliability are undermined. These then need to be renegotiated, in order to accommodate to this stressful experience. With this in mind, problem or solution focussed coping makes use of efforts on the part of the individual to alter or manage conditions that are the source of stress (Gellis, 2002:39). In the following sections, the cognitive process involved in solution focussed coping, with regard to how the newly qualified social worker can make use of it, will be discussed.

#### ***4.3.1.1 The narrative of the problem***

One of the first steps in the solution focuses therapeutic process, is to begin with a "narrative" account of the stressful experience (O'Connel, 2001:24). As the newly qualified social worker gives their own perceptual version of events, they can begin to decipher which version of their story, with regard to the stressful experience, is the more accurate, as there will be several versions or perspectives of events. This process of differentiation, and then integration of a truer, more utilisable narrative, can help the newly qualified social worker form a less subjective perception of the problem (Knight, 2005:155). Through this narrative process, the newly qualified social worker can perceive new options or alternatives with regard to developing an actual solution to the stressor or problem.

#### ***4.3.1.2 Causes of the problem***

The next step in the solution-focussed process is for the newly qualified social worker, to track down, or list, the possible causes or origins of the problem itself. Essentially the "causality" of the problem is discovered (O'Connel, 2001:26). If the newly qualified social worker's specific problem were one with regard to a particular

stressful experience within the workplace, it might be productive for them to list all of the causes of stress within the workplace, so that the causality of the presenting stressor may be better understood, as well as linked to other stressors (Palmer & Dryden, 1995:54). It is important for the newly qualified social worker to focus on the present and the past, in order to better understand the causes of their problem. This can be a positive experience for the newly qualified social worker, as they are free to not only determine the causes of their stress, but possibly locate or identify a path towards a solution without the criticism for the causes of the problem (O'Connell, 2001:28).

#### ***4.3.1.3 Reassessment of self image***

The following step in the solution focussed process has to do with the image newly qualified social workers have of themselves. Within this process, stress can be seen as arising from a disparity in the way they view themselves, and the manner in which they would like to be viewed by others (O'Connell, 2001:29). This illustrates the conflict between their ordinary self and their idealised self. This evokes feelings of guilt, self-blame and anxiety. It is necessary for the newly qualified social worker to be able to bring these two "selves" together. They should begin exploring their inner perception of themselves in relation to their outer world. In this way the newly qualified social worker can begin making links to their own inner perception of themselves and the consequences this perception has on the outer world around them. In this manner, the presenting problem or stressor is given a social or environmental context by the newly qualified social worker. This context can be used to work towards a solution for the problem.

#### ***4.3.1.4 Initiation of change***

One of the predominant facets of solution focussed coping is the element of "change" (Knight, 2005:155). Once the client is in a position where they can locate the causes of stress, and they can place these in a context, with regard to their inner perceptions of these causes, they may begin initiating a process of change (O'Connell, 2001:30). The newly qualified social worker can begin to change facets of

their life with a goal, to correct those elements which contribute to the cause of their stress. These changes must be enduring in nature, so that they do not imply a temporary solution, but rather one that can be incorporated into the newly qualified social worker's life. The worker, him/herself, needs to be able to answer certain questions about the changes they need to make. Why do they need to change? What are the benefits of implementing this change? How will their lives be affected by this change? What period will be necessary for change to take effect? These are all questions that may be helpful in allowing the worker some space to consider positive change in their life.

#### **4.3.1.5 Available choices**

One of the fundamental benefits of this process is the fact that individuals suffering from stress can become aware that they do have choices available to them. Because people are very often driven by specific scripts, attached to certain roles, they perceive they fulfil, they often feel obligated by these scripts, and inundated by a sense of helplessness (O'Connell, 2001:31). The awareness that choices are available, and that these driving scripts can be redefined, opens up new possibilities for the newly qualified social worker (Palmer & Dryden, 1995:55). It is from this realisation, that beginner social workers can begin to better understand how the stress occurred in the first place, and also why it occurred.

#### **4.3.1.6 Progress as a motivating tool**

Making the progress of awareness, reassessment and awareness of choice progress forward, is one of the most important aspects of solution focussed coping. It can encourage the newly qualified social worker to formulate a productive amount of hope and confidence that they can overcome the problem facing them (Tyson, Pongruengphant & Aggarwhal, 2002:458). As progress is experienced by the individual, it can act as a motivator for them to continue making changes. This change can also act as a legitimising factor for the newly qualified social worker, as they can perceive that the process is having definable results, and this too acts to encourage them to further progress.

#### **4.3.1.7 Available resources**

One of the advantages of solution focussed coping, is that the individual suffering from stress becomes more aware of not only the nature of the problem itself, but also the resources available to them for the overcoming of the problem (Knight, 2005:155). When an individual is more aware of available resources, they are in a better position to utilise them. When available resources are more effectively utilised, the disparity between the perceived threat of the stressor and the individual's ability to cope with it decreases. In this way, the newly qualified social worker becomes more aware of the truth behind the perceived stressor, and their ability to cope with it.

#### **4.3.1.8 Cultivating change through skill building**

Solution focused coping also allows the presenting problem to be defined in a manner that is more conducive to changing it in favour of a solution. People tend to perceive their problems, especially those which are considered stressful, to be unchangeable and fixed in nature. The newly qualified social worker must attempt to accept that the problem is changeable and mutable (Pascual *et al.*, 2003:520). They are then in a position to understand that this stressor or problem is temporary in nature and not a permanent fixture in their life. This redefinition and resultant deconstruction of the problem can be facilitated by turning the attention to possible deficits in the individual's skill set (O'Connel, 2001:39). By examining the problem in the light of the skills the individual might be lacking, newly qualified social workers can then be made aware of the areas in which they might make changes and build upon these skills. The acquisition and implementation of these skills can help to overcome or even prevent the problem/stressor. This problem redefinition can also be aided by identifying attempted solutions to the problem that have already failed. Often, people will adopt these failed solution strategies and, in essence, maintain the problem (O'Connel, 2001:39). Because this adoption of failed solution strategies becomes a problem in itself, the newly qualified social worker needs to interrupt this recurring negative pattern, and attempt strategies that are wholly different.

#### **4.3.1.9 Guidelines within solution focussed coping**

There are several guidelines within the solution focussed approach to coping that are important when dealing with stress (O'Connell, 2001:40). The first is that routine is often not conducive to a positive change. Attempting something different with regard to how one perceives their problem, and attempts to change it may have more positive results than remaining stagnant with regard to solution attempts. The second is that if a specific approach to solving the problem does not work, then it should not be repeated. By ending recurrent cycles of failure, new avenues for solution can be opened up for the newly qualified social worker. Conversely, if an approach towards a solution is yielding progress in term of a solution, remain loyal to this approach, because any progress towards a solution is good progress.

#### **4.3.1.10 Advantages of solution focussed coping**

The solution-focussed approach to coping with stress may have several advantages for newly qualified social workers experiencing stress within the workplace (Gellis, 2002:47). Since newly qualified social workers are entering into a transitional period of their lives, where role conflict and uncertainty over expectations are facets of entering a new profession, as well as the fact that there are many potential stressors latent within the profession itself, solution focused coping may be useful in assisting them with the identification of the actual context within which they experience stress. By being able to not only locate the origins and causality of the stress they are experiencing, but also deconstruct the presenting problem, newly qualified social workers can begin to isolate the areas in which change needs to occur within their lives. This also aids newly qualified workers in being able to ascertain the choices available to them with regard to specific solutions in coping with their stress. Another benefit of this approach for newly qualified workers, is that it may help them identify the resources available to them, so strengthening their ability to cope with potential stressors. Astute utilisation of these resources makes it easier for newly qualified workers to close the gap between the perceived stressor and their perceived self efficacy in coping with it. Lastly, this solution-focussed approach can help in dissecting their lives in terms of what is aiding them in coping with stress, and what is hampering their coping abilities. Once they can identify these positive and



negative aspects of their lives with regard to stress, they are in a better position to revise them, and so cut away those that may hamper their coping abilities, and strengthen those that increase their ability to cope with stress (Kitaoka-Higashiguchi, Nakagawa, Morikawa, Ishizaki, Miura, Naruse, Kido & Sukigara, 2003:42).

#### **4.3.2 Emotion focussed coping**

Emotion can be seen to play an integral part of the coping process. On a very animalistic level, emotion serves to protect and provide for the individual in several ways (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991:208). Emotion may act as a motivator or an activator that induces a behavioural response. Fear and anger, in particular, initiate either a protective flight or aggressive confrontational response respectively. Emotion also serves to communicate between animals when it is safe to approach, for example in the case of a predator, and also in the instance of the possibility of mating. This expressive aspect of emotion can also serve to illustrate when help is required, for example in a communal scenario with highly socialised animals. In these ways, it is obvious how emotion plays a role in how the individual interacts with their environment.

According to Folkman and Lazarus (1991:209), emotions can be defined as “complex psycho-physiological reactions, consisting of cognitive appraisals, action responses and patterned somatic reactions”. Within the realm of emotion focussed coping, the individual is faced with a possible stressor experienced within his/her environment, and appraisal takes place. This appraisal of the potential stressor will give the individual a perception of the severity of the perceived stressor. When this appraisal is made, emotion is experienced by the individual, with regard to the stressor. Depending on the severity of said emotion, the individual will attempt to cope with the stressor. Where problem/solution focussed coping looks to changing or altering the environment in response to the stressor, emotion focussed coping involves efforts to regulate or manage stressful emotions by utilising mechanisms that avoid direct contact with sources of stress (Gellis, 2002:39). Emotion-focussed coping can be seen as having negative and positive elements with which the newly qualified social worker may make use of consciously or unconsciously, in the hopes of reducing or combating stress. In this vein of attempting to manage the

experienced distress, several forms of emotion focussed coping become evident. These can be split up into two main groups: those that deploy attention away from or towards the stressor, and those that attempt to change the meaning of the transaction with the environment (Gellis, 2002:39) which will now be discussed.

#### **4.3.2.1 Strategies to turn attention away from the stressor**

Within the first group, where attention is deployed towards or away from the stressor, the first category of emotion focussed coping are the “avoidant” coping strategies. The first coping mechanism within this strategy is avoidance (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991:215). Avoidance is one of the most common forms of emotion focussed coping. Through avoidance, newly qualified social workers attempt to separate themselves from the source of the distress (Gellis, 2002:39). Attempts to do so may include taking vacations or taking up hobbies. These attempts serve to reduce distressed emotion and improve their emotional state (Kitaoka-Higashiguchi *et al.*, 2003:42). Another sub-category of avoidant coping strategies is “escape-avoidance” (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991:210). By employing escape-avoidance, newly qualified social workers attempt to escape from their stress through efforts such as wishful thinking, recreational drugs, medication, smoking and drinking. Although this form of coping may provide the individual with a short lived solution or respite from the stress, these tactics are often associated with ongoing anxiety or depression, and do not prove to be successful in the long run (Tyson *et al.*, 2002:456).

#### **4.3.2.2 Strategies to turn attention towards the stressor**

Where attention is directed toward the stressor, the next emotion based coping method can be found. “Vigilance” is an attempt by the newly qualified social worker to direct their attention towards the offending stressor in an attempt to prevent or control it (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991:210). Vigilance can include seeking help from others about the problem, as well as formulating a plan to deal with the problem. This can be a positive coping method in the sense that it can provide the newly qualified social worker with a greater understanding of the stressor itself, and thus a greater sense of control over it. Vigilance, can, however, also have negative

ramifications for the individual as it may intensify the emotional distress related to the problem by elucidating the true severity of it for the individual.

#### ***4.3.2.3 Strategies aiming to change the meaning ascribed to Interaction with the environment***

The second group of emotion focussed coping strategies aims at attempting to change the meaning ascribed to the transaction with the environment. The first category of these types of strategies is “distancing” (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991:217). Through distancing, the newly qualified social worker acknowledges the stressful problem, but does not attempt to deal with its emotional significance. In this way, distancing can be useful in aiding people in times of severe emotional crisis. Distancing can be used as a tool in situations where there are no real options but experience the distress, such as a waiting period associated with hearing the results of a test. Distancing can help newly qualified social workers function whilst experiencing stress that cannot be changed or altered (Gueritault-Chalvin, Kalichman, Demi & Peterson, 2000:158). Distancing is, however, only as powerful as the distortion of reality experienced by the individual. The environment may serve to remind the newly qualified social worker of the significance of the stressful encounter, and reintegrate this stress into the individual’s frame of reference.

Another category of emotion focussed coping within this realm is “positive reappraisal” (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991:218). Positive reappraisal is used to create positive meaning from stressful results that have already occurred. This form of coping can help newly qualified social workers come to terms with life events that are perceived to be very severe or crisis causing. Whilst positive reappraisal can generate positive emotions such as satisfaction or pride, it can also reduce the negative effects of emotions such as fear, anger and sadness (Gellis, 2002:47).

#### ***4.3.2.4 Advantages and disadvantages of emotion focussed coping***

In the light of newly qualified social workers, and the effect these emotion-focussed strategies may have with regard to the stress they experience, it must be stated that

there are positive and negative aspects to employing these strategies. Many of the stressors experienced by newly qualified social workers, such as large workload, bad working conditions and the emotionally taxing effect the client system's problems are stressors that are not likely to change over a brief period of time. Thus, coping strategies such as avoidance and distancing may not be as useful in dealing with stress, as the existence of these stressors remains the same, and drawing attention away from them does not solve any problems. Tactics, however, such as vigilance might provide newly qualified social workers with a better understanding of said stressors, and enable them to form plans of action to begin managing them. This being said, certain stressors, such as a lack of experience on the part of the newly qualified social worker may be alleviated by strategies such as avoidance and distancing, since a lack of experience is something that will inevitably change over time, as the workers becomes accustomed to the rigours of their job, and in this instance these tactics can allow them room to cope and function more effectively (Gueritault-Chalvin *et al.*, 2000:151).

### **4.3.3 Social support**

Social support is an intrinsic part of coping and dealing with stress. Taylor (2003:235) defines social support as "information from others that one is loved and cared for, esteemed and valued, and part of a network of communication and mutual obligations from parents, a spouse or lover, other relatives and friends, social and community contacts, or even a devoted pet". Individuals with higher levels of social support may more experience less stress, as well as cope with experienced stress more effectively (Himle, Jayaratne & Thyness, 1989:19; Stetze *et al.*, 2006:50).

#### **4.3.3.1 Forms of social support**

There are several forms of social support (Taylor, 2003:235). The first strategy to be discussed is appraisal support. Appraisal support involves assisting an individual to understand a particular stressor, as well as highlighting what resources and coping strategies may be employed or utilised to deal with it. Through this sharing of appraisals, people can more effectively determine how threatening a stressor is, and

can utilise suggestions to better cope with it (Himle *et al.*, 1989:19; Hulbert & Morrison, 2006:247).

The second norm of social support, “tangible assistance”, refers to the actual provision of more material support, such as financial assistance, services or goods (Taylor, 2003:236). There are many instances where this form of support can have very positive effects, with regard to coping with experienced stress. A death in the family, or a sudden illness may cripple the newly qualified social worker financially, and in this case, tangible support can greatly alleviate the stress this individual may face. “Informational support”, is another form of social support. Newly qualified social workers may be faced with a specific situation within the workplace that is unfamiliar to them, and thus a stressful problem to deal with. Co-workers might provide that individual with information as to how to go about dealing with said problem, and thus potentially lessening the stress experienced by the new worker (Himle *et al.*, 1989:19; Storey & Billingham, 2001:661).

Lastly, “emotional support” can be given to people in times of stress. Since sadness, depression and loss of self-esteem often go hand in hand with regular stressful situations, the provision of emotional support can assure the individual that they are indeed care for and valued, thus helping to assure them of their value in times of stress (Chu, Lee & Hsu, 2006, 497; Himle *et al.*, 1989:19).

#### **4.3.3.2 The effects of social support**

The effects of social support on stress are multivariate (Noblet, 2003:356). Firstly, social support can have a marked effect on psychological distress. Symptoms of stress such as depression and anxiety can be greatly reduced by social support (Marriage & Marriage, 2005:117). Conversely, because social support can act in such a positive manner, with regard to reducing psychological distress, its absence can be felt (Huxley *et al.*, 2005:1075). The lack of social support can in itself be stressful for individuals, particularly those going through life altering events, such as beginner workers entering the workplace for the first time.

Social support can also have a marked effect on the actual physiological and neuro-endocrine responses the body may have to stress. It has been consistently found

that sympathetic and HPA responses to stress are lower when a supportive companion accompanies a person having their stress responses tested (Taylor, 2003:237). The same research has shown that when that supportive person is in fact a friend, as opposed to a stranger, the effects on the stress response are even more pronounced. In this way, newly qualified social workers can limit the physiological effects of occupational stress by cultivating a strong support network.

When considering how social support actually helps to moderate the stress experienced by newly qualified social workers, there are two hypotheses to consider (Jenkins & Elliot, 2004:623). The “direct effects” hypothesis maintains that social support has a positive effect on the individual during times of non-stress, as well as periods when stress is actually experienced. Inverse to this is the “buffering hypothesis, which elucidates the fact that the mental and physical benefits accruing from social support are most obviously evident only in times of high stress. This implies that social support creates a reserve of resources with which the individual can buffer the effects of stress, and also enables them to cope more effectively with it (Storey & Billingham, 2001:667). Taylor (2003:240) presents evidence to suggest that when individuals identify their social integration network, i.e. the friends and support systems they have, the direct effects of social support are more prevalent, whereas, when this is assessed more qualitatively, in the sense that the individual has to identify the degree to which there are available people around them to support them, the buffering effects of social support are more prevalent. Thus, in being actively aware of the network of support around them, the newly qualified social worker can increase the beneficial effects of social support.

#### ***4.3.3.3 The effectiveness of social support***

Social support and its effectiveness at relieving stress, is dependant on how competently a person can make use of their support system (Dillenburger, 2004:223). Individuals with better social skills, who are more adept at self-disclosure with others and suffered from lower levels of social anxiety will more effectively make use of their support systems. Because these people find it easier to form lasting, more meaningful relationships, they are more likely to feel that they are able to turn to these relationships in times of stress. Connected to this is the idea that very close

relationships, such as a spouse or partner, or one or two very close friends, can provide the most effective social support (Taylor, 2003:240). Conversely, too much social support that is more intrusive in nature, and through this more directive and controlling may actually accentuate the effects of perceived stress.

Because individuals are complex and unique, and stress may come in many different forms, and also be perceived and appraised in many different ways, the social support that will be most effective in helping to alleviate this stress, will have to subscribe to that particular stressor in a particular manner. Because of this, newly qualified social workers who require support must be able to ascertain what type of social support will benefit them the most, and communicate this to those support systems around them (Taylor, 2003:231). The obvious mirror to this notion is that it is also important for those individuals who comprise these support systems to empathise with the newly qualified social worker going through stressful experiences and decide on how they may best provide support to suit that person's needs. This "matching hypothesis" goes on to suggest that the potential a support system has to provide a buffering effect on stress, is dependent on the needs of the person experiencing stress, and how these needs are provided for by the actual resources available within their support systems.

In light of this, it is also important to note that social support is more effective when the right type of support is provided or given by the right type of person within the support system. Different types of support may be more valued, if they are perceived to be given from a particular type of person within the support system, as certain people within that system have unique abilities to assist with stress within certain dimensions (Taylor, 2003:241). The newly qualified social worker may feel a more positive benefit from emotional support if that is provided by a close or intimate person in their life. At the same time, more objective, less emotional advice may be more constructive in relieving stress if it is being given by a less intimate "expert". A newly qualified social worker may feel less reassured if a stranger attempts to provide emotional support to them, or conversely, an intimate person providing objective advice. This simply illustrates that the correct form of support should be provided by the correct person within the support system.

#### **4.4 UTILISING THE SUPPORT FUNCTION OF SUPERVISION**

In the afore mentioned sections, the support networks available to the newly qualified social worker, and their benefits, have been discussed. In the following section, the support function of supervision shall be discussed, as it too, is a resource to be utilised by the newly qualified social worker to help alleviate occupational stress. In the following sections, the various facets of the support function of supervision shall be highlighted with reference to the manner in which the newly qualified social worker may benefit from them.

Every newly qualified social worker will be allocated a supervisor, and thus receive supervision at regular intervals during their practice. Because there are a wide variety of stressors within the social workplace, often both social worker and supervisor will be confronted by stressful situations that present themselves. Because supervisors work in conjunction with social workers on a regular basis, it is often the duty of these supervisors to diffuse stressful situations encountered by those workers (Botha, 2002:196) In this manner the newly qualified social worker can turn to their supervisor as a means of support. By cultivating an atmosphere where the worker can turn to the supervisor for support, an interdependent relationship can be formed where the newly qualified social workers can not only learn from their supervisors, but also feel as though they may approach their supervisors with work related stress, with the intention of alleviating the problem (Quario, 2002:24). If a supervisor can apply the supportive function of supervision effectively, it can alleviate tension on the part of the worker that can result from the demands placed on them by the administrative and educational functions of social work (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002:217). This support can improve the way a newly qualified social worker performs their work related tasks, delivers services, and develops insight terms of their role as a social worker.

##### **4.4.1 Support to relieve stress**

There are a variety of ways in which the support function of supervision may act as a mechanism whereby the stress or tension experienced by the newly qualified social worker may be lessened or alleviated. In the following sections, various facets of the



support function of supervision will be elucidated, and how it may help newly qualified social workers alleviate occupational stress.

#### ***4.4.1.1 Climate of the supervisory relationship***

By implementing the supportive function of supervision effectively, a supervisor can cultivate an atmosphere or climate, whereby the beginner worker feels at ease (Botha, 2002:210). This climate can be one where the worker feels that they can trust their supervisor, and in this manner, feel as though can share their concerns and problems. Essentially a climate of trust can be developed, where the newly qualified social worker accepts that they may bring their worries to their supervisor, with the intention of working through them, accepting that the supervisor wants to be able to help them with these problems (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002:231) This climate of trust can also incorporate a sharing and acceptance of responsibilities (Botha, 2002:210). With the demarcation of shared responsibilities, this climate can ensure the newly qualified social worker understands their own expectations of their role as social worker, and enables them to take ownership of that role, as well as the responsibilities that go hand in hand with that role (Jordan, 2006:49). This can positively influence the manner in which newly qualified social workers evaluate stressful situations, as well as the decision making process they must attend to in doing so, as their responsibilities are clear (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002:218). This may also lessen elements of uncertainty and role conflict a newly qualified social worker may be experiencing. The creation of such a positive climate between worker and supervisor can also promote the working environment of the worker (Quario, 2002:34). Complaints with regard to the working environment such as a lack of office space, may be brought to the supervisors attention, and they, within the scope of the organisation's limits, may facilitate positive change in the newly qualified social workers environment (Botha, 2002:211). This can greatly reduce the feeling of helplessness that may be experienced by newly qualified social workers who are disappointed or disillusioned by their working conditions, as they do have an avenue of recourse, where they can express their frustrations, and where positive change may be facilitated by this exchange (Brink, 2002:52).

#### **4.4.1.2 Using the supervisor as role model**

There are also a variety of specific activities that can provide the easing of tension and lessening of stress. The newly qualified social worker can view their supervisor's behaviour and conduct as an example to follow, in terms of their own work (Botha, 2002:212). The manner in which the supervisor deals with clients, as well as their general conduct with regard to office candour can have a very positive influence on newly qualified social workers, as it can illustrate to them how they should behave with clients as well as within the workplace (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002:238). This is positive for the newly qualified social worker as it elucidates the expectations colleagues might have of them, with regard to their professional behaviour. It can also transform the expectations newly qualified social workers themselves have of how they should behave. All of this serves to eliminate uncertainty on the part of workers, and define the roles that they feel they must take on. It helps to build a foundation upon which newly qualified social workers may develop their own professional identity, as well as increase self efficacy with regard to interaction with the client system.

#### **4.4.1.3 Reassurance**

Supervisors may also help the newly qualified social worker to understand that it is normal to feel overwhelmed when dealing with clients for the first time, and that their relationship is a good playing field in which to voice concerns regarding ability to interact and deal with clients (Botha, 2002:212). The newly qualified social worker can approach their supervisor to gain greater insight as to the realm of common problems associated with dealing with clients, and in this way cultivate a relationship where their concerns with regards to client dealings can be voiced and shared with their supervisor. In the same vein, the supervisor can encourage the worker by voicing their trust in their ability, and making it evident that they are prepared to assist them with their problems, as well as their learning curve (Dill, 2007:179). This can greatly reduce the fears newly qualified social workers have of dealing with clients, as well as their reservations about their own ability to perform their job adequately. In addition to this, the competence a worker feels that they have with regard to performing these tasks is boosted. The willingness a newly qualified social

worker displays in turning to their supervisor for assistance shows that they trust their supervisor's judgment, and are willing to accept help from them, as well as learn. This will also have a positive effect on how a newly qualified social worker approaches a stressful situation, as they now have a support system they know they can turn to. This acts as a buffer to stress.

#### **4.4.1.4 Learning**

The newly qualified social worker is also in a position to approach their supervisor with the intention of learning how to handle stressful situations, as well as how to deal with stress (Botha, 2002:212). The newly qualified social worker and the supervisor can determine guidelines for managing a stressful situation, whereby the newly qualified social worker is in a position to apply them when faced with a difficult situation (Engelbrecht, 1995:75). A supervisor can also remove a particularly stressful case from a beginner worker, so that recovery and reflection may be utilised to better understand the case. In this way the newly qualified social worker is able to learn from experience, and thus develop their own methods for dealing with stressful situations.

#### **4.4.1.5 Praise**

Supervisors can relieve stress by praising the newly qualified social worker for any progress that they have made (Botha, 2002:212). The supervisor can also extend the appreciation of the organisation to the newly qualified social worker, This all serves to increase the self image the worker has of himself, as well their perceived competence (Engelbrecht, 1995:77). Praise also reduces the alienation the newly qualified social worker might feel towards the organization and the working environment. Such praise can also give meaning to the work a newly qualified social worker is involved with, and in this way increase the fulfilment and job satisfaction they experience within the workplace.

#### **4.4.1.6 Role clarification**

Newly qualified social workers can reduce the stress experienced because of role conflict by receiving positive and negative feedback, from their supervisor, on their behaviour and performance (Botha, 2002:212). This will illustrate to the worker in which areas they need to improve, and in which areas they have done well. It will also set a standard of expectation for their behaviour and the role they must fulfil as a social worker. This can help to reduce uncertainty on the part of the newly qualified social worker as well as develop their sense of competence.

#### **4.4.1.7 Organisational clarity**

The newly qualified social worker may reduce their stress by approaching their supervisor and obtaining greater clarity with regard to the procedures, regulations and policies that go hand in hand with administrative work within the social work organisation (Botha, 2002:213). This might include covering the necessity of specific tasks, as well as displaying the proper use of channels of communication within the organisation (Engelbrecht, 1995:76). All of these measures helps the newly qualified social worker to perform their tasks properly and will also serve to alleviate any confusion on the part of the newly qualified social worker, as to what is expected of them, and how best to manage their work in a manner that is up to the organizations standards (Quario, 2002:32).

The organisation can also play a part in reducing the anxiety experienced by newly qualified social workers (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002:240). This can be achieved by taking into consideration the working conditions, financial remuneration, the role conflict experienced by the worker, as well as the potential the worker might have for future promotion (Botha, 2002:213). This can help to redefine the newly qualified social workers' job in a manner which greatly reduces stress, as well as cultivate a loyalty from the worker, as they are given a place and an identity that is recognised and validated, within the organisation.

#### **4.4.1.8 Handling of cases and case-load**

The newly qualified social worker may express a desire for their caseload and the amount of work they currently attend to, to be monitored closely by their supervisor (Botha, 2002:213). By helping the newly qualified social worker manage their case load, the supervisor can reduce the anxiety, tension efficacy issues that might plague a newly qualified social worker with a large caseload. Linked to this, is the idea that the supervisors control over newly qualified social workers cases can extend to the type of cases they receive. Supervisors can give them cases that are easily resolved by the newly qualified social worker, as well as cases that cannot be so easily resolved. By giving the supervisor an active role in the nature and scope of their caseload, the newly qualified worker can become more acquainted with the reality of case work, and that some cases cannot be resolved by the worker involved with them. This can aid the newly qualified social worker in establishing more realistic expectations for themselves, in terms of how they see their performance within their job. This balancing of cases can ensure that failure to resolve a case does not decrease the perceived self efficacy of the worker, and that they understand the true nature of their work. Linked to this idea is the fact that the supervisor can teach the newly qualified social worker to be tolerant and patient with regard to intervention, and that the work itself can be frustrating and difficult (Botha, 2002:214). This serves to educate the worker on the certainties of their job, and they can gain acceptance from learning these facts. This promotes greater job satisfaction and also increases self esteem, as failure is not taken to be so completely personally linked to the worker but possibly the case itself.

#### **4.4.1.9 Keeping abreast of new developments**

The newly qualified social worker can utilise their relationship with their supervisor to keep abreast of any new developments in the field of social work (Botha, 2002:214). In doing this, the supervisor exposes the worker to new sources of knowledge, thus increasing their skill bases and the resources available to the worker whilst working on intervention. This will help the newly qualified social worker to become more independent, as well as increase their sense of confidence and competence with regard to their work. In conjunction to the introduction of new knowledge to the

worker, the supervisor can also assist the worker in the decision making process, and the utilisation of these new skills. As mentioned in Chapter 2, decision-making can be a highly stressful component of the job. If newly qualified social workers can turn to their supervisors for help in the decision making process, they can alleviate some of the stress and uncertainty associated with decision making. This can also reduce the feelings of guilt associated with decisions are not successful, and thus reduce the effect of this guilt on the workers perceived self efficacy (Botha, 2002:214).

#### ***4.4.1.10 Conflict resolution***

By creating a climate of warmth and trust with the supervisor, the newly qualified social worker is in a position to alleviate tension and anxiety that may arise from conflict within the workplace (Botha, 2002:214). This conflict, whether it arises due to differences in age, gender, experience or ideology, can be discussed within the supervision environment. The supervisor is in a position to help resolve this conflict by discussing aspects of it with the worker, and possibly introducing the newly qualified social worker to other views regarding the conflict (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002:231). These new perspectives may help the newly qualified social worker to better understand their conflict and thus find solutions that might ease this conflict. The supervisor can also provide regular and informative feedback on their performance. By providing positive and negative feedback, the supervisor can help the worker realise the areas in which they need to improve, as well as recognise the areas in which they have excelled. This also has a positive influence on the newly qualified social workers self esteem and self efficacy.

#### ***4.4.1.11 Teambuilding and co-operative work***

The community's attitude towards social workers, especially those that are new to the organisation, and have not become familiar within their target area can be a stressful experience for a newly qualified social worker (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002:242). The newly qualified social worker can work together with their supervisor to help diffuse the stress reaction by activating the potential for teamwork, and

interdependence of the workers in the organisation (Botha, 2002:215). This emphasis on joint projects and the importance of teamwork and team-building can raise moral of workers, as well as introduce newly qualified social workers to the resources available to them within the organisation and their peers. This increase in resources and morale can greatly reduce the tension experienced by newly qualified social workers as introduces the strengthening of peer relationships as well as giving new workers a wider pool of resources from which to work.

Whilst the creation of teambuilding and an environment where cooperative work is conducive to the relieving of stress, this transition can also be a stressful change. With the increased interaction with peers, and the potential for difference of opinion and differing views on the best course of action, a certain amount of tension may be experienced by the newly qualified social worker having to connect and interact with their colleagues on a more regular basis. The newly qualified social worker, working in conjunction with their supervisor can, however, create a system of interdependence where peers on reliant on each other, rather than in competition with each other (Nye, 2006:96). This climate of interdependence allows workers to work with one another, but also grants each worker a certain amount of independence and freedom with their own tasks (Botha, 2002:214). This cultivation of interdependence within supervision can also be augmented by increasing the morale of the group by praising them for good work, and highlighting their strengths.

The latent benefit that positive team building has for the newly qualified social worker is that within a cooperative climate with high moral, it is also easier to form lasting and meaningful relationships with their peers. When the newly qualified social worker can form these bonds within their workplace, it has various benefits for the reduction of experienced stress. A support system is formed around the newly qualified social worker, of individuals who share similar goals and problems. Stress can be shared with this support system, as each part of the system will have their own similar problems. This support system can act as a buffer between the stress and the newly qualified social worker. A meaningful support system within the workplace can also give meaning to the beginner social workers job, and dramatically increase their sense of job satisfaction. This in turn, helps to alleviate other, more day to day stressors, such as large workloads and long hours, as the satisfaction obtained by a

meaningful and enjoyable workday can outweigh the more regular stressors encountered within that day (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002).

## **4.5 CONCRETE ACTIVITIES OR TECHNIQUES IN COPING WITH STRESS**

There are a variety of techniques and activities that can be employed by newly qualified social workers to aid them in reducing or preventing stress. Many of these are perspectives or outlooks on life, and others are concrete tasks that can alleviate or prevent the effects of stress. In the following section, these tasks and perspectives will be discussed, to highlight their benefit to newly qualified social workers employing them to cope with occupational stress.

### **4.5.1 Acceptance**

Honest appraisal, the acceptance and expression of emotion can be seen to alleviate stress (Kastram, 1999:346). Because negative emotions such as anger are often repressed within interactions, such emotions can lead to internalised frustration and depression. Recognition of such emotion can be a healthy way to avoid a build up of anxiety and tension. The expression of such emotion can help to empower newly qualified social workers who feel helpless within their workplace, and give them increased self efficacy and confidence. The expression of these emotions does not have to be viewed as demonstrating a lack of control, as they can aid beginner workers in making sense of their realities.

The acceptance of failure and frustration can be seen as reducing feelings of shame and guilt within the workplace (Kastram, 1999:346). Whilst there is a tendency to focus on the acquisition of new knowledge, and the gaining of skill, there is also a lack of attention directed at the realities of everyday social work, and the facets of which that may be less pleasing. Acceptance of these realities can equip beginner workers to better deal with failure, which is a normal part of social work practice. This acceptance can help prevent the effects of failure, and work to protect the self efficacy, sense of competence and self esteem of beginner workers.



### **4.5.2 Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is also a relevant practice within the field of social work. Given that social workers, especially newly qualified social workers perceive a certain responsibility towards their client system and the problems encountered within that system, it is important for workers to forgive themselves for not being able to resolve everyone's problems (Kastram, 1999:347). This enables workers to accept the facets of life that they often surround themselves with, and aids them in being able to use their sense of responsibility in a positive way, rather than a manner which adds to the amount of stress they experience.

### **4.5.3 Lifestyle**

Whilst seemingly more obvious, eating and living healthily can dramatically decrease the effects of stress on the social worker (Kastram, 1999:347). A balanced nutritious diet can restore energy to workers suffering from high workloads, and also help to prevent illness, which only contributes to stressors already present within the workplace (Furnham, 2006:373). Regular exercise and sport can have a positive effect on the newly qualified social workers morale, as well as their self esteem and sense of competence (Kaye & Fortune, 2001:32). Exercise also has the benefit of producing endorphins, or pleasure hormones, which can lift and brighten the mood of the newly qualified social worker.

The airing of stress management skills and professional support can also be seen as healthy pursuits in aid of reducing stress levels of the beginner worker (Kastram, 1999:347). Newly qualified social workers should focus on acquiring management skills such as filtering the tasks the worker chooses to take on, so reducing their load. Workers can also learn how to control their normal responses to stress, so inserting a break in the stress reaction cycle, and allowing them new possibilities in terms of how to react to stress (Aamodt, 2004:485). Workers can also stabilise change in their lives, by maintaining patterns of behaviour that have proved to be healthy and conducive to feeling in control of themselves, and well as facilitating calm. Humour can also be utilised as a way to increase positive interaction with peers, as well as making learning more enjoyable and satisfying (Aamodt,

2004:483). Newly qualified social workers can also learn to take part in activities that provide them with intrinsic and exterior rewards, so helping to maintain good self esteem and perceived self efficacy (Furnham, 2006:373). Learning to increase the amounts of spontaneity in their lives can help newly qualified social workers to feel excited and happy with their jobs, as well as reducing feelings of alienation or boredom that may result from the workplace (Zhong-Xiang, Kun & Xun-Cheng, 2008:228).

#### **4.5.4 Positivity**

Newly qualified social workers can also work at maintaining a positive outlook on life, and attempt to think more positively about themselves, the others around them, as well as the world they find themselves in (Kastram, 1999:348). This can help newly qualified social workers to increase their sense of competence with regards to their own ability, allow them to develop their sense of control with regards to their job, as well as better develop positive relationships with their peers and exist more comfortably in the world around them (Zhong-Xiang *et al.*, 2008:228).

#### **4.5.5 Faith**

Faith can also be a very positive influence with regards to the reduction of stress in the beginner workers life (Kastram, 1999:349). A sense of spiritual connection, in whatever form the worker feels comfortable with, can help them gain perspective in their life, better able to formulate clear goals with regard to what they want from life. This faith can also provide them with security and a sense of belonging that can help to alleviate feelings of helplessness and worthlessness that may plague a newly qualified social worker (Kaye & Fortune, 2001:33). All of these things aid the worker in feeling more confident and more positive about themselves.

#### **4.5.6 Biofeedback**

One way in which individuals can become more aware about the state of their body, and how much stress it is experiencing is biofeedback (Potter, 1998:108). In this process a device is used to measure autonomic process of the body. Brain wave activity, skin temperature, heart rate and muscle tension can all be measured to give an indication of stress levels within the body. Although these process are costly, they are an effective way to gain an awareness of internal stress (Zhong-Xiang *et al.*, 2008:224). Self observation is another method whereby some form of awareness can be achieved (Potter, 1998:111). By systematically tensing and releasing different groups of muscles in the body, one can, over time learn how to identify tension as it occurs. This can help workers learn to be more aware of occurring tension and stress, and thus take actions to reduce it.

#### **4.5.7 Relaxation techniques**

Relaxation techniques can also be helpful in relieving the effects of stress (Zhong-Xiang *et al.*, 2008:224). Over time, individuals can learn to relax at will, thus boosting their confidence and sense of mastery over potential stressors. Deep breathing is one of the simplest ways in which to reduce stress and aid relaxation (Tyson *et al.*, 2002:456). Regular, deep breaths can reduce active stress levels in the body, and learning to breathe in the correct way enables individuals to begin breathing in this manner unconsciously (Furnham, 2006:373). Once an individual has learnt to identify active tension, they can then begin to learn the “relax command” (Potter, 1998:115). By selecting a specific word, and creating the association of relaxing the muscles of the body with the saying of this word, one can eventually learn to sync the notion of this word with the relaxation of muscles in the body. All of these relaxation techniques need to be practiced in order for them to be effective. Once an individual has become more familiar with their own ability to relax, they can begin implementing these techniques within the workplace.

#### 4.5.8 Concrete environment

An important facet with regards to controlling the amount of stress experienced within the workplace, is the manipulation of the environment around oneself. According to Potter (1998:120), the amount of “uncertainty and information within the environment” determines the “load” of the environment. An environment that is more familiar and there is little new information can be considered to have a low load. Conversely, higher amounts of new information coupled with greater uncertainty can increase the load of the environment. By utilising the correct tools, individuals can raise or lower the load of their environment to decrease tension and stress. A few examples will be discussed.

Music is a less obvious mood altering tool, for lowering stress (Potter, 1998:121). Music affects us both emotionally and physically. It can be used to both increase the load of the environment, as well as decrease it. Repetition can become very boring, and boredom is a source of stress within the workplace, if encountered on a regular basis. Music can be used to increase the load of the workplace environment, thus reducing the boredom experienced by the worker. Relaxing music may also have a decreasing effect on the load of a particular environment, thus decreasing the perceived stress. Likewise, colour and design can alter the load of the environment (Potter, 1998:122). A calming effect can be obtained through muted, softer colours of a regular design, whilst brighter, more vivid colours may make the environment more stimulating. By utilising colour as a mood alterant to lessen or accentuate the load of the environment, the worker can change the way they might react and perceive the workplace around them to suit their needs. Another facet of the environment that the worker may often underestimate is the effect of people, in the workplace, has on the load experienced (Potter, 1998:123). Other individuals, even friends, have a pronounced effect on the load of the environment, more often than not, increasing the load dramatically. Whilst this may be viewed negatively in a context where a quiet atmosphere of concentration is required for work, it can also be used to the workers advantage. Moving to a more populated environment, such as the cafeteria area, may improve the load of the working environment, when dealing with boring repetitive work. This added stimulation can increase the load of the working environment, and thus serve to increase the workers alertness and productivity. Thus, newly qualified social workers can utilise a variety of ways, in which they can

alter their immediate working environment, and thus help to alleviate their daily occupational stress.

#### **4.6 CONCLUSION**

Although newly qualified social workers face a multivariate spectrum of stressors within the realm of their workplace, it is evident that there are several options available to them in the way of coping. It has been demonstrated that these workers will and may turn to different types of coping strategies in the hopes of dealing with stress. Whilst problem/solution focussed strategies may seem a more radical endeavour, as actual changes and re-evaluation of their lives and potential stressors are called for, these strategies, over the long run seem positive for effecting long lasting change in terms of dealing with perceived stress. More likely, as well as more common, newly qualified social workers may turn to emotion focussed coping in times of stress, and whilst these strategies seem easier to employ, and may serve to help them enjoy periods of respite from stress, the benefits can be short lived when viewed in the long term.

The importance of social support and its benefits, in terms of dealing with occupational stress have been highlighted. Whilst the merits of a good network of social support are clear in its ability to help reduce stress, it is also obvious that the lack of such a system can greatly increase or exaggerate the effects of perceived stress, especially in newly qualified social workers.

There are many concrete activities that can be employed by newly qualified social workers to more effectively deal with stress within their workplace and lives. These can range from simple relaxation techniques, to gaining a more fundamental awareness of one's own stress. Altering the actual working environment can also prove a positive experience, as well as working to incorporate and organisational environment that is conducive to the alleviation of stress. Gaining a positive outlook on life, and oneself, with regard to the way a newly qualified social worker views themselves in their organisation, and also in terms of their own professional responsibilities can also help them come to terms with their stress, and deal with it more effectively. The development of a stress management plan is a concrete

attempt at taking positive ownership of ones stress, and newly qualified social workers can make good headway by spending time on such an endeavour.

In this chapter, the support function of supervision has also been highlighted, to display its ability to provide not only positive support to newly qualified social workers, but also the manner in which a newly qualified social worker can best utilise the latent benefits of their supervision, and thus ensure they are in the best possible position to deal with their stress effectively, by gaining knowledge and skills which can accomplish this, as well as gaining a better understanding of the professional expectations of them as a social worker. The support function of supervision is a crucial strategy in helping newly qualified social workers, not only adjust to their professional environment, but also to gain a powerful grasp of their own professional identities; all of which serves to enable them to deal with their perceived stress more effectively.

The following chapter will explore the experiences of potential occupational stressors by a sample of newly qualified social workers. The following chapter will also explore the coping strategies employed in response, by this sample of newly qualified social workers.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **EXPLORATION OF NEWLY QUALIFIED SOCIAL WORKERS EXPERIENCES OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES**

#### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

Within the Interactive Model of Stress, occupational stress must be considered from various viewpoints (Jones & Fletcher, 1991:444). These include the environmental stimuli that the newly qualified social worker may encounter within the job, individual differences in the way that each worker may cognitively appraise their situation or stressful events and the manner in which each individual responds to stress, or in other words, the stress reaction. All of these facets must be considered equally important in potentially contributing towards the amount of occupational stress a newly qualified social worker experiences. It is in this manner that very different types of potential stressors will be explored within this chapter. It is in examining this wide variety of potential stressors that particular trends or significant results may be determined, with regard to how newly qualified social workers within NGOs may perceive the aetiology of their stress. In addition to this, a wide variety of different coping methods, some conscious, and other unconscious, will be examined with regard to how effectively those utilising them feel they are in terms of how effectively they alleviate stress. It is the objective of this chapter to investigate the experiences of these potential stressors, as well as potential coping strategies which might, or might not be, being utilised.

#### **5.2 DELIMITATION OF INVESTIGATION**

The population for this study could not be determined and thus, a purposive sample of 20 newly qualified social workers was chosen, working within Stellenbosch, Somerset West, Paarl, Strand, Franschoek and Elsie's River areas, within NGOs in the Western Cape. For the purposes of the study, "newly qualified social workers" were defined as those workers that had been in practice within an NGO for up to 24

months. The sample of 20 newly qualified social workers was decided upon to maximise sample size and thus increase validity of results. The sample was chosen purposively due to the fact that all respondents could be defined as newly qualified social workers, and all were practicing within NGOs. Respondents were chosen from the Stellenbosch, Somerset West, Paarl, Strand, Franschoek and Elsie's River areas, as they all border on one another, and fall within a general catchment area. All organisations visited to seek respondents were Non-Governmental Organisations, and all workers within these organisations had been in practice up to 24 months, were considered newly qualified, and thus viable for this study.

### **5.3 GATHERING AND ANALYSING DATA**

Data was gathered in structured, one on one interviews, with respondents. Interviews were conducted with the aid of a structured questionnaire, in either English or Afrikaans, depending on the home language of the respondent. The respondents were interviewed in their own personal capacity, and their names and organisations remained anonymous, due to issues of confidentiality. Interviews were arranged telephonically. During these telephonic introductions, the researcher introduced himself, as well as highlighted the aims of the study, as well as the nature and purpose of the proposed interview. Once consent was given to hold an interview, the researcher then arranged a date and time. Interview duration was between thirty and forty five minutes long, in each case, and took place during the month of February, 2009.

Before each interview, confidentiality was once again discussed, as well as the aims and objectives of the study. All data gathered within afore-mentioned interviews was noted down on separate questionnaires for each respondent. Data gathered will be quantitative, to provide actual numeric data to provide inferences, as well as qualitative data, to provide unique and meaningful perspectives of respondents involved. This data will be covered within this chapter in the form tables, figures and graphs. This information will then be compared to existing information contained within the literature review section of this study for possible conclusions.



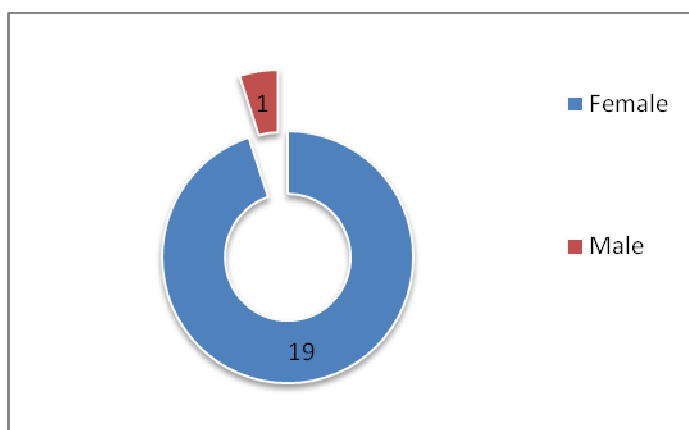
## 5.4 RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION

In the following section, all of the data gathered within interviews shall be presented. This data was obtained through afore-mentioned interviews, and then transcribed into visual formats for the purpose of discussion and elucidation. As mentioned earlier, respondents within this study consisted of 20 newly qualified social workers, all practicing within NGOs. Data will be presented under the following headings: Demographic information; Experience of occupational stress by newly qualified social workers; Personality traits and a predisposition to stress and coping strategies employed by newly qualified social workers in dealing with occupational stress.

### 5.4.1 Demographic information

The demographic information for this study was limited to sex, age and the amount of months respondents had been in practice.

#### 5.4.1.1 Sex

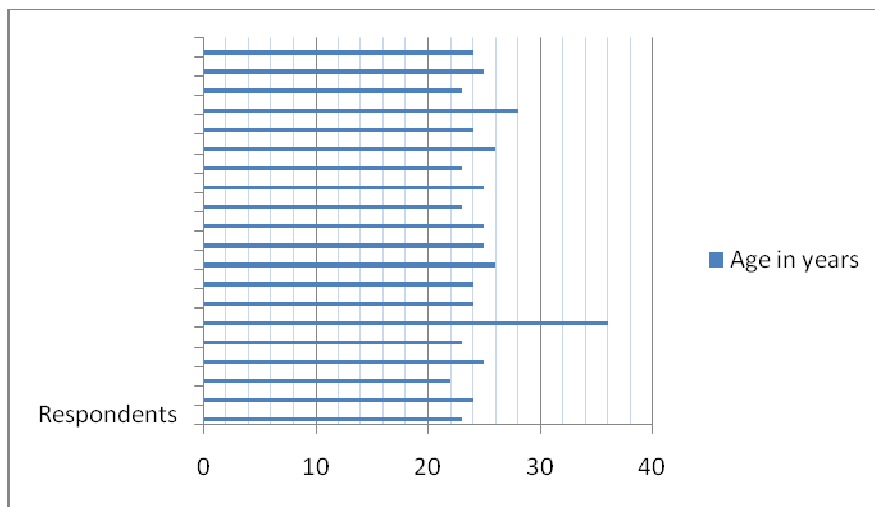


**Figure 5.1: Sex of respondents**

(N=20)

Of the 20 newly qualified social workers that participated in this study, only one of those was male. The other 19 respondents were all female. Whilst this might not directly contribute directly to signs of stress, it is evident of a large discrepancy in the number of males entering the social work profession, at least in terms of those practicing within NGOs.

#### 5.4.1.2 Age

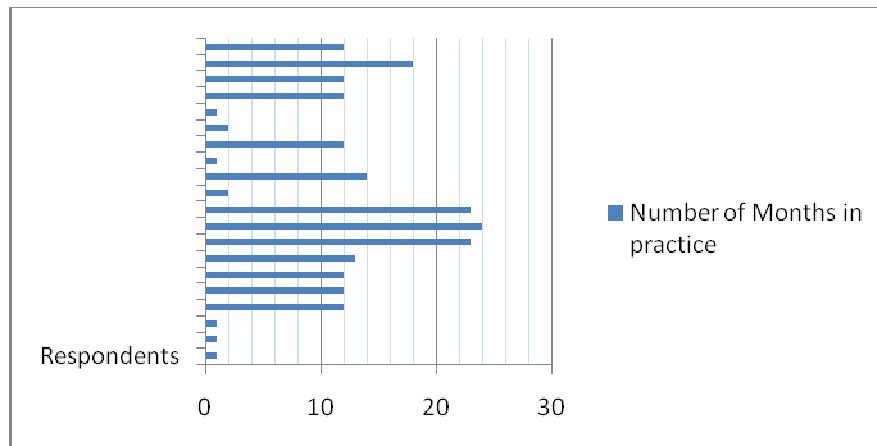


**Figure 5.2: Age of respondents**

(N=20)

Nearly all of the respondents within this study, proved to be within the ages of 22 and 26. Only two respondents were older: one being 36, and the other 28. This means that the average age of respondents was 25 (24,9). This indicates that within this sample, and thus generalised to the population, it may be said that newly qualified social workers, on average, are between the ages of 22 and 25. This is in line with data by Earle (2008:46), where only 3,7% of social workers in South Africa were between the ages of 20 and 24. This also explains the small population of newly qualified social workers within the identified areas for this study.

### 5.4.1.3 Number of months in practice



**Figure 5.3: Respondents – number of months in practice**

(N=20)

When considering the number of month's respondents had been in practice at the time of interviews, it is clear that there are three groups of respondents. The first of those, have been in practice for between one and two months. This group consisted of seven respondents. The second group were all only in practice for around 12 months, with two of those having practiced for 13 and 14 months respectively. This group consisted of nine respondents. The last group were in practice for up to 24 months, with one respondent at 18 months, two at 23 months, and one for 24 months. These three groups indicate that the respondents in this study all complied with the prerequisite 24 month limit defining them as newly qualified social worker, as well as the criteria for inclusion for the study. It also indicates different years of social work graduates entering the work field, as the distribution of work practice is fairly regular, and connotes year intervals between each group. This distribution is positive for the sake of this study, as it displays that all three distributions of practice length are represented within this study, and thus experiences of occupational stress, and employed coping strategies might be more representative of the population.

### 5.4.2 Experience of occupational stress by newly qualified social workers

In this section of the situational analysis, respondents were asked to respond to how regularly they experienced a particular stressor. The researcher covered a variety of stressors clustered within the P-components, a broad outline that summarises the various components of the social worker role and identity (Botha, 2002:107). As each stressor was highlighted for respondents, they were asked to rate each stressor using a rating scale from one to three. This scale would give an indication of how regularly each respondent thought they experienced each stressor, with one indicating “never” experiencing the stressor, two indicating that they experienced the stressor “sometimes”, and three indicating that they experienced the stressor “all the time”, or “always”. In cases where a three was ascribed to a stressor, respondents were also asked to elaborate, so as to give some qualitative element to the exploration. The focus of this section will be the experiences of respondents/newly qualified social workers, with regard to occupational stress, and the frequency thereof.

#### 5.4.2.1 Conditions in the workplace



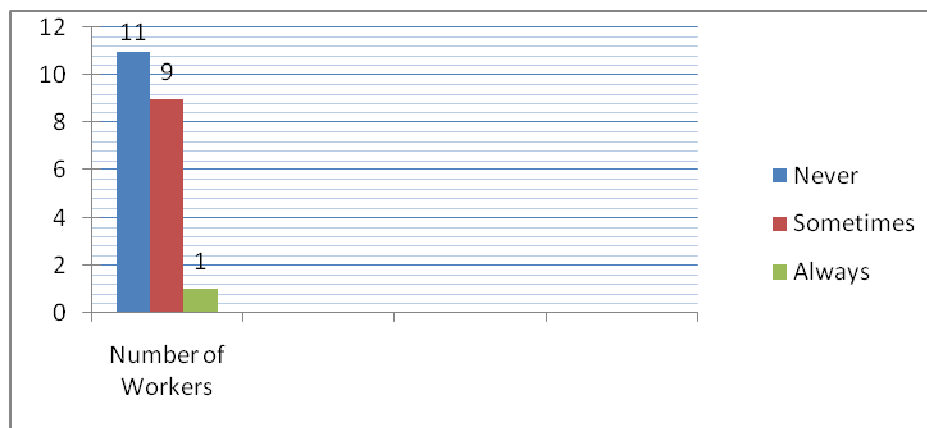
**Figure 5.4: Conditions in the workplace**

(N=20)

Respondents were asked to rate how regularly they experienced “conditions in the workplace” as a stressor. Of the 20 respondents, ten responded that they felt they

“sometimes” experienced conditions in the workplace as a stressor. Whilst seven respondents commented that they “never” experienced this as a stressor, an additional three respondents cited conditions in the workplace as “always” being stressful to them. The fact that more than half the respondents did cite this factor as being stressful can be seen as being in agreement with Earle (2008:131), who states that working conditions in South African social work organisations are of a generally poor standard, with very little resources available to their workers. Of the respondents that stated that these conditions were experienced as a stressor on a regular basis, commented, “Conditions in the workplace contribute greatly to daily stress”. Another also stated, “It is stressful trying to work on a day to day basis, when your office is shared with another worker, and cramped office space becomes a problem”.

#### 5.4.2.2 Lack of job satisfaction



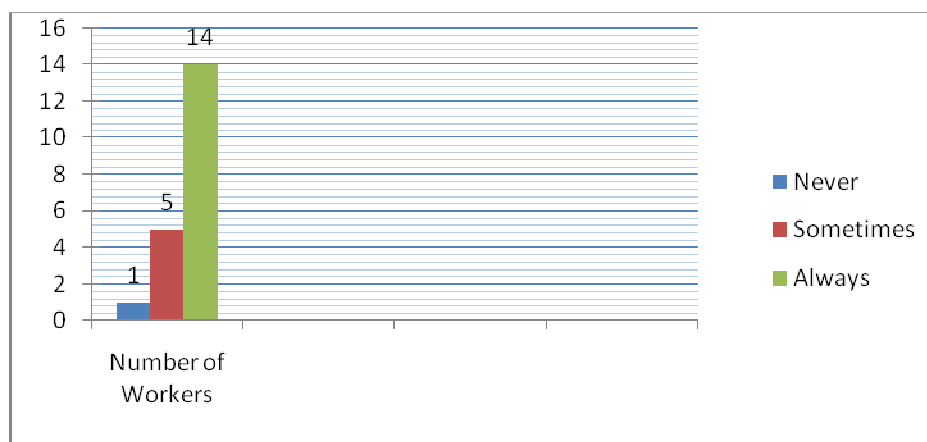
**Figure 5.5: Lack of job satisfaction**

(N=20)

When asked to cite how regularly respondents felt that lack of “job satisfaction” was experienced as a stressor, more than half, with 11 respondents felt they never experienced this factor as a stressor. In sharp contrast to this, though, nine respondents did “sometimes” experience this factor as a stressor. This however, is mitigated by the fact that only one respondent experienced “lack of job satisfaction” as a stressor, on a very regular basis. Whilst this does not conclusively agree with

the literature that alienation and the culture of work have reduced the satisfaction gained from work (Powell, 1994:235), it cannot be conclusively stated that this is a definite occupational stressor for newly qualified social workers on a very regular, day to day basis. The respondent who did experience this as a stressor on such a basis did state that “Very little has been done within the organisation to ensure the wellbeing of the workers”.

### 5.4.2.3 Over-load



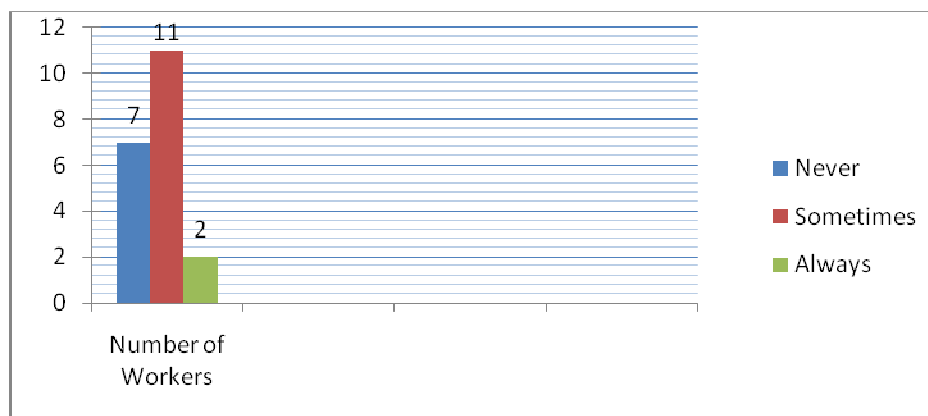
**Figure 5.6: Over-load**

(N=20)

When asked how regularly they experienced over-load as a stressor, 14 out of the 20 respondents stated that they experienced it on a day to day basis. Five of the respondents “sometimes” experienced this factor as a stressor, whilst in sharp contrast, only one respondent “never” experienced over-load as a stressor. These figures point to nearly all respondents experiencing over-load as a stressor on a very regular basis. This finding is consistent with literature that points out that high workloads and a lack of time with regard to that workload, can greatly increase the amount of occupational stress experienced by social workers (Dillenburger, 2004:222; Huxley *et al.*, 2005:1067; Noblet, 2003:357). From these findings, we can also assume that increased or high levels of workload, as well as time constraints also contribute to the stress levels of newly qualified social workers. Respondents experiencing over-load as a day to day stressor commented accordingly. “You have

such a great deal of work, and at the same time, there is never enough time to complete it.” was the statement of one of them. Another stated that “ You never get to finish a sufficient amount of work, and this ends up adding pressure on the amount you have to complete”. Another respondent replied, “There is never enough time to finish the daily workload”.

#### 5.4.2.4 Under-load



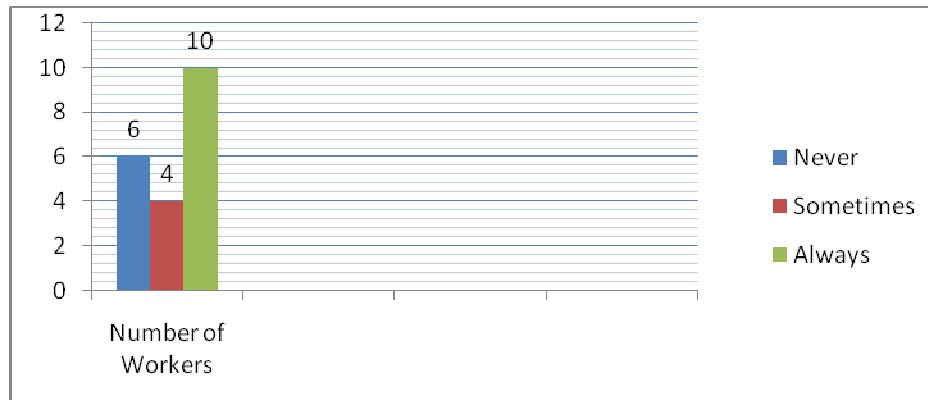
**Figure 5.7: Under-load**

(N=20)

With regards to under-load as a stressor, only two respondents were found to experience this factor on a day to day basis. More prominent were the 11 respondents who found under-load to be a stressor “sometimes”. Of the 20 respondents, seven “never” experienced under-load as a stressor in the workplace. Whilst these figures do not overwhelmingly point to under-load as a major stressor within the workplace, they do display that more than half of respondents did indeed experience this stressor “sometimes”. To an extent, this does agree with the literature that implies that workers can become dissatisfied with their skills and expertise being under-utilised within the workplace (Statt, 2004:91). With regard to this, one respondent commented, “There is no opportunity for self improvement within this job. It would be great if we could take part in courses or training.” The above data points to the fact that under-load is not a major occupational stressor experienced by newly qualified social workers within the catchment area, and this

might be propounded by the fact that over-load is much more prominent amongst workers within this sample.

#### 5.4.2.5 Remuneration



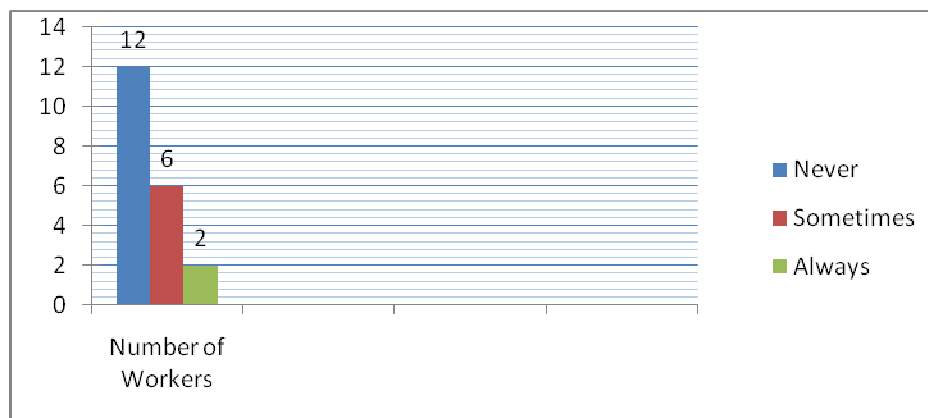
**Figure 5.8: Remuneration**

(N=20)

In a more convincing figure, ten respondents found remuneration a constant source of stress. Another four respondents “sometimes” experienced remuneration as a source of stress. Out of the total of 20 respondents, only six “never” experienced remuneration as stressful. Despite these six respondents, half of the sample experienced their salary or pay-check within their respective NGO, as a day to day, or constant stressor within their lives. The further four that sometimes found it stressful is further evidence of the fact that these figures are in agreement with the literature that states that social workers within South Africa, especially those newly qualified social workers, can expect a low salary (Earle, 2008:130), one that is poor considering the qualification necessary to enter the profession. One respondent commented, “The salary received at the end of the month is not a reflection of the amount of work that is put in on a day to day basis. There are also no benefits.” Another stated, “You are paid too little for the qualification you have attained. After monthly expenses and tax, the salary is really insignificant”. In light of these findings, the lack of a substantial salary seems to be a prominent stressor amongst newly qualified social workers within this catchment area.



#### 5.4.2.6 Lack of effective management/supervision

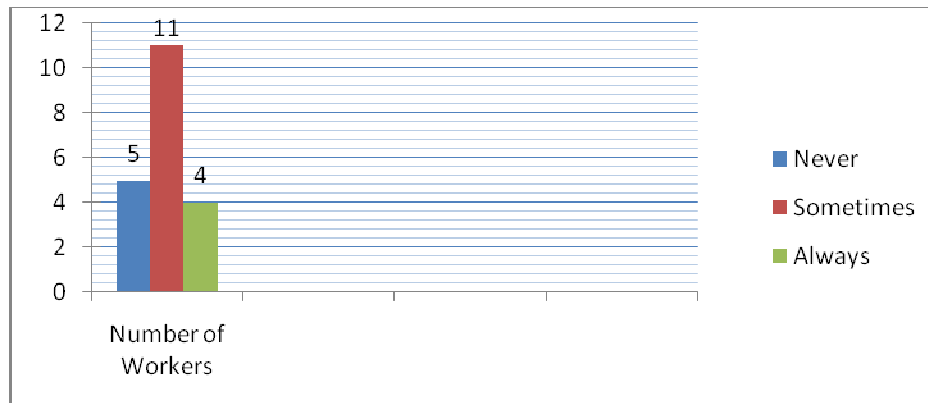


**Figure 5.9: Lack of effective management/supervision**

(N=20)

Figure 9 shows that 12 of the 20 respondents “never” experienced a lack of effective management or supervision within the workplace. Six respondents “sometimes” experienced a lack of effective supervision or management as stressful, and only two respondents always found this lack of effective supervision or management stressful. Whilst this may be taken out of context, and be seen in the light that a lack of effective supervision or management is not a prolific stressor, it can also be argued that within the targeted workplaces, the majority of newly qualified social workers were receiving effective supervision or management. This may explain the figure above. In this light, it may then also be assumed that those respondents that did experience a lack of effective supervision or management as stressful, did in fact receive ineffective management or supervision. In terms of this fact, it can then be assumed that these figures do, in some way, agree with the literature that states that managers and supervisors who do not have the knowledge and expertise to provide effective supervision, can greatly increase the stress experienced by those underneath them (Botha, 2002:200). One of the two respondents that did experience this lack of supervision on a day to day basis commented, “Supervision occurs once a month, and then it does not have enough depth, and there is rarely feedback, with which to gauge progress”. The afore mentioned data seems to illustrate that newly qualified social workers in the catchment area, for the most part, are receiving suitable if adequate supervision.

### 5.4.2.7 Emotional labour

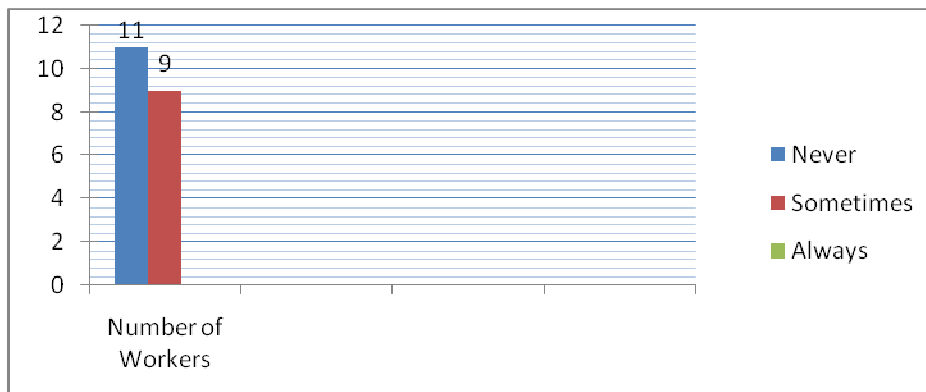


**Figure 5.10: Emotional labour**

(N=20)

Figure 10 shows that whilst only five of the 20 respondents in the study “never” experienced emotional labour as a stressor in the workplace, 11 respondents did “sometimes” experience emotional labour as a stressor. The remaining respondents, a further four “always” experienced emotional labour as a source of occupational stress. This means that 75% of the sample did experience emotional labour as a stressor at one time or another. This means that the act of having to fulfil a particular role, and the expectations that go alongside this taking on of all of the emotions that go with that role, may be considered a stressor for most, if not all, newly qualified social workers (De Jonge *et al.*, 2008:1462; Statt, 2004:92). Whilst the majority of respondents in this case only experienced the stressor occasionally, are examples of those who experienced it more frequently stated, “You have to take the clients problems and needs into your own life, and that can become taxing”, as well as, “There is a frustration associated with not being able to make a visible difference, and rules and regulations can sometimes work against you”. The above data points to the fact that emotional labour can be viewed as an occasional occupational stressor amongst newly qualified social workers within the catchment area.

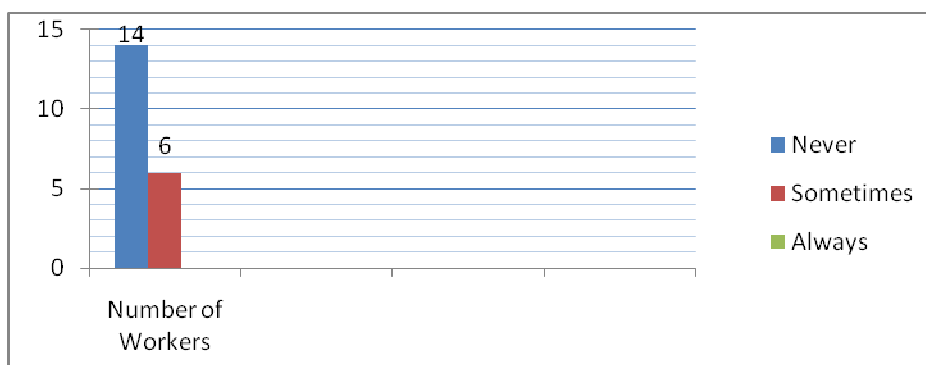
#### 5.4.2.8 Language



**Figure 5.11: Language**  
(N=20)

Figure 11 highlights that more than half of respondents “never” experience language as a source of stress in the workplace. This is further emphasized by the fact that with nine other respondents only “sometimes” experience language as a source of stress and no respondents feeling that the stressor was experienced on a day to day basis, language seems to be a less prominent avenue for stress in newly qualified social workers. The literature does point out, however, that language becomes a particularly stressful factor in rural areas, where a variety of dialects and South African languages may be prominent (Earle, 2008:135). All interviews were conducted with newly qualified workers, within towns that were less if not rural in nature, and this might account for why language seemed to be less of a significant stressor with respondents.

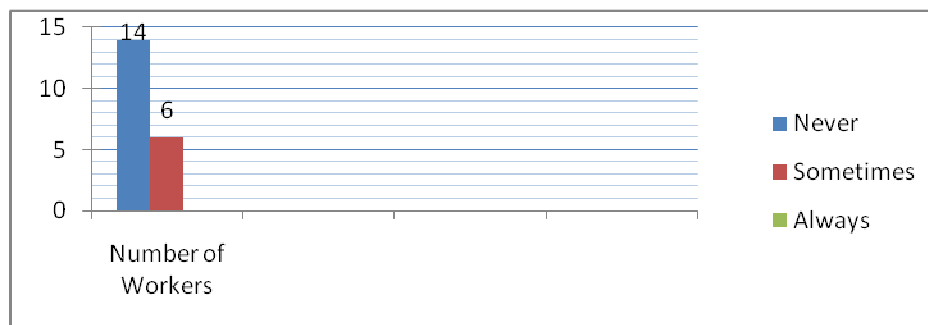
#### 5.4.2.9 Gender



**Figure 5.12: Gender**  
(N=20)

Figure 12 is very similar to Figure 11, in that almost three quarters of respondents “never” experienced gender as a source of stress in practice. In addition, only six respondents, the remainder of the sample, felt that they “sometimes” experienced gender as a source of stress. None of the sample fell into the last category. This may serve to highlight the fact that, although the social work industry, and the sample in particular, is a female dominated one, gender seems less significant as a source of stress for newly qualified social workers. The small portion of the sample that highlighted occasionally experiencing gender as a source of stress may point to aspects of the literature which state that specific spheres of social work within South Africa are more male dominated, such as community work and administrative work, and some are considered more female, such as intervention (Earle, 2008:139). The sample, however, does not merit enough evidence to suggest that gender can be considered a prolific source of stress for newly qualified social workers.

#### 5.4.2.10 Age

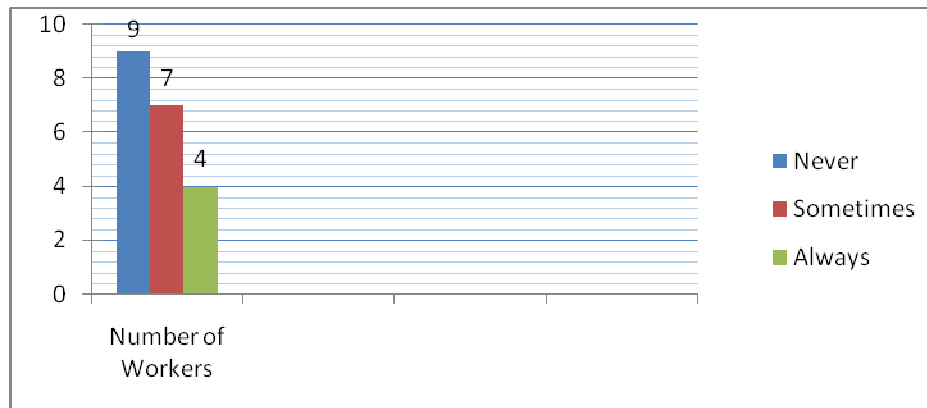


**Figure 5.13: Age**  
(N=20)

Figure 12 depicts the regularity with which respondents experienced age as a source of stress. The graph shows that the majority of respondents “never” experienced their age as a source of stress in the workplace. The remaining six respondents cited that they experienced their age as a source of stress “sometimes”. The fact that almost three quarters of the sample did not experience this particular stressor within the workplace, as well as the fact that there were no respondents that could cite the experience of this potential stressor on a day to day basis, could lead to the

assumption that it is not a significant stressor amongst newly qualified social workers.

#### 5.4.2.11 Lack of understanding



**Figure 5.14: Lack of understanding**

(N=20)

The above figure highlights how regularly respondents thought they had experienced “lack of understanding”, in terms of the information available to them within the workplace. Nine respondents indicated that they “never” experienced a lack of understanding in the workplace as a source of occupational stress. Additionally, seven respondents indicated that they “sometimes” experienced a lack of understanding as a source of stress. Finally, only four respondents indicated that they “always” experienced a lack of understanding as a stressor. Although just under half of the sample showed that they never experienced this source of stress, the fact that just over half did, might support the existing literature to a certain extent. A fifth of the sample experienced a lack of understanding on a regular basis. Additionally, seven respondents cited experiencing this stressor occasionally. Thus, with noted instances of the stressor occurring within more than half the sample, it might be fair to say that there is support of literature stating that there is a distinct lack of understanding amongst social workers in practice, with regard to the resources available to them, as well as their capabilities within the workplace (Earle, 2008:131). Some comments made by those respondents experiencing this stressor regularly were, “Clients are not always open about their problems, and this can be very trying”

and, “You don’t always know what you should do in a specific situation, especially when dealing with clients. Sometimes you just wish that there were steps for handling each situation”.

#### 5.4.2.12 *The communities attitude towards the social worker*



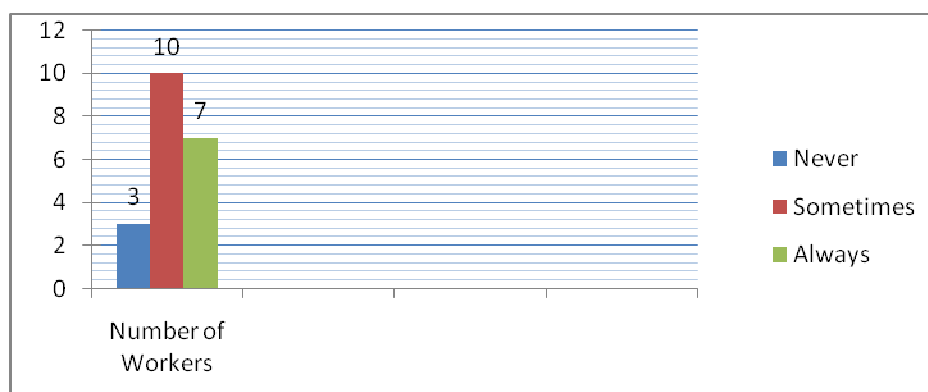
**Figure 5.15: The communities attitude towards the social worker**

(N=20)

The above figure displays how frequently respondents felt they experienced the actual attitude of the community towards them, as a source of stress. Only two of the overall sample “always” experienced this stressor within their occupation. However, ten respondents indicated that they occasionally experienced the attitude of their communities towards them as stressful. The remainder of the sample, with nine respondents, indicated that they never experienced this stressor within the workplace. Whilst this figure shows fairly balanced results, in terms of this stressor never being experienced and it being experienced occasionally, it must be said that with 12 of 20 respondents indicating experience of the this stressor in the workplace, there is some agreement with the literature. Thus the results do partly support the fact that in some communities, there is a distrust of social workers, and the members of such communities feel that social workers are interfering and controlling. Obviously this distrust can increase the occupational stress of newly qualified social workers (Botha, 2002:198). The results in Figure 15 may also point to the fact that the majority of the sample’s communities are less suspicious of the motives of social workers, and more welcoming. One respondent did comment on the communities

attitude towards social workers, “The clients in the community think we as social workers only amount to a “food parcel”, and that we are constantly trying to interfere in their lives”.

#### 5.4.2.13 Contemporary problems of the service user

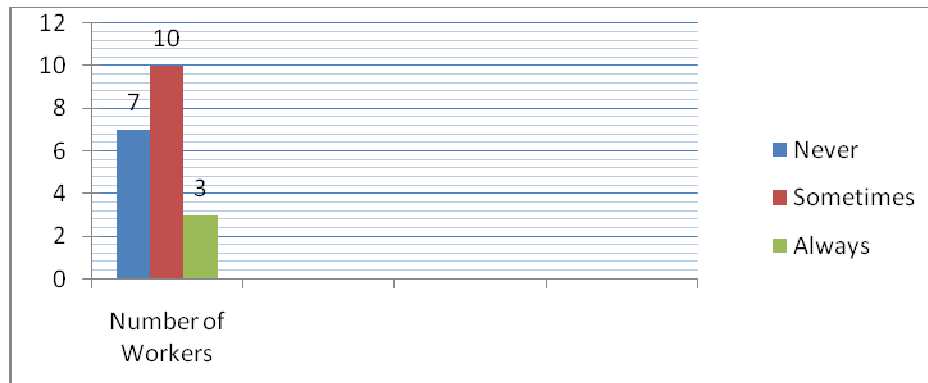


**Figure 5.16: Contemporary problems of the service user**

(N=20)

The above figure highlights how frequently respondents thought they experienced the problems of their clients as a stressor. Whilst only three respondents cited never having experienced their client’s problems as being stressful for them, the remainder of the sample paints a different picture. With ten respondents experiencing stress from their clients problems occasionally, and a further seven experiencing stress from this factor on a regular basis, this figure suggests that the problems clients have, do act as a source of stress for newly qualified. These results seem to support the literature by Botha (2002:207), which states that characteristics of communities such as rape, child abuse, poverty, unemployment, crime and substance abuse can contribute to the occupational stress of social workers active within these communities. This is further emphasized by some of the respondent’s responses, with the following quote as an example, “The problems of the client affect your emotions in a negative way”. Another stated, “As a person, sometimes you cannot understand some of the clients problems, but you still have to work to deal with them” and “Their problems are a source of stress because you have to internalise their problems in a certain sense, to be able to work with them”.

#### 5.4.2.14 Role conflict



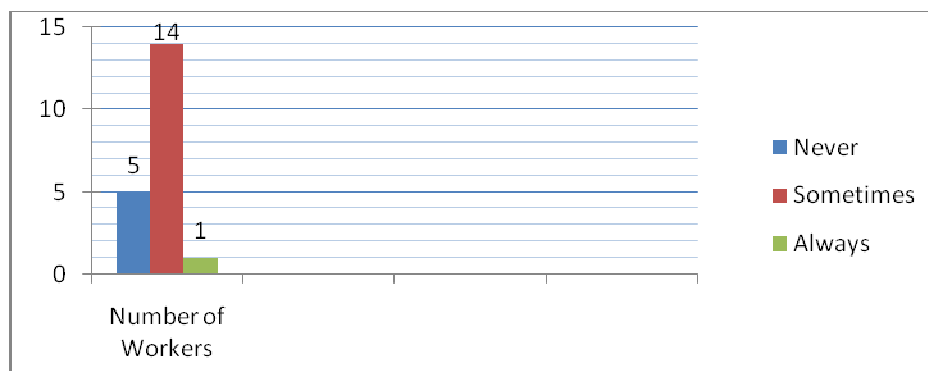
**Figure 5.17: Role conflict**

(N=20)

Figure 17 shows how the regularity, with which respondents experienced role conflict in the workplace as a stressor. In this case, seven respondents felt that they never experienced role conflict as a stressor. Whilst ten respondents felt that they did experience role conflict as a stressor occasionally, only three respondents experienced it on a day to day basis. Whilst the number of respondents that did not experience role conflict is somewhat high in this case, there are still sufficient responses indicating an occasional experience of the stressor for this figure to agree in part with the literature. This figure does agree with the fact that role conflict, as well as the role ambiguity that goes with this conflict, can increase the tension and anxiety experienced by workers in the workplace (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:43; McKenna, 2000:605). This figure does point to the fact that role conflict can be considered an occasional stressor for newly qualified social workers. “The client sometimes expects too much of you, and this can sometimes conflict with the other roles expected of you within the organisation” was one comment by a respondent. Another remarked, “In terms of new workers, there is always some manipulation of you by senior colleagues, with regard to what is expected of you in the organisation” Whilst the above information points to role conflict being a more common occupational stressor, it must be noted that this stressor can apply to those roles a social worker applies to themselves in terms of their colleagues, as well as those expected of them by their clients. In some cases, these differing roles may clash, and the result is perceived role conflict.



### 5.4.2.15 Uncertainty

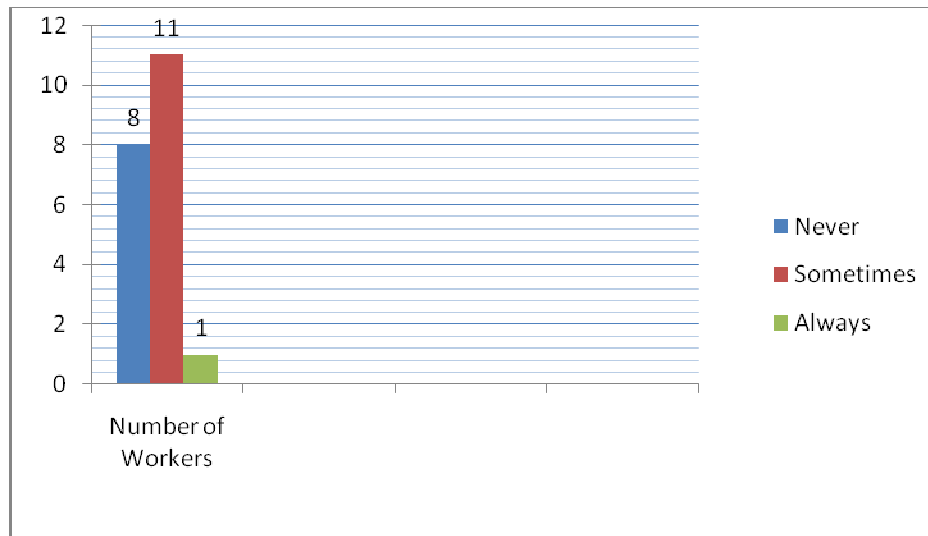


**Figure 5.18: Uncertainty**

(N=20)

The above figure gives an indication of the regularity with which respondents experienced uncertainty as a source of stress within the workplace. What is immediately visible in the figure is the fact that only one respondent experienced uncertainty as a stressor on a day-to-day basis. Additionally, only five of the 20 respondents never experienced uncertainty as a stressor. The majority of the sample, 14 respondents, did, however, sometimes experience uncertainty as a stressor. The fact that almost three quarters of the sample did occasionally find this factor a stressor within the workplace supports literature that concludes that uncertainty, the fear of the unknown, as well as the fear associated with being unsure, with regards to decision making, can greatly contribute to the stress experienced within the workplace (Aamodt, 2004:477; Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:44; Huxley *et al.*, 2005:1070). Whilst only experiencing this stressor sometimes, the above figure does show the majority of the sample experiencing uncertainty as a stressor along this frequency, and thus, it may be considered a notable stressor within the circle of newly qualified social workers within NGOs. One respondent commented “When you are unsure of your responsibilities and capacities within your role as social worker, it can be very stressful”. The above data can also be linked to a lack of understanding within the organisation, as an increase in a lack of understanding with regard to resources and procedure, will undoubtedly have an effect on the degree of uncertainty experienced by a newly qualified social worker on a regular basis.

#### 5.4.2.16 The application of social work theory

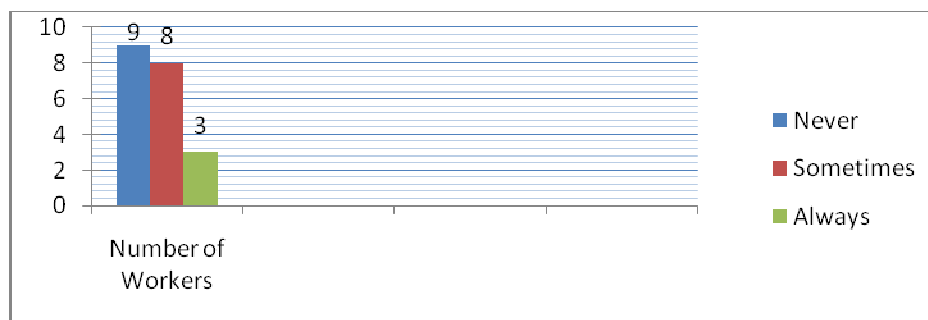


**Figure 5.19: The application of social work theory**

(N=20)

Figure 19 describes how regularly respondents experienced the application of social work theory in practice as a stressor. Within this figure it can be seen that eight of the respondents “never” experienced the application of social work theory as a stressor. Eleven respondents reported that they “sometimes” experienced this factor as a stressor, whilst only one respondent “always” experienced the application of social work theory as a stressor within the workplace. Whilst this factor cannot be considered a very prominent stressor, the fact that just over half the sample did occasionally experience this factor as a stressor does lend some support to literature which states that the entrance into the field of social work may be a complex process of adaption and identity change and this process may be one punctuated by the difficulties of incorporating theory learnt as a student, with the practical aspects of the job (Botha, 2002:199; Lombard *et al.*, 2003:9). With regard to this, one respondent stated, “There is a great difference between theory and practice, and often there is no exact science with regards to breaching this divide. Often theory does not provide answers when you encounter a challenging situation in the field”.

### 5.4.2.17 Experiencing loss

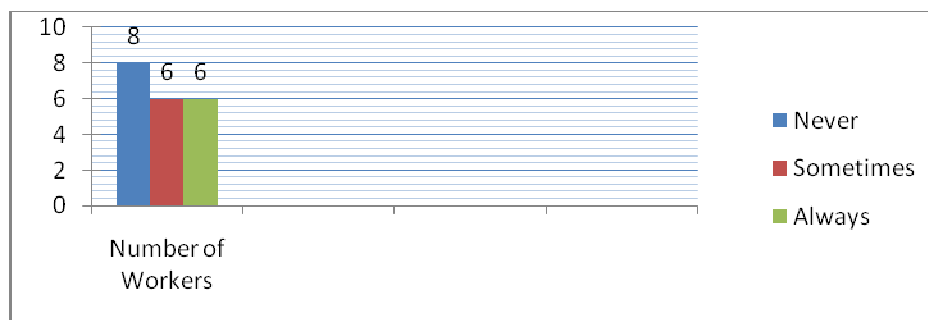


**Figure 5.20: Experiencing loss**

(N=20)

Respondents were asked to comment on how regularly the experience of loss was encountered as a stressor. The experience of loss refers to the loss of old routines and the loss of identity as a student that newly qualified social workers may encounter when entering the workplace. Nine respondents reported that they “never” experienced this stressor within the workplace. A further eight respondents stated that they occasionally experienced this factor as a stressor within the workplace. In addition, only three respondents felt that they experienced this loss as a stressor on a day to day basis. In this instance, with the sample being fairly divided, it should be noted that this potential stressor cannot be considered a very notable one. This, being said, however, the amount of respondents that did experience this stressor on an occasional or more regular basis does show support for literature that points out that the loss of old relationships, previous lifestyle, old routines, a less professional identity and previous competencies may contribute to the stress experienced by newly qualified social workers (Matlhaba, 2001:61). Those respondents who felt this a more regular stressor commented, “The loss of your old identity is a stressful occurrence because you cannot do anything to prevent it”, and “The loss of identity and freedom as a student can be very stressful because you have to take on the new role as a social worker and leave the other role behind”.

### 5.4.2.18 Responsibility



**Figure 5.21: Responsibility**

(N=20)

The above figure describes the results reported by respondents when asked to report on how regularly they experienced responsibility and the expectations associated with this responsibility, as a stressor within the workplace. Of the 20 respondents, eight stated that they “never” experienced responsibility as a stressor. A further six respondents “sometimes” experienced this factor as a stressor, and the same amount reported that they “always” experienced responsibility as a stressor. Although a fair portion of respondents did not experience this stressor within the workplace, the fact that six respondents saw this a stressor on a day to day basis, and the same amount occasionally points to these figures supporting the fact that added amounts of responsibility directly related to their job, and the sense of obligation and duty created by this pressure to perform can create an increasing amount of occupational stress for newly qualified social workers (Furnham, 2006:367; McKenna, 2000:606; Statt, 2004:90). This can be seen in responses such as, “When working with clients, you feel responsibility and obligation with regards to your service, because their lives are in your hands, and this can be stressful” and “There is pressure to apply your knowledge as a professional“. Another said that, “It is intimidating being involved professionally in other people’s lives and problems.”

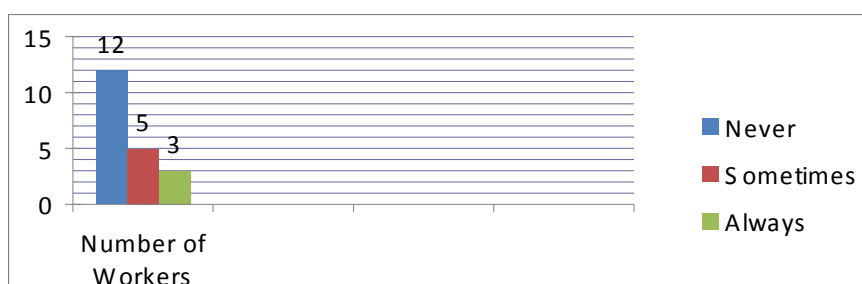
#### 5.4.2.19 Low perceived self efficacy



**Figure 5.22: Low perceived self efficacy**  
(N=20)

Figure 22 describes the regularity with which respondents experienced low perceived self efficacy as a stressor. Whilst six respondents “never” experienced low self efficacy as a stressor, 11 respondents experienced it “sometimes” and three experienced it all the time. With 14 of the 20 respondents having some occasional or regular experience of the stressor, one could assume that there is some validity in stating that the above figure does support existing literature. This literature states that workers who do not believe in their own competency, or do not have confidence in their own abilities within the workplace, may experience increased occupational stress as a result (Judge & Bono, 2001:96; Liu *et al.*, 2005:570; Stetze *et al.*, 2006:50). This does point to the fact that newly qualified social workers may experience increased levels of stress within the workplace if their own self-efficacy is low. One respondent remarked, as an example, “The apathy of the community, as well as the fact that it is difficult to see results, manifests in doubts about competence as a worker and the ability to make change. These doubts can be very stressful.”

#### 5.4.2.20 Lack of control



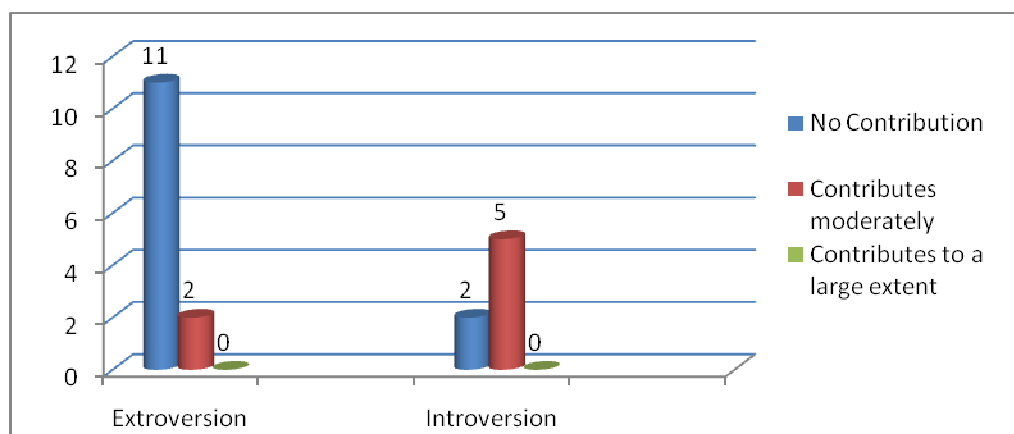
**Figure 5.23: Lack of control**  
(N=20)

The above figure describes the regularity with which respondents experienced a lack of control within the workplace as a source of stress. With only five respondents “sometimes” experiencing this stressor, and a further three always experiencing it, this figure provides evidence to the contrary of literature that states that a perceived lack of control within one's work life can be considered a stressor within work life (Huxley *et al.*, 2005:1067; Judge & Bono, 2001:97). With 12 of the 20 respondents “never” experiencing this as a stressor, these figures imply that perhaps lack of control is not necessarily a very prominent stressor for newly qualified social workers within NGOs.

#### **5.4.3 Personality traits and a predisposition to stress**

In the following section of the situational analysis, respondents were asked to identify which categories of personality traits they felt they belonged to, and furthermore, whether or not these personality traits added to the amount of occupational stress they experienced. The researcher asked respondents to make choices within each category of personality traits, as to which trait they felt they carried. Then, each respondent was asked to indicate, on a rating scale of one to three, how much having this trait might contribute towards their experience of occupational stress. A one on the scale indicated that the trait did not contribute to stress, a two that it contributed to a moderate extent, and a three, that it contributed to a large extent. The focus of this section will be the manner in which predisposition to particular personality traits may have on the amount of occupational stress newly qualified social workers experience.

### 5.4.3.1 Extraversion versus introversion

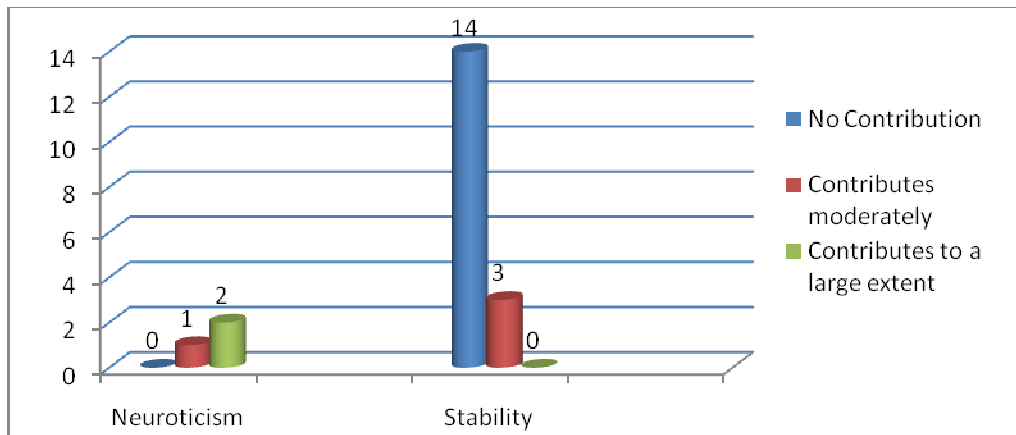


**Figure 5.24: Extraversion versus introversion**

(N=20)

Figure 24 describes the manner in which respondents grouped themselves into either the extraversion personality trait or the introversion personality trait, and whether these traits contributed towards their stress. In this, 13 respondents chose extraversion, with 11 of these feeling that this fact did not contribute to their stress. This notion supports literature stating that extroverts are more socially confident and thus have stronger support systems (Grant & Langan-Fox, 2006:721), as only two respondents felt that this trait contributed to their stress in a moderate fashion. The other seven respondents chose introversion, and of these, two felt this did not contribute to their stress, and five felt that this did contribute moderately to their experience if stress. This shows moderate support for literature, as these respondents might lack the buffering support system of their more extroverted counterparts. Examples of respondent's quotes who chose introversion are commented, "Being introverted might cause you to think twice about seeking help from others," and "Being introverted causes you stress when faced with a lot of strangers, something you encounter often in social work". These facts may then imply that those newly qualified social workers who are more inclined to be introverted may be more predisposed towards occupational stress.

### 5.4.3.2 Neuroticism versus stability



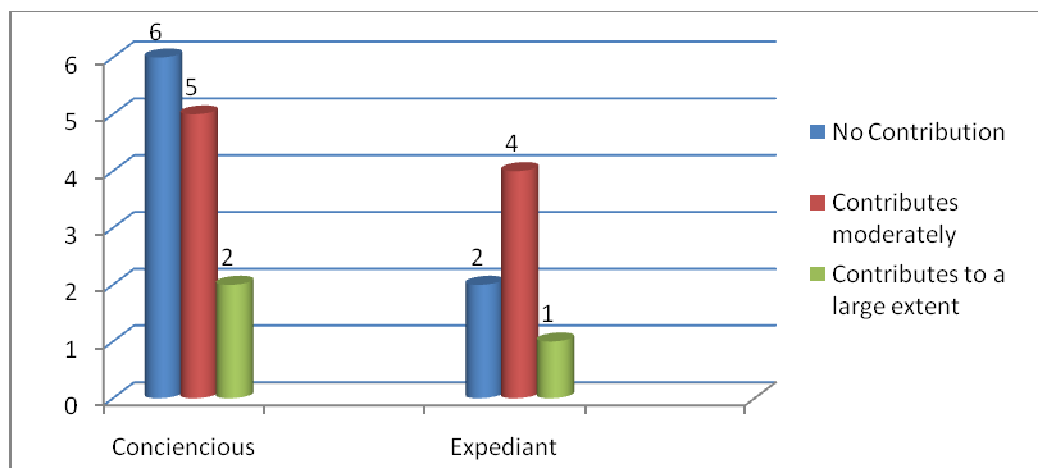
**Figure 5.25: Neuroticism versus stability**

(N=20)

Figure 25 displays how respondents grouped themselves into either the neuroticism trait or, alternatively, the stability trait. From the graph, it is clear that the minority of respondents felt they belonged within the neurotic group, with only one respondent stating that having this personality trait contributed moderately to their stress, and a further two stating that it contributed largely. The majority of respondents fell into the other “stable” group. Fourteen of these felt that being a more stable personality type did not contribute at all to their stress. This does support existing literature that implies that those who are more neurotic tend to experience more anxiety, tenseness, irritability and lower self esteem, and thus more stress within the workplace (Chamurro-Premuzie, Ahmetoglu & Furnham, 2008:262; Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:70; Vearing & Mak, 2007:1752).



### 5.4.3.3 *Conscientious versus expedient*

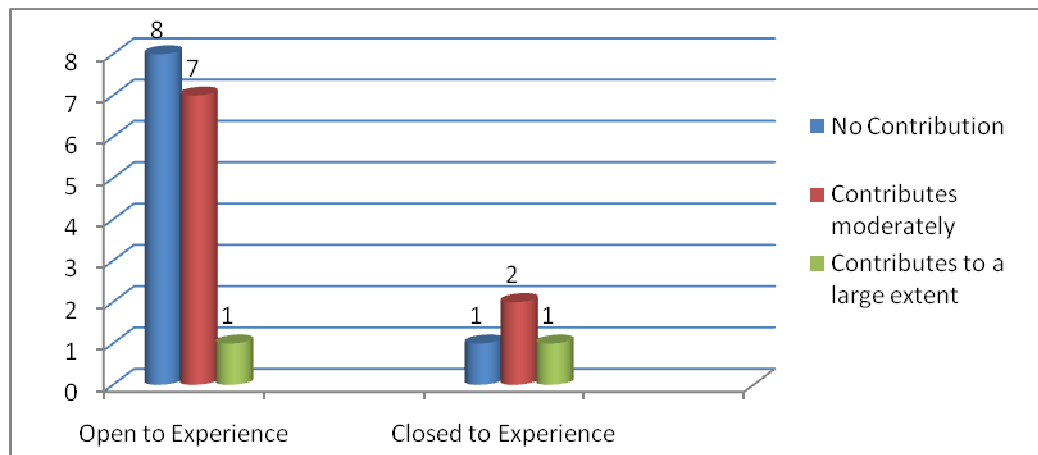


**Figure 5.26: Conscientious versus expedient**

(N=20)

In the above figure describing how respondents grouped themselves within the conscientious and expedient personality traits, the spread of respondents is more even. Whilst 13 of respondents felt they were more conscientious, seven of these felt this contributed to their stress, five moderately and two to a large extent. In contrast to this, of the seven who grouped themselves expedient, five of these felt this contributed to their stress, with four stating moderately and one to a large extent. In this light, whilst several respondents felt that being conscientious contributed to their stress, the above figure may imply that being more expedient in terms of ones work might contribute more significantly to work related stress. In terms of this, these figures might not agree with afore-mentioned literature completely (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:72; Grant & Langan-Fox, 2006:721; Vearing & Mak, 2007:1752), in the sense that it implies that newly qualified social workers with expedient personality types may experience work related stress more often than conscientious types. The data in the above figure is very general however, and thus this implication may have to be taken in context. One expedient respondent replied, however, "The rules end up getting in the way within Social work. There is so much red tape that it becomes hard to help people sometimes. It makes you jaded."

#### 5.4.3.4 Open to experience versus closed to experience

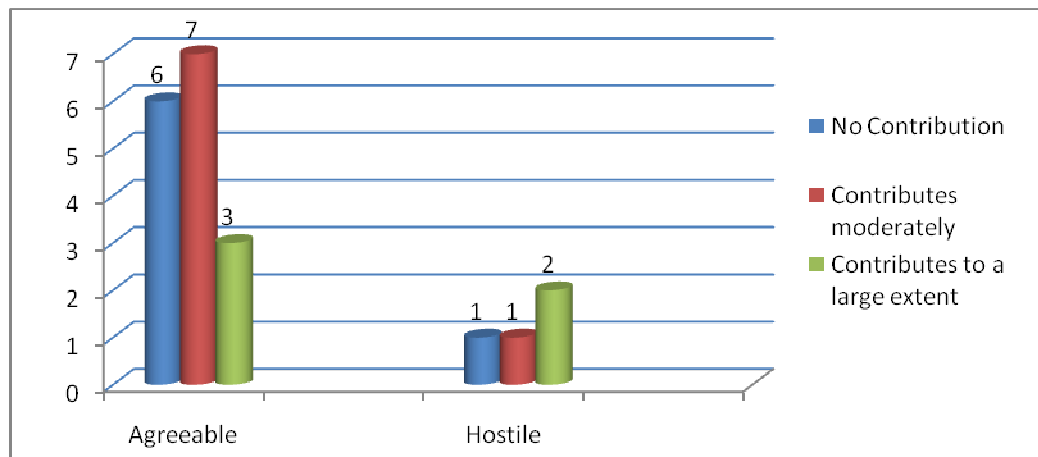


**Figure 5.27: Open to experience versus closed to experience**

(N=20)

The minority of respondents felt they fell into the closed to experience group, with four respondents, only one of which felt that being in this group contributed to work stress in a large way. The clear majority of respondents, some 16 in total, felt they fell into the open to experience group. Whilst eight of these respondents did not feel as though this personality trait contributed to their occupational stress, a further seven did state that have this trait did in fact contribute to their stress moderately. This may be enough evidence to prompt a suggestion that this figure does support afore mentioned literature in that eight respondents felt that being more open to experience means being able to adapt well, and be creative when faced with new experiences and concepts (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:73; Grant & Langan-Fox, 2006:721). This may point to those newly qualified social workers who are more open to experience may find their entrance into the workplace a less stressful experience.

#### 5.4.3.5 Agreeable versus hostile



**Figure 5.28: Agreeable versus hostile**

(N=20)

Figure 28 highlights the manner in which the respondents grouped themselves in terms of personality traits “agreeable” and “hostile”. Whilst only four of the 20 respondents felt they had a more hostile personality, only half of these stated that this personality trait contributed to a large extent to their occupational stress. The remaining 16 respondents fell in the agreeable category. Whilst six of these felt that being more agreeable did not contribute to their stress. Despite this the rest of this group did state that having this personality trait did contribute to their occupational stress, with seven of these feeling it contributed only to a moderate extent, and the remaining three to large extent. In light of these distributions, it must be noted that ten of the 20 respondents felt that having the agreeable personality trait did contribute to their occupational stress in some way. This does show that findings may not necessarily be in total agreement with afore mentioned literature, where agreeable personalities tend to be good natured, trusting and accepting, and thus, experience less stress (Fincham & Rhodes, 1999:74; Grant & Langan-Fox, 2006:730). However, this is not conclusive, due to the wide distribution of participants. One respondent who fell within the agreeable group stated, “I am to nice to clients. Because of this, they always end up taking advantage of me.” Another said, “Always trusting others because it’s in your nature and can have its

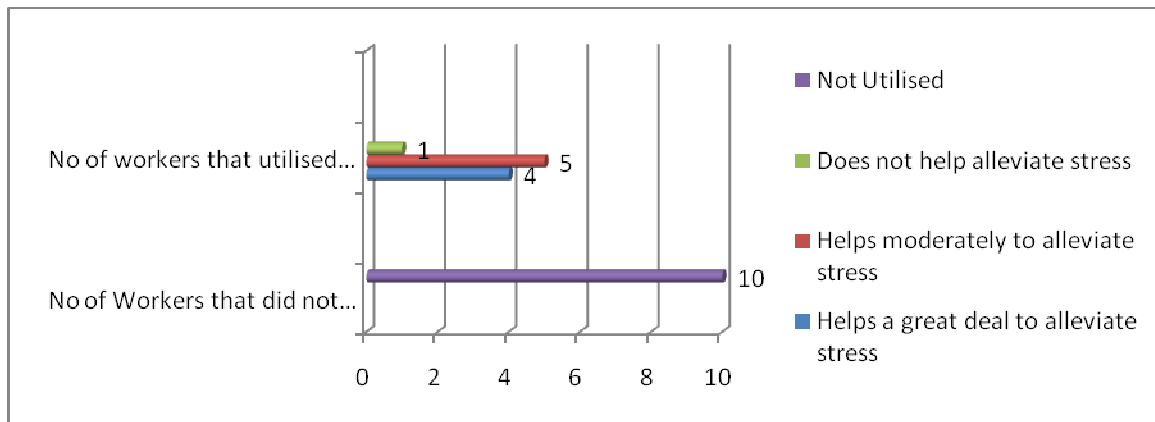
disadvantages. When people let you down, it can lead to a lot of uncertainty in the workplace.”

#### **5.4.4 Coping strategies employed by respondent in dealing with occupational stress**

In the following section of the situational analysis, respondents were asked to respond to indicate which coping strategies they employed in response to occupational stress. By utilising the cognitive approach to coping (Aldwin, 2007:115), it can be assumed that individuals will respond to stressors in attempts to ward them off or lessen their effects, once they have appraised these potential stressors as being stressful. The interactional model of Folkman and Lazarus (1984) divides cognitive coping into solution focussed coping and emotion focussed coping. Concrete coping methods were also covered by the researcher, as well as social support and the role of supervision in the coping process. As potential coping methods within each category were covered, respondents were asked to comment firstly, on whether they employed said coping strategy, and secondly if so, utilise a rating scale to rate each coping strategy between one and three. Within the rating scale, a one would connote that although employed, the coping strategy did not help alleviate stress. A two would imply that the coping strategy helped in a moderate way to alleviate stress, and a three that it helped a great deal to alleviate stress. Those respondents who reported a three for a particular coping strategy were also then asked to elaborate for qualitative purposes. This section will be divided under the following headings: Solution-focussed coping; Emotion-focussed coping; Social support; Utilisation of supervision and Concrete methods for coping with occupational Stress.

##### **5.4.4.1 *Solution focussed coping***

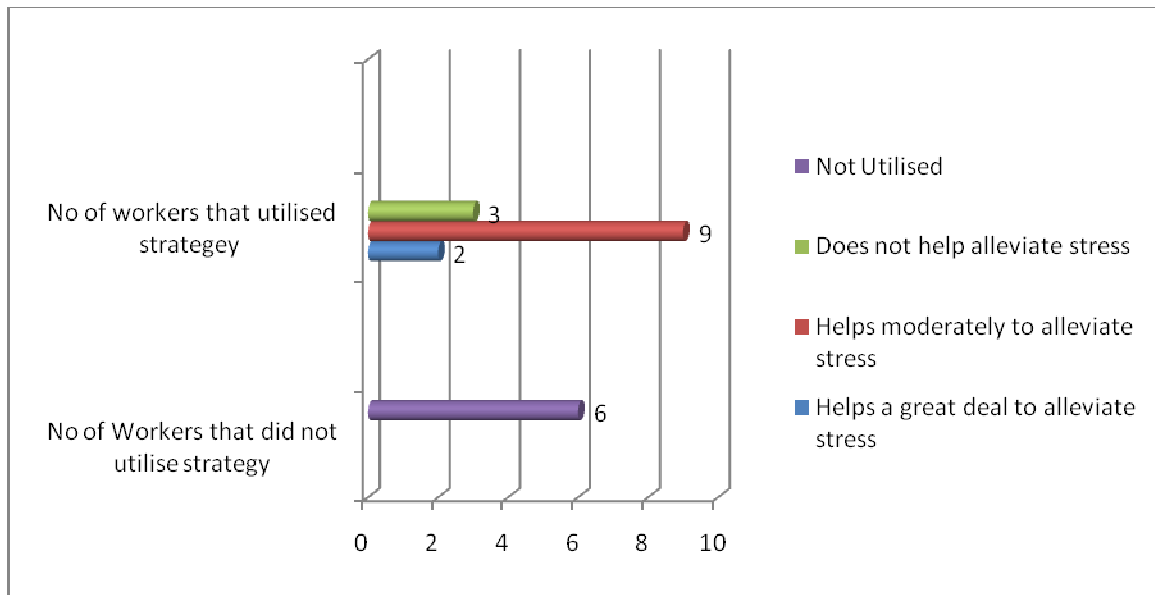
The focus of this section will be to highlight the various facets of solution-focussed coping, as well as identify whether or not newly qualified social workers actively utilise these coping strategies to deal with occupational stress. This Section will also describe how effective these strategies are for those that do employ them.

(a) *Deliberately identifying stressors in respondents life***Figure 5.29: Deliberately identifying stressors**

(N=20)

The above figure describes the number of respondents who actively identified the stressors within their life, and of those, who found this to alleviate stress. Ten of the 20 respondents were found not to utilise this strategy at all. Of the remaining ten, only one found it unsuccessful in alleviating occupational stress to some extent. Of the remaining nine, five found it to relieve stress to a moderate extent and four found it helped a great deal to alleviate stress. This data may imply that the majority of those utilising this strategy found success in its ability to help alleviate stress. Despite the fact that half the respondents did not utilise it within their lives, this may still support afore mentioned literature that points to the success of the newly qualified social worker reassessing the narrative of the stress within their lives, and the ability of this to help them define their own stress (Knight, 2005:155; O’Connel, 2001:24). One respondent commented, for example, “Forming concerns on life at the moment helps me be aware of the state of my life on a day to day basis” and another, “Identifying the stress within my life helps me to form some idea of how to approach stress within the workplace”.

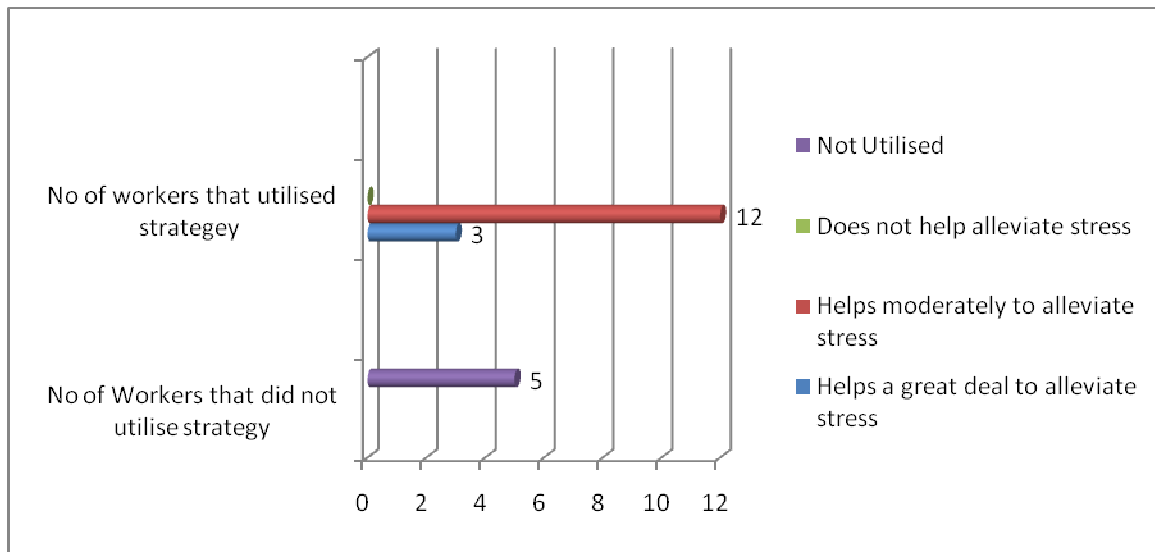
(b) *Identifying the causes of stress in respondents life*



**Figure 5.30: Identifying the causes of stress**

(N=20)

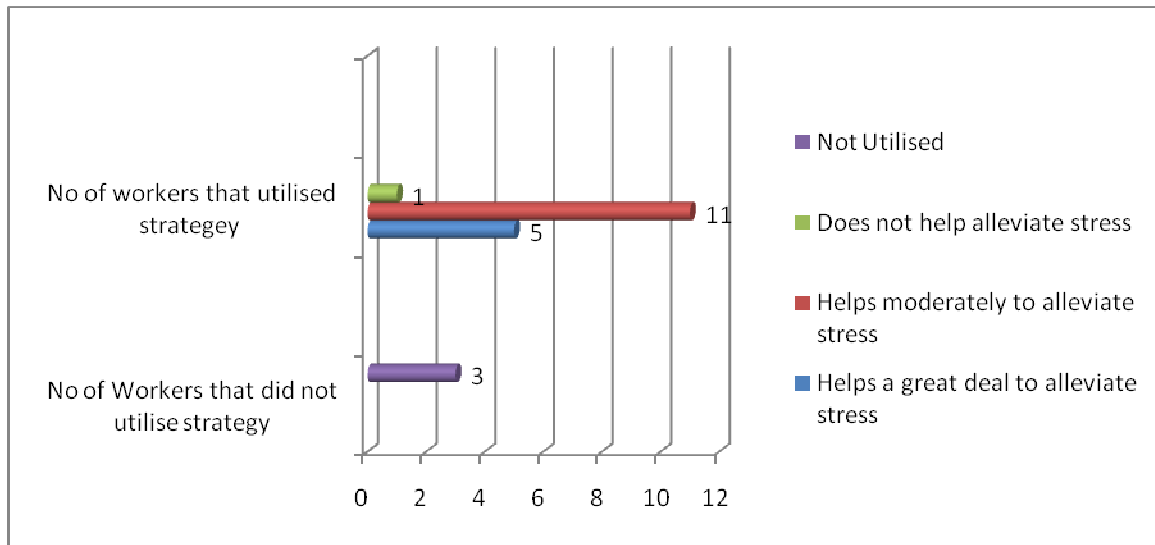
Figure 30 highlights the amount of respondents that actively identified the causes of stress within their lives, as well as the extent to which it alleviated occupational stress in those that did. Six of the 20 respondents did not actively identify the causes of stress in their lives. Of the remaining 14, three stated that it did not help to alleviate stress, whilst a further nine reported that it did help to relieve stress moderately, and two that it helped a great deal. It could be argued that with 11 respondents reporting some alleviation of occupational stress due to the identification of the causes of stress within their life, that these findings support aforementioned literature stating that stress may be alleviated by actively assessing the causality of the problems in ones life and in doing this highlight a possible path to solution (O'Connel, 2001:26; Palmer & Dryden, 1995:54). One respondent commented "If I can understand what is causing the stress in my life, be it at work, or at home, then I can think of a way in which to try and solve my problems and thus my stress". These findings to point to the fact that identification of the actual causes of stress within their lives can have beneficial results for newly qualified social workers.

(c) *Reassessment of self image***Figure 5.31: Reassessment of self image**

(N=20)

Figure 31 describes the number of respondents who used reassessment of self image as a coping strategy and the success of it for those who did. Five of the 20 respondents did not actively pursue this as a coping strategy. Of the 15 that did, 12 of these reported that it helped to alleviate stress in a moderate manner and a further three reported that it helped a great deal. This figure points to positive support of afore mentioned literature which mentions the fact that newly qualified social workers can make attempts to link their real and idealised self, and in doing so put themselves in a much more positive position contextually, to deal with stressors within their lives (O'Connell, 2001:29). One respondent stated, "Being aware of your own self image, and what you would actually like that image to be helps you realise your own potential, and in doing so, your potential to deal with stress". The above data does point to the fact that newly qualified social workers that utilise reassessment of their self image may find it beneficial in reducing the amount of occupational stress they experience.

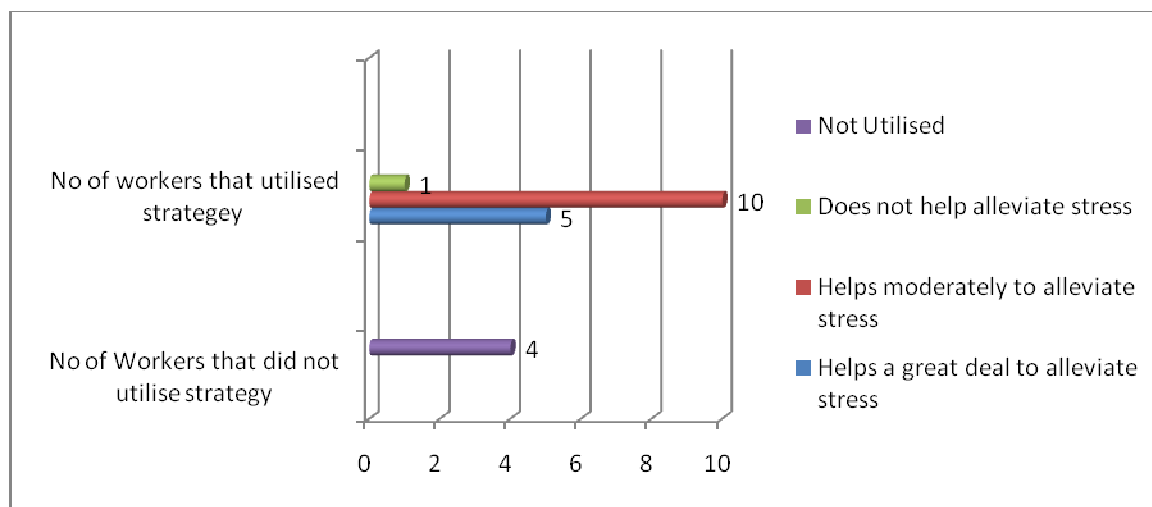
## (d) Available choices

**Figure 5.32: Available choices**

(N=20)

Figure 32 describes which respondents made themselves actively aware of the choices available to them, in terms of dealing with stress. Above, it can be seen that only three of the 20 respondents did not utilise this coping strategy. Of those respondents that did, only one reported it not helping to alleviate stress. Eleven respondents reported that it helped moderately to reduce occupational stress, and a further five that it helped a great deal. In this, it can be seen that the majority of respondents employed this coping strategy, and that it did help to alleviate stress. This supports afore mentioned literature that states that it is in identifying the choices available, that newly qualified social workers can work to rewrite the habitual scripts their role acquired in everyday life, and through this write new scripts for themselves, and thus deal with the stressful elements of their lives (O'Connel, 2001:31; Palmer & Dryden, 1995:55). In light of this, one respondent commented, "To better your situation and yourself as a person, you have to be aware of your choices to do so."



(e) *Identifying available resources to reduce stress***Figure 5.33: Identifying available resources**

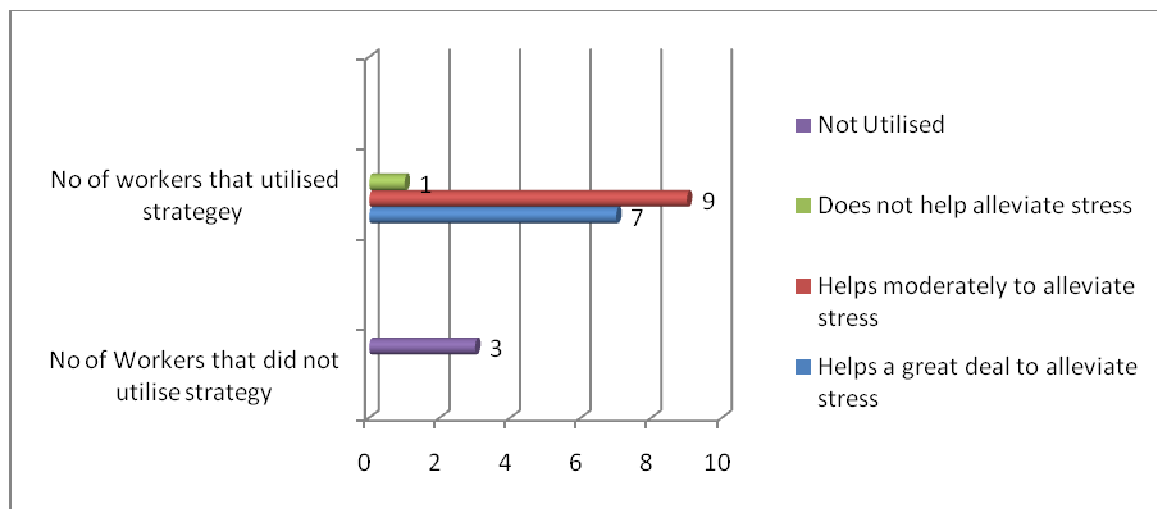
(N=20)

Figure 33 highlights the number of respondents that actively identified their resources in terms of coping with occupational stress. Four of the 20 respondents did not use this coping strategy to reduce stress. Of the remaining 16, only one found it ineffective in alleviating stress. A further ten found it to reduce stress moderately and a remaining five found that it helped a great deal. In this instance, 15 of the 20 respondents found this coping strategy useful in reducing occupational stress. This supports afore mentioned literature that postulates that a greater awareness of possible resources for coping with stress increases their potential to actually go about using these resources and thus, alleviate the occupational stress that the newly qualified social worker might be experiencing (Knight, 2005:155). One respondent stated, as example “Resources help to alleviate stress by helping deal with workload and acts as a buffer to stress”. Another said, “Identifying resources makes you more confidants in seeking help and in seeking to reduce stress in general”.

#### 5.4.4.2 Emotion focussed coping

This section will focus on the emotion focussed-coping strategies employed by newly qualified social workers, as well as the effectiveness of these strategies in helping to alleviate their perceived occupational stress.

##### (a) Utilising avoidance



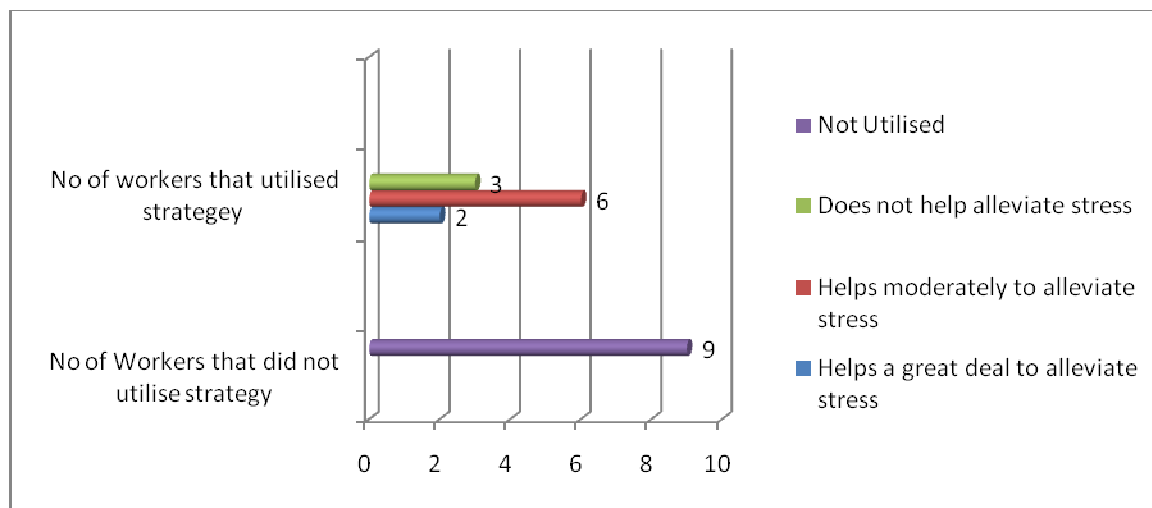
**Figure 5.34: Utilising avoidance**

(N=20)

The above figure describes which respondents utilised avoidance as a coping strategy and the effectiveness of it in those that did in relieving occupational stress. Three respondents reported that they did not utilise avoidance as a coping strategy. Of the remaining 17 respondents, only one stated that it did not help to alleviate stress. Of the remaining 16, nine reports that it helped moderately to alleviate stress, and a further seven that it helped a great deal. This data does support literature stating that avoidance is one of the more common strategies, and that it can help to improve emotional state of mind and thus help alleviate stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991:215; Gellis, 2002:39). In light of this, one respondent stated, “It helps you get away from your stress, and recreate a more positive frame of mind” and another said, “For the moment it helps a great deal to alleviate stress, and allows you time to gain a new perspective on things”. A third commented, “Getting away from your

stress for a while helps you recharge”. The above data points to the fact that newly qualified social workers utilising avoidance as a coping strategy to deal with occupational stress can expect this coping strategy to benefit them in terms of alleviating occupational stress.

(b) *Utilising escape avoidance*



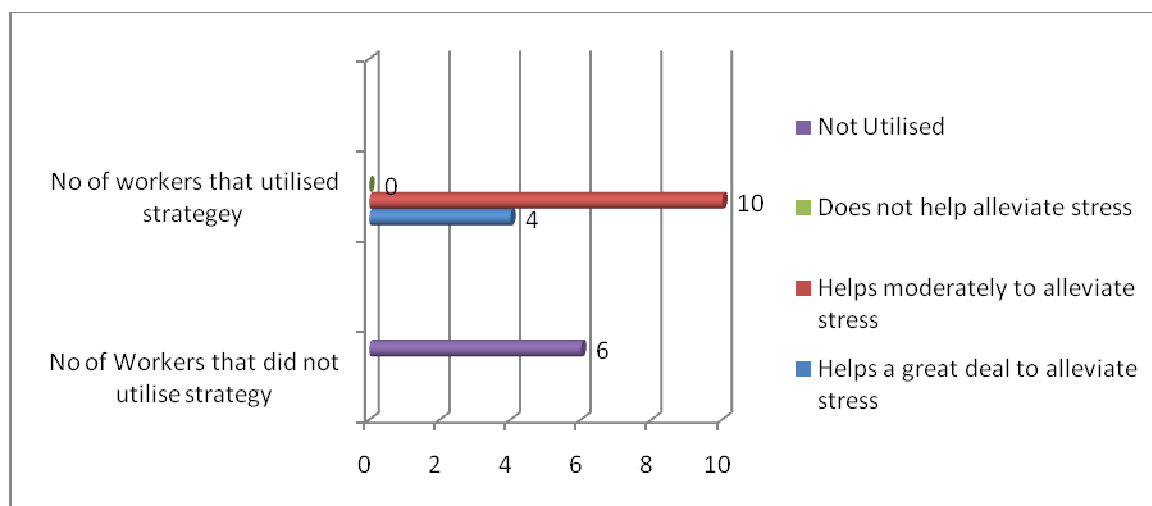
**Figure 5.35: Utilising escape avoidance**

(N=20)

Figure 35 highlights how respondents utilised escape avoidance as a coping strategy and how it helped them alleviate stress. Of the 20 respondents, nine reported that they did not utilise this coping strategy. The remaining 11 were mixed in their reports. Three of these stated that although they did use this strategy, it did not help them alleviate stress. A further six said it only alleviated stress moderately and the remaining two that it helped a great deal. Although almost half of the sample reported that they did not note utilise this coping strategy, the results in the group that did, are varied. These findings report no alleviation, a moderate measure of alleviation and a great deal, but the majority leans toward moderate alleviation. This does support afore mentioned literature which points to the fact that this coping strategy may help in the short term, but does not provide for long term alleviation of occupational stress. It seems that this may be true of those newly qualified social

workers that employ this strategy. One respondent did respond, “Smoking helps me relax”.

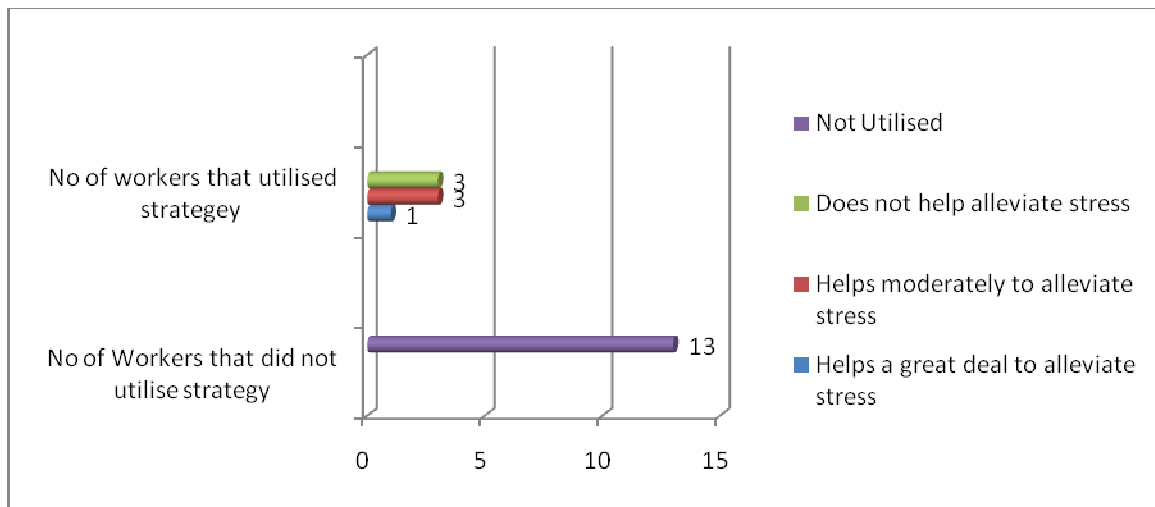
(c) *Utilising vigilance*



**Figure 5.36: Utilising vigilance**

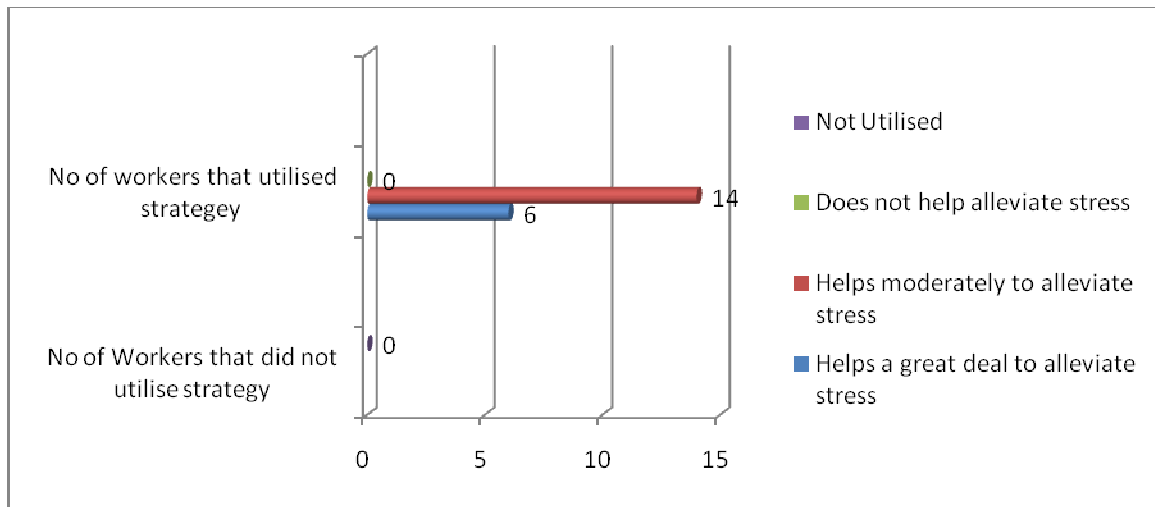
(N=20)

The above figure describes which of the respondents reported using vigilance as a coping strategy, and of those who did, the manner in which they felt it helped alleviate occupational stress. Only six of the 20 respondents did not utilise this coping strategy. Of the remaining 14, ten of them stated that this coping strategy helped moderately to alleviate stress. A further four reported that it helped a great deal. Significant is the fact that no respondents utilising this strategy reported that it did not help to alleviate stress. Figure 36 provides support for afore mentioned literature pointing to the fact that newly qualified social workers can gain a better understanding of their stressors by turning their attention toward them, and thus gain a certain measure of control over them (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991:210). One respondent stated, for example, “Turning your attention towards your stress and facing it helps you get a new perspective on it, and then you are in a better position to handle it”. Another said, “When you seek help from others and turn yourself toward a stressor, it helps you form different ideas about how you can deal with it.”

(d) *Utilising distancing***Figure 5.37: Utilising distancing**

(N=20)

Figure 37 provides for the utilisation of distancing as a coping strategy by respondents and how effective respondents felt it was in helping to cope with occupational stress. Of the 20 respondents in the sample, 13 did not make use of distancing. The remaining seven's results were relatively mixed. Three said that it did not help relieve stress, a further three that it helped moderately, and only one that it helped a great deal to reduce stress. Whilst only seven respondents utilised this coping strategy, these findings do support afore mentioned literature in that distancing can be useful in helping to alleviate stress at a given moment, it is only as useful as the mindset of the newly qualified social worker employing it (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991:217; Gueritault-Chalvin *et al.*, 2000:158). This may account for those who found it moderately useful, and the same amount that found it did not help alleviate stress.

(e) *Utilising positive reappraisal***Figure 5.38: Utilising positive reappraisal**

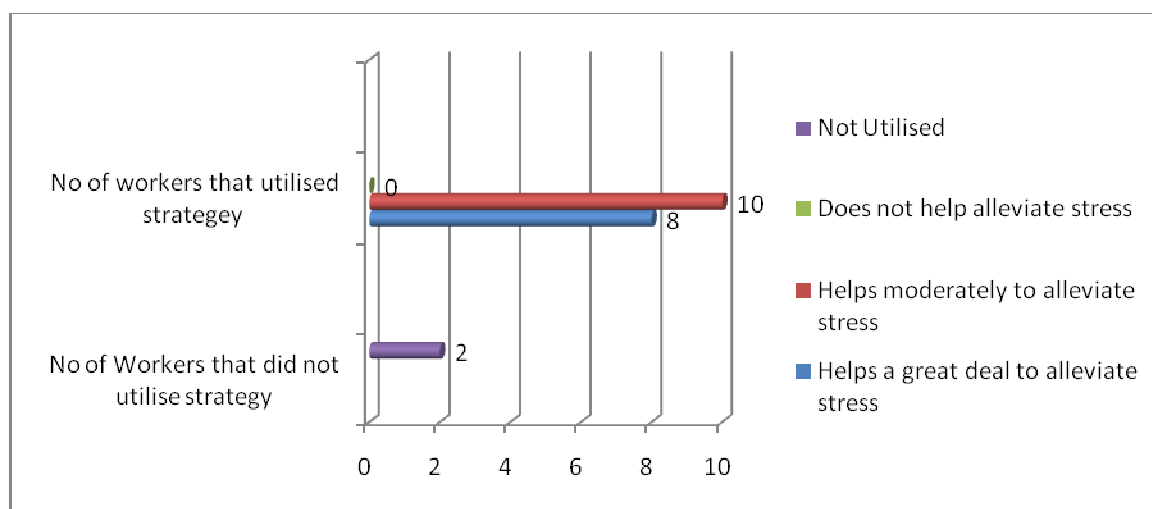
(N=20)

Figure 38 highlights how many respondents utilised positive reappraisal as a coping strategy, and its effectiveness in helping to alleviating occupational stress. All of the 20 respondents reported that they utilised this coping strategy, and none of the sample reported that it was ineffective in helping to alleviate stress. Fourteen of the respondents stated that they found that positive reappraisal helped in a moderate manner to alleviate stress. A further six reported that it helped a great deal to reduce occupational stress. These findings are significant in that all respondents reported some alleviation of stress through the utilisation of this coping strategy. This strongly supports afore mentioned literature that states that through the use of positive reappraisal, newly qualified social workers can work to reassess the nature of their stressors and then take positive meaning from the experience of those stressors and can thus help to prevent the negative effects of emotions such as fear and anxiety (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991:218; Gellis, 2002:47). One respondent commented, for example, “If you can see the stressor as a good thing, it can be less stressful an experience, and you can then view it as growth”. Another said, “It helps create meaning out of the challenges in life and being positive helps keep you focussed during the difficult times and usually aids you in reducing your stress overall”.

### 5.4.4.3 Social support

This section will focus on the different forms of social support, as well as how newly qualified social workers utilise these forms of social support to help alleviate occupational stress. This section will also detail the effectiveness of these forms of social support as coping strategies.

#### (a) Utilising appraisal support



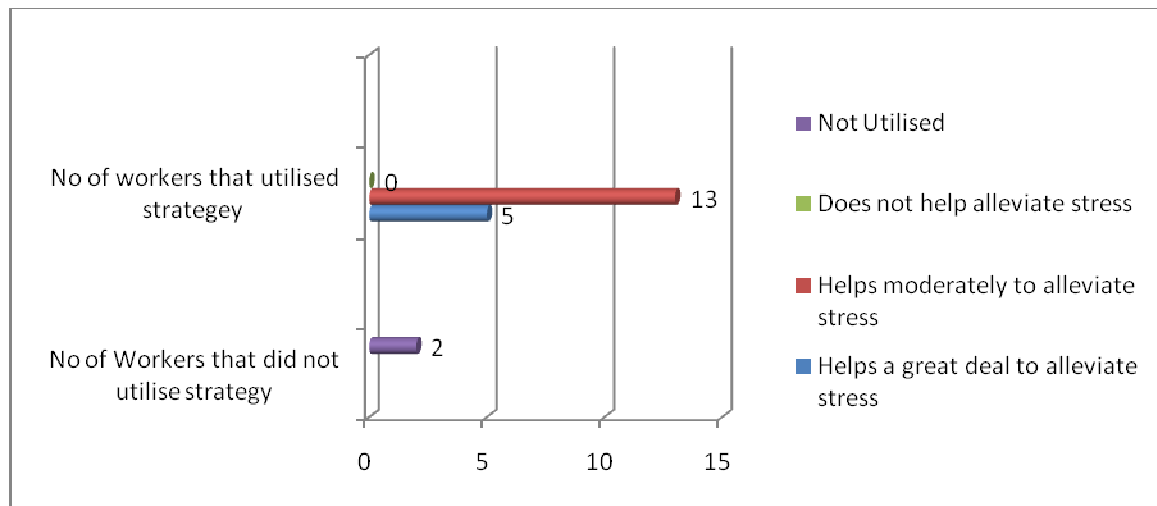
**Figure 5.39: Utilising appraisal support**

(N=20)

The above figure represents the number of respondents that utilised appraisal support as coping strategy. Only two respondents within the sample did not utilise this strategy. Of the remaining 18, ten reported that they did utilise appraisal support and that it helped to moderately alleviate occupational stress. A further eight reported that appraisal support helped a great deal in the alleviation of stress. These findings indicate support for afore mentioned literature that states that the sharing of appraisals of a stressor can lead to a better understanding of stressor for newly qualified social workers, and in doing so, utilise suggestions to better cope with this stress (Himle *et al.*, 1989:19; Hulbert & Morrison, 2006:247). Examples of what respondents said who found that this strategy to be useful are stated, “Other perspectives help you remain positive and think of alternative solutions to your

problems” and additionally, “Someone else’s input increases your awareness of the support and resources available to you”. The above findings point to the fact that appraisal support can be effective in alleviating occupational stress for those newly qualified social workers utilising it as a coping strategy.

(b) *Utilising informational support*



**Figure 5.40: Utilising informational support**

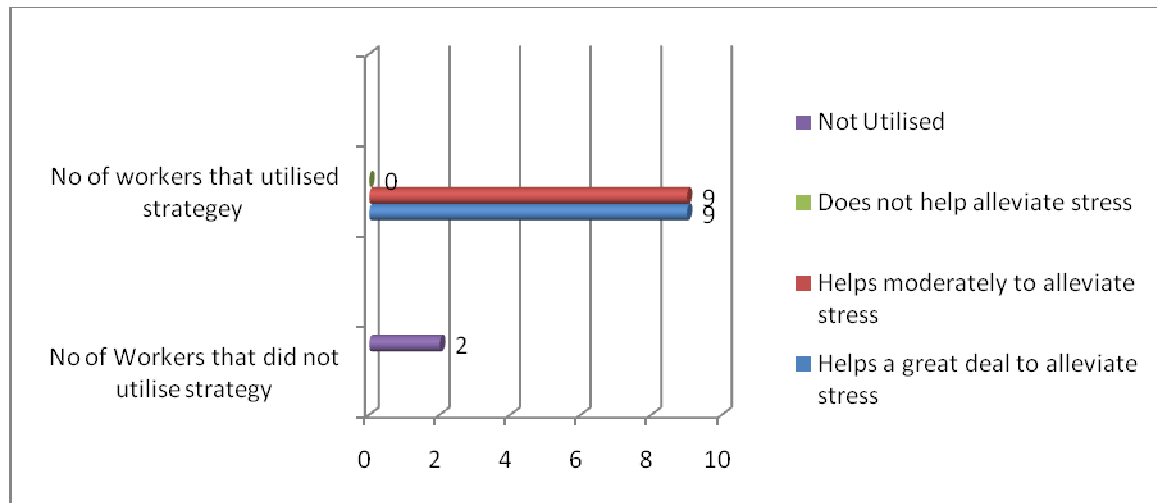
(N=20)

Figure 40 describes how many respondents used informational support to cope with stress, as well as its effectiveness as a coping strategy. Two of the 20 respondents did not use this strategy. Alternatively 13 respondents, who did make use of this strategy found it to moderately alleviate stress. The remaining five found it to greatly alleviate occupational stress. The above figure and its implications do positively support literature claiming that an increase of information from colleagues, friends and family can increase the potential ways newly qualified social workers can go about dealing with problems/stressors (Himle *et al.*, 1989:19; Storey & Billingham, 2001:661). One respondents said, “Getting information from others on your problems helps you let go of the seriousness of your problems and not get caught up in them” and another said, “It is easier to handle stress if you know someone else is taking the time to give you information on how deal with your stress or problems”. The



above data highlights that informational support can be beneficial in helping newly qualified social workers cope with occupational stress.

(c) *Utilising emotional support*

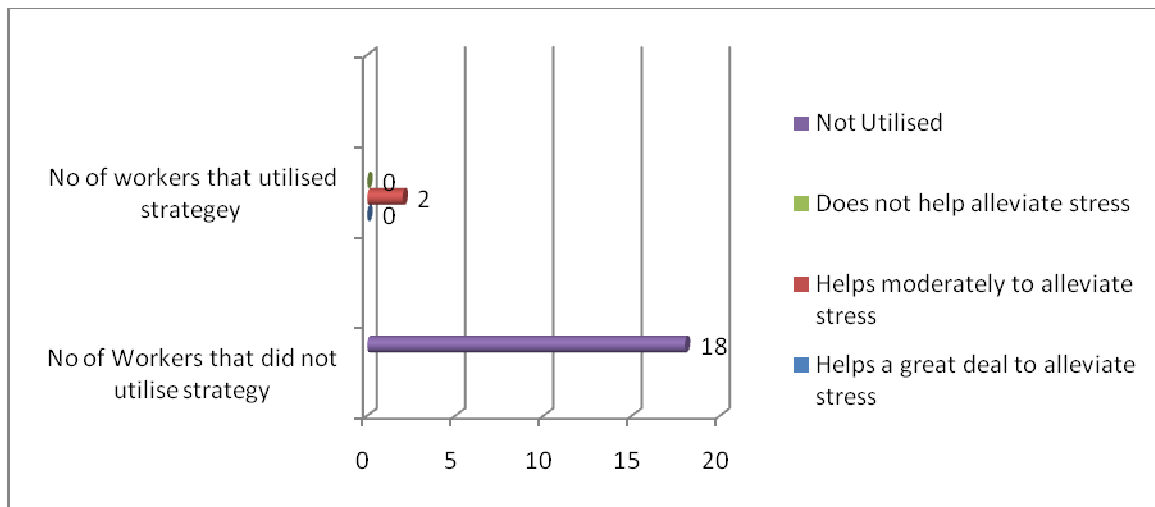


**Figure 5.41: Utilising emotional support**

(N=20)

The above figure highlights how many respondents utilised emotional support as a coping strategy, and of those, how effective it was in alleviating occupational stress. Only two respondents within the sample did not make use of this coping strategy. Of the remaining respondents, nine found emotional support to moderately alleviate occupational stress and a further nine found emotional support to great reduce stress. The above data shows support for literature that states that emotional support can alleviate stress by helping newly qualified social workers understand that they are indeed care for and valued by the people around them in times of stress (Chu *et al.*, 2006:497; Himle *et al.*, 1989:19). One respondent stated, “It is good when you are reminded that you are cared for and not alone”. A second respondent commented, “The people around you that care for you give you strength in stressful and difficult times”. In light of the above findings, it is clear that newly qualified social workers do utilise and benefit from emotional support and the cultivation of a strong support network that can provide this support.

(d) *Utilising tangible assistance*



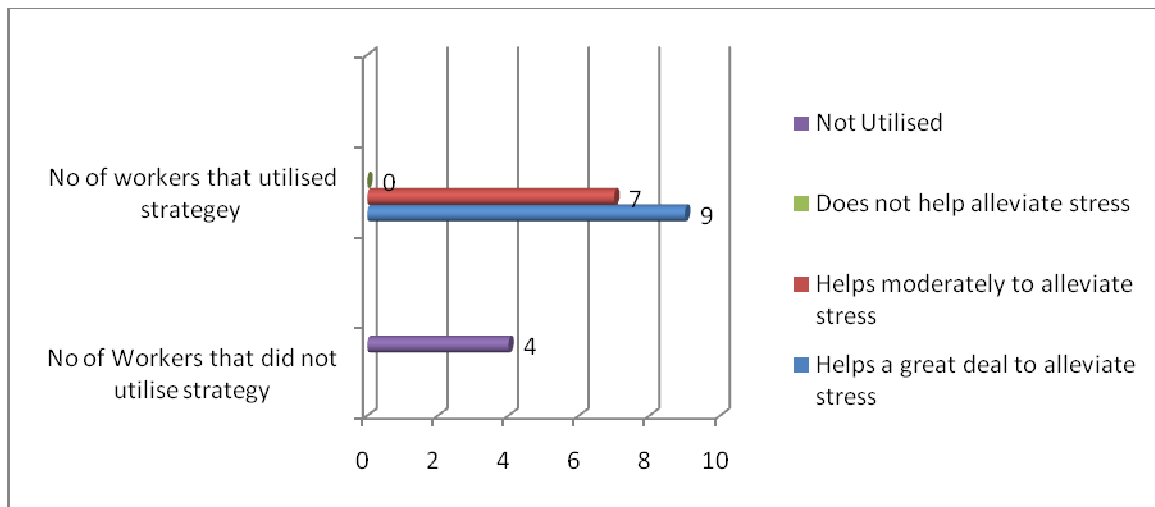
**Figure 5.42: Utilising tangible assistance**

(N=20)

Figure 42 describes how many respondents utilised tangible assistance as a coping strategy. Of the 20 respondents, only two actually made use of tangible assistance as a coping strategy to deal with occupational stress. These two both reported that it helped moderately in alleviating stress. The rest of the sample all reported not utilising tangible assistance as a coping strategy to deal with stress. In this instance the researcher cannot comment on whether the findings can support afore mentioned literature, as there is not enough evidence for support, as almost the entire sample did not make use of this strategy. What is clear from Figure 42, is that tangible assistance was very rarely used amongst the sample of newly qualified social workers.

#### **5.4.4.4 Utilisation of supervision**

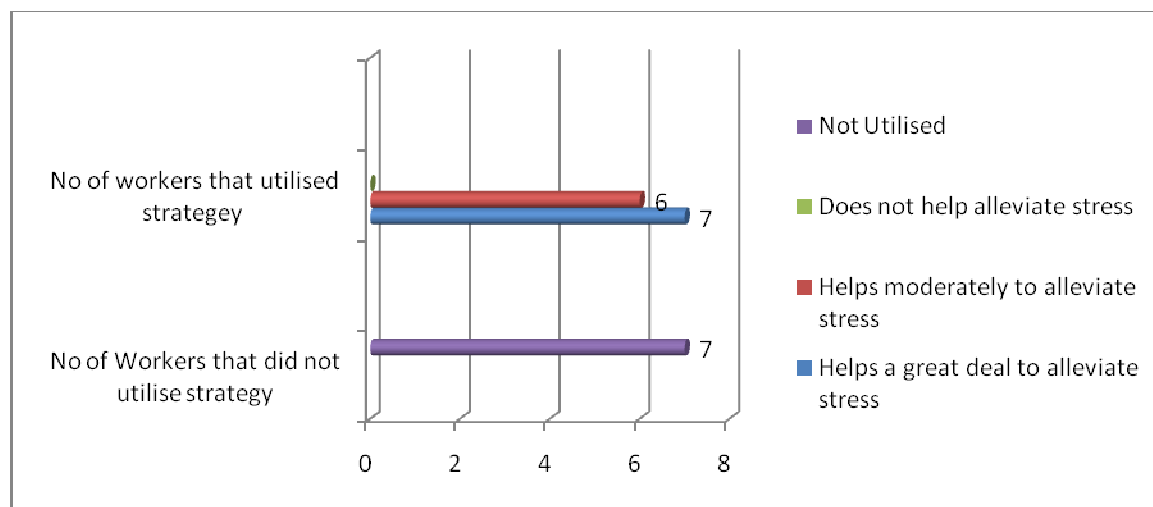
This section will focus on the variety of ways in which newly qualified social workers utilised supervision to cope with their occupational stress, as well as describe the effectiveness of supervision in the alleviation of this occupational stress.

(a) *Cultivating an atmosphere of trust with supervisor***Figure 5.43: Cultivating an atmosphere of trust in supervision**

(N=20)

Figure 43 represents the number of respondents that utilised an atmosphere of trust in supervision as a coping strategy, and of those that did, how effective this was in terms of alleviating stress. Only four of the 20 respondents did not utilise this coping strategy. Of the remaining 16, seven found an atmosphere of trust within supervision to moderately alleviate occupational stress, whilst a further nine found it to greatly alleviate stress. This data may show support for afore mentioned literature stating that the cultivation of a climate of trust with the supervisor can help the newly qualified social worker feel at ease, as well as enable them to bring their concerns or worries to the supervisor for discussion, and in this way, help to alleviate their occupational stress (Botha, 2002:210; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002:231). In addition to this, one respondent stated “You feel that the supervisor understands you, and that they are giving the best advise to you”. Another commented, “It makes you feel that the workplace has a resource that helps you perform better”.

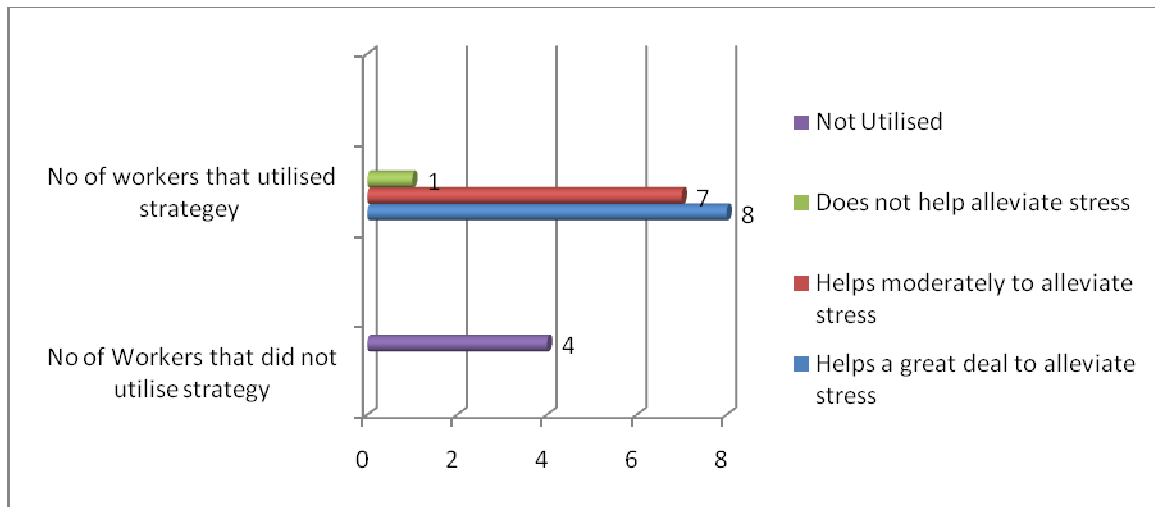
(b) *Utilisation of supervisor as role model for behaviour*



**Figure 5.44: Supervisor as role model for behaviour**

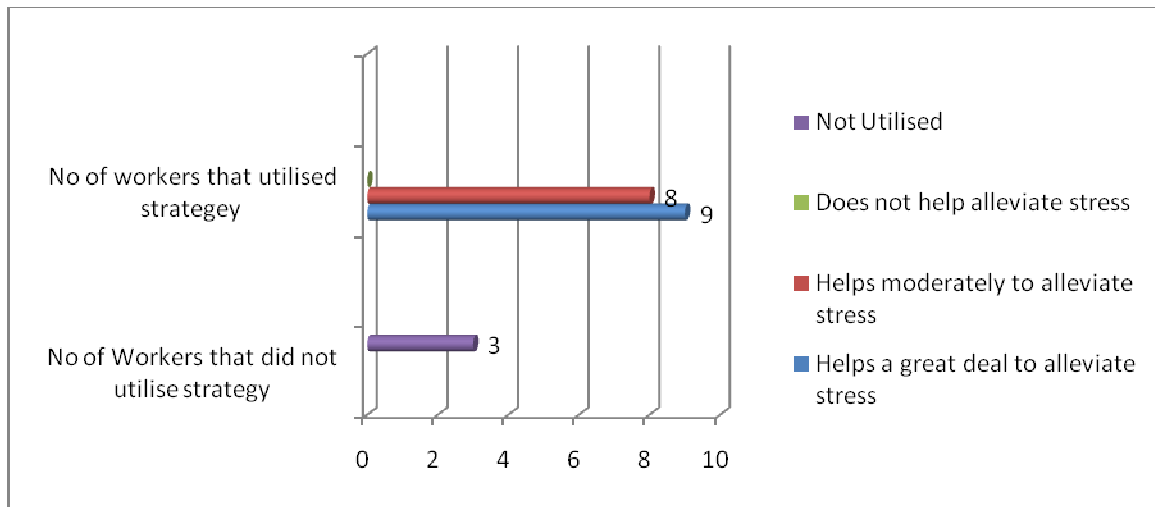
(N=20)

The above figure describes the amount of respondents utilising the supervisor as a role model to alleviate stress. Seven respondents stated that they did not utilise this coping strategy. Of the remaining 13, six found using the supervisor as a role model to moderately alleviate stress, whilst a further seven found this to greatly reduce occupational stress. This does show support for afore mentioned literature that states that the utilisation of supervisor as role model can help elucidate the expectations of the newly qualified social worker within the organisation, as well the patterns of behaviour that they should follow, which can help to alleviate occupational stress (Botha, 2002:212; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002:238). One of the respondents finding this strategy to be successful stated, "Using the supervisor as a role model gives you an indication of something better to strive towards" and another "In the begging stages it is important to be able to learn how to behave as a social worker". Considering that those all respondents that utilised the supervisor as a role model found it to help alleviate stress, and it should be noted that those respondents not utilising this resources would not benefit from these obvious benefits.

(c) *Approaching the supervisor for reassurance***Figure 5.45: Approaching the supervisor for reassurance**

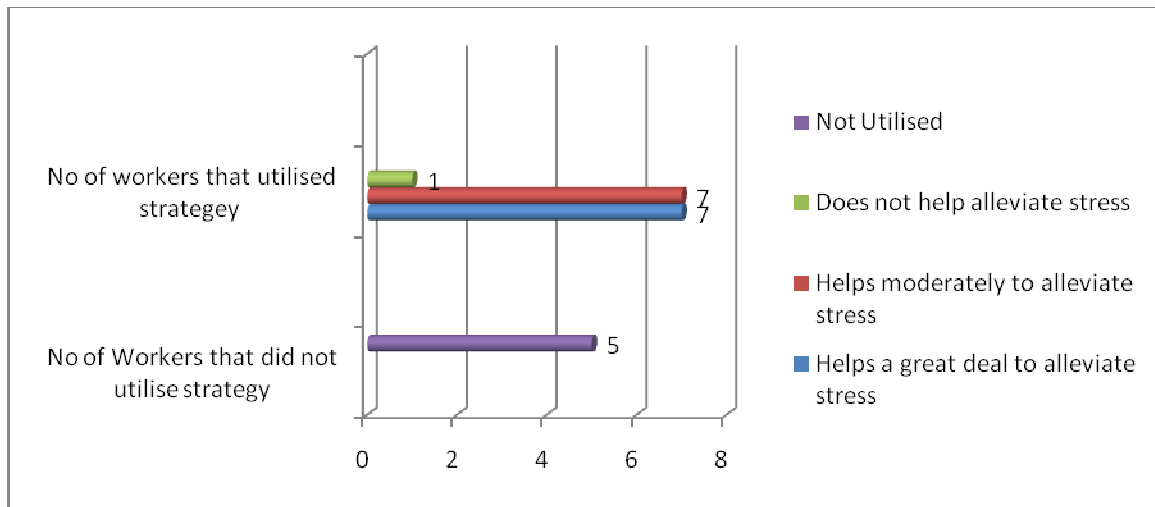
(N=20)

Figure 45 highlights the number of respondents that utilised approaching the supervisor for reassurance as a coping strategy to reduce occupational stress, as well as the effectiveness of this strategy in those that did. Four of the 20 respondents stated that they did not utilise this strategy. Of the remaining 16, only one respondent found this strategy to be ineffective. Seven respondents found this strategy to moderately alleviate stress and a further eight found this strategy to greatly alleviate occupational stress. This does show support for afore mentioned literature which states that the reassurance supplied by the supervisor can help the newly qualified social worker deal with their concerns and uncertainties, and thus help to alleviate occupational stress (Botha, 2002:212; Dill, 2007:179). In light of this, one respondent said, “You can learn from the supervisors experience, and their assurances help in difficult situations”. Another said, “The alternate perspectives of the supervisor can help you to find solutions to problems”

(d) *Learning from the supervisor***Figure 5.46: Learning from the supervisor**

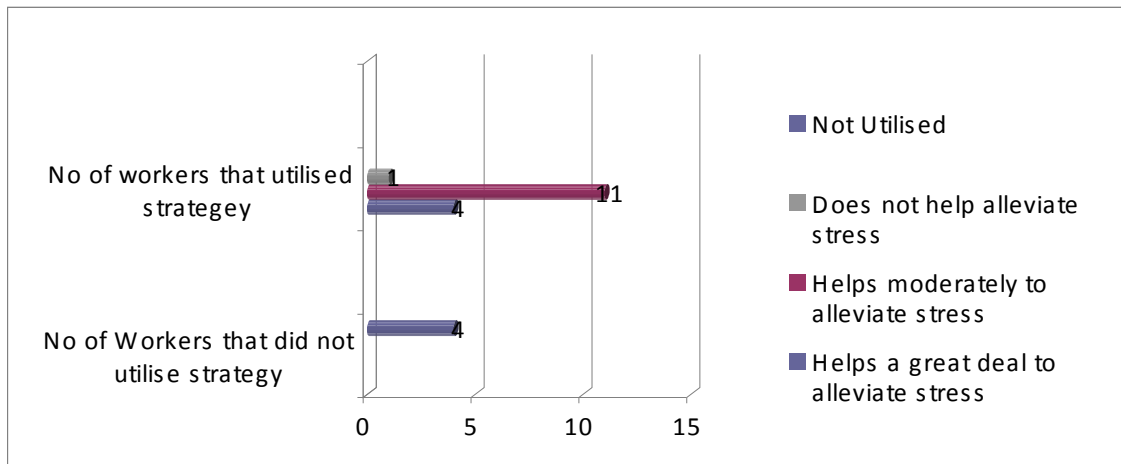
(N=20)

The above figure describes the amount of respondents that utilised learning from the supervisor as a coping strategy. Whilst only three respondents did not make use of this strategy to alleviate occupational stress, the remaining 17 respondents did. Of these, eight found the strategy to moderately alleviate occupational stress, whilst a further nine found the strategy to greatly alleviate stress. These results do show support for afore mentioned literature that states that newly qualified social workers can alleviate their occupational stress by learning from their supervisors, and in doing so, learn how to deal with difficult and stressful situations. One respondents stated, "The supervisor gives you guidance and support through their teaching". Another said, "You can use the supervisor's experience to see how to handle cases, and in this way, be surer about what you are doing." Once again, in this instance, all respondents who actively learnt from the supervisor enjoyed relief or a positive effect on occupational stress. Inversely, those not utilising this resource, would once again, not benefit with regard to alleviation of their occupational stress.

(e) *Asking for feedback from the supervisor***Figure 5.47: Asking for feedback from supervisor**

(N=20)

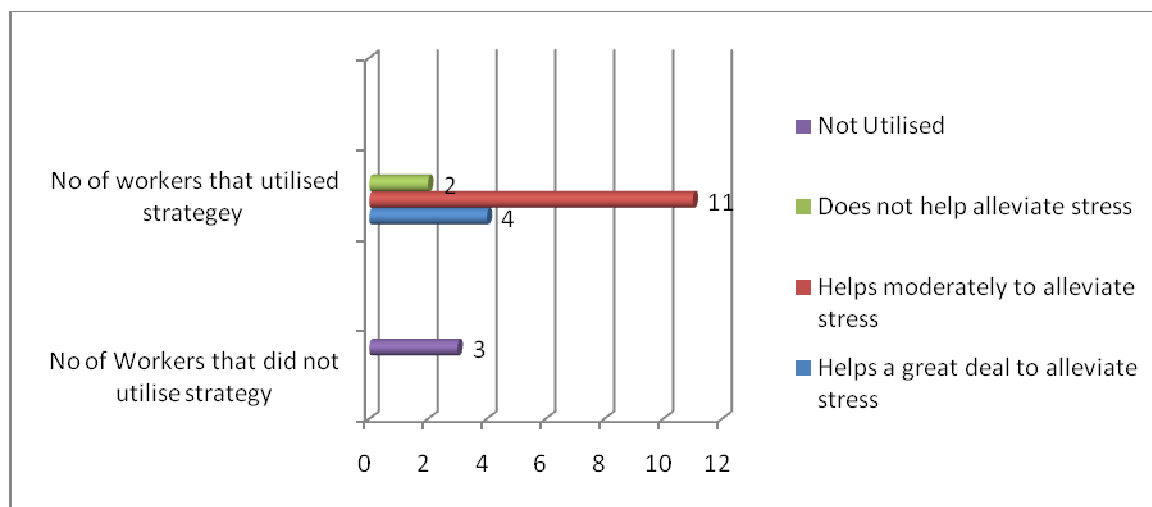
Figure 47 highlights the amount of respondents that utilised feedback from the supervisor to cope with occupational stress. Five of the 20 respondents did not utilise feedback to cope with stress. Of those that did, only one found it ineffective in helping to alleviate occupational stress. A further seven respondents found this coping strategy to moderately helping to alleviate occupational stress, and another seven respondents found that it greatly helped to alleviate stress. This data does show support for afore mentioned literature that states that feedback can clarify the newly qualified social workers role for them, and thus reduce uncertainty, as well as highlights expectations for them (Botha, 2002:212). One respondent commented, "Once the supervisor helps you to understand what the right procedures are and how you are doing, you feel less anxious". The above data displays the positive elements of feedback from the supervisor and the positive effect it can have on the occupational stress experienced by newly qualified social workers.

(f) *Utilising supervision to clarify role as social worker***Figure 5.48: Utilising supervision to clarify role**

(N=20)

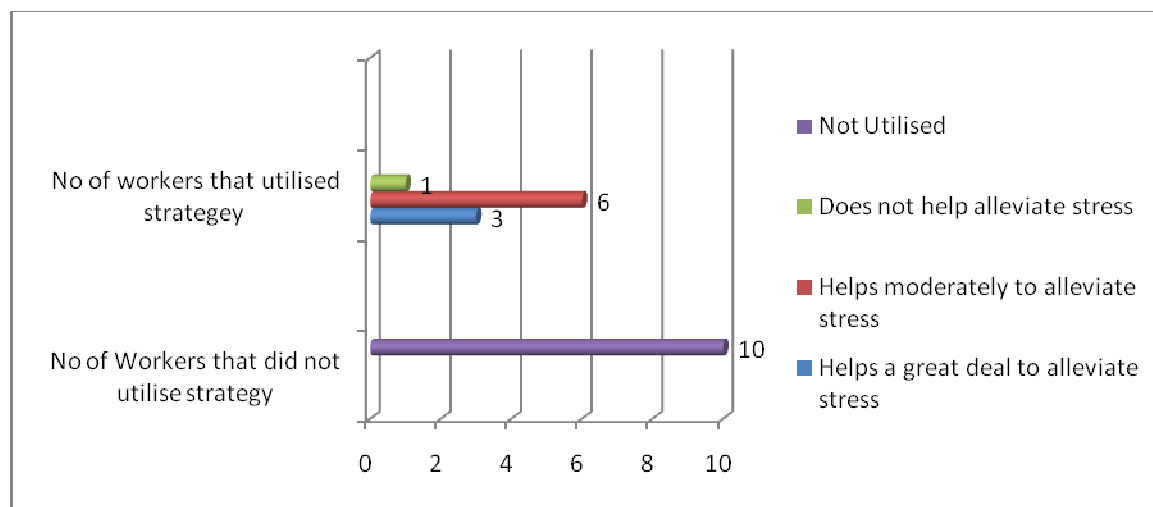
Figure 48 describes how many respondents utilised supervision as a role clarification tool with the intent of alleviating occupational stress, as well as its effectiveness in alleviating stress in those that did utilise it. Four respondents did not utilise this coping strategy. Of the remaining 16, only one respondent found it completely ineffective in terms of alleviating occupational stress. Eleven of the 20 respondents found role clarification via resulting from supervision to be moderately effective in alleviating occupational stress. A further four respondents found this coping strategy to help a great deal in alleviating stress. This data show support for afore mentioned literature pointing out that role clarification via feedback within supervision can help to reduce role conflict and thus, to some extent, alleviate occupational stress in newly qualified social workers (Botha, 2002:212). One respondent replied, “When you start working as a social worker, it is important that you know what to do, as well as how to go about doing it”, and a second mentioned, “Supervision reduces stress because it clarifies possible service delivery practices for us a s new workers”. The above data does illustrate that newly qualified social workers do benefit with regard to having their role clarified by their supervisor, and this does help to alleviate their occupational stress.



(g) *Utilising supervision to gain organisational clarity***Figure 5.49: Utilising supervision for organisational clarity**

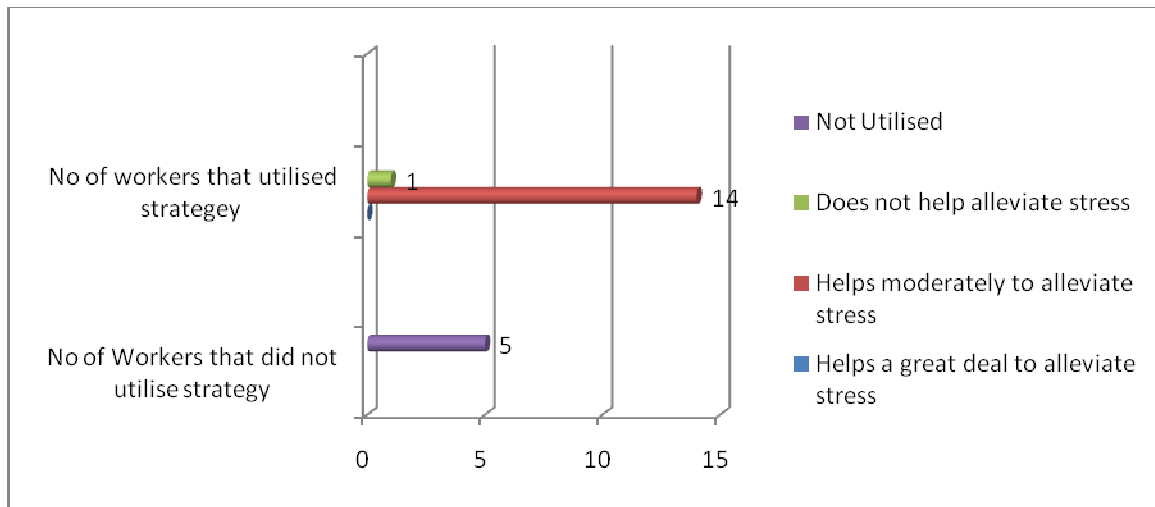
(N=20)

The above figure highlights those respondents that did and did not make use of supervision in terms of gaining organisational clarity, and through this, alleviation of perceived occupational stress. Three respondents did not make use of this coping strategy. A further two reported that they made use of supervision with the aim of gaining organisational clarity, but also that it was ineffective in alleviating their occupational stress. Eleven respondents reported that gaining organisational clarity through supervision moderately alleviated their stress, and a further four respondents said that this greatly reduced their stress. This does show support for afore mentioned literature which states that newly qualified social workers can hope to reduce their occupational stress, by gaining organisational clarity through supervision, as the covering of tasks and the opening of communication channels can aid in this alleviation (Botha, 2002:213; Engelbrecht, 1995:76; Quario, 2002:32). One of the respondents mentioned that “Certainty within the organisation is a very big buffer to stress”. Another replied, “Supervision helps me to gain a better awareness within the organisation, and thus helps me to reduce my stress”. The above data points to the fact that the majority of newly qualified social workers in the sample not only utilised supervision for organisational clarity, but found it to alleviate their occupational stress in some way.

(h) *Utilising supervision to regulate caseload***Figure 5.50: Utilising supervision to regulate caseload**

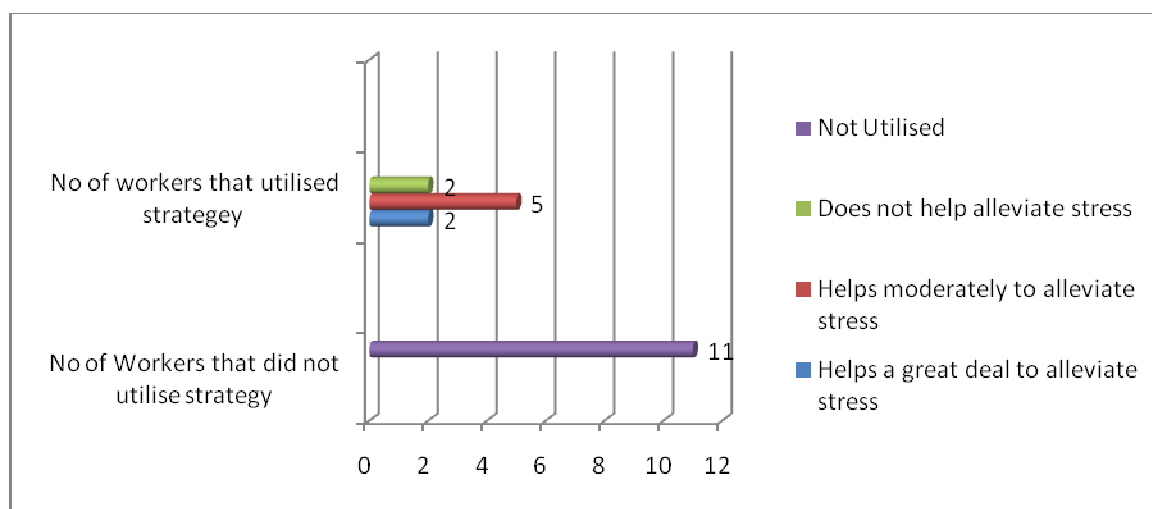
(N=20)

In the above figure, the number of respondents that utilised supervision to regulate their caseload and in this, attempt to alleviate their stress is documented. Half of the 20 respondents reported that they did not utilise supervision to regulate and reduce their caseload. Of the remaining ten, one respondent reported that they did utilise supervision to regulate caseload, but that it did not alleviate their occupational stress. Six respondents responded that it moderately alleviate their occupational stress. A further three reported that it helped a great deal to reduce stress. Despite half of the sample not utilising supervision to regulate caseload, the fact that the majority of those that did reported that it was somewhat effective in reducing stress may show some support of literature stating that newly qualified social workers caseload may be more evenly distributed with help from their supervisors, and in doing so, the amount of occupational stress experienced with regard to workload may be reduced (Botha, 2002:213). One respondent commented, “You become much more aware of how efficiently the cases can be run, when your supervisor works closely with you to regulate caseload”. Another said, “It helps you get rid of unnecessary cases, and manage those that are challenging”.

(i) *Utilising supervision to keep abreast of new developments***Figure 5.51: Utilising supervision to keep abreast of new developments**

(N=20)

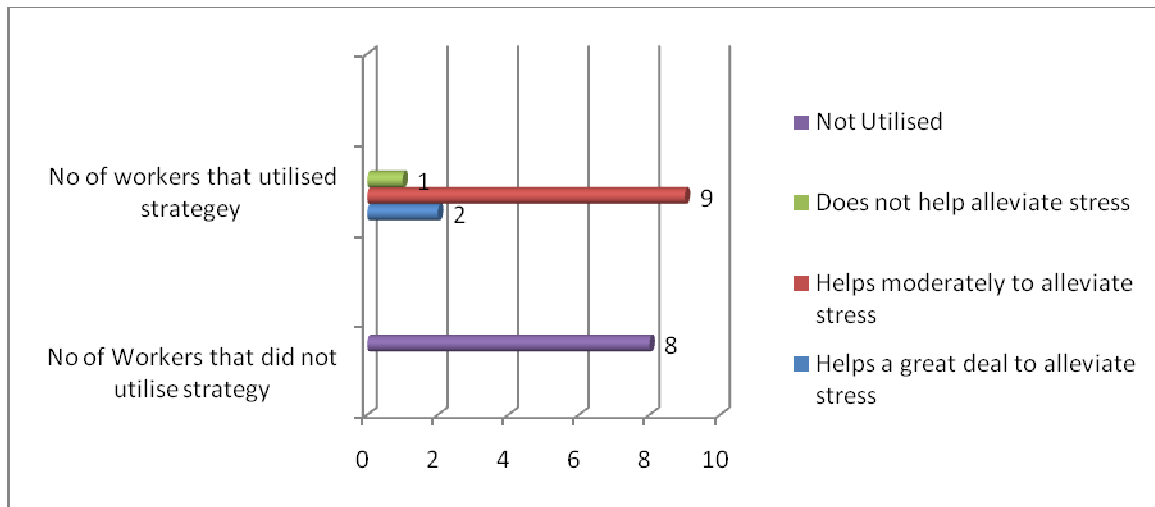
The above figure describes the amount of respondents that utilised keeping abreast of new developments via supervision as a coping strategy to reduce occupational stress. Whilst only five respondent did not make use of this strategy to alleviate occupational stress, the remaining 15 respondents did. Of these, one found the strategy to be ineffective in alleviating occupational stress, whilst a further 14 found the strategy to moderately alleviate stress. No respondents reported that this greatly helped to reduce stress. Since 14 of the 20 respondents found this strategy to moderately help alleviate stress, it may be argued that this data shows support for afore mentioned literature that highlights how newly qualified social workers can be exposed to new sources of knowledge by their supervisor and in doing so, have their skill bases increased, and within this, be in a better position to alleviate their occupational stress (Botha, 2002:214).

(j) *Utilising supervision to resolve conflict***Figure 5.52: Utilising supervision to resolve conflict**

(N=20)

In the above figure, the number of respondents that utilised supervision to resolve conflict, and in this, attempt to alleviate their stress is documented. Eleven of the 20 respondents reported that they did not utilise supervision to resolve conflict. Of the remaining nine, two respondents reported that they did utilise supervision to resolve conflict, but that it did not alleviate their occupational stress. Five respondents responded that it moderately alleviate their occupational stress. A further two reported that it helped a great deal to reduce stress. Despite just over half of the sample not utilising supervision to resolve conflict, the fact that the majority of those that did reported that it was somewhat effective in reducing stress may show some support of literature stating that the newly qualified social worker may approach their supervisor when conflict or tension arises within the organisation, and in doing this, this conflict may be resolved, and thus, the stress caused by said conflict (Botha, 2002:214; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002:231. One of the respondents replied, “My supervisor has successfully resolved conflict within the workplace, and this makes the working environment much easier to practice within”.

(k) *Utilising supervision to strengthen team building*



**Figure 5.53: Utilising supervision to strengthen team building**

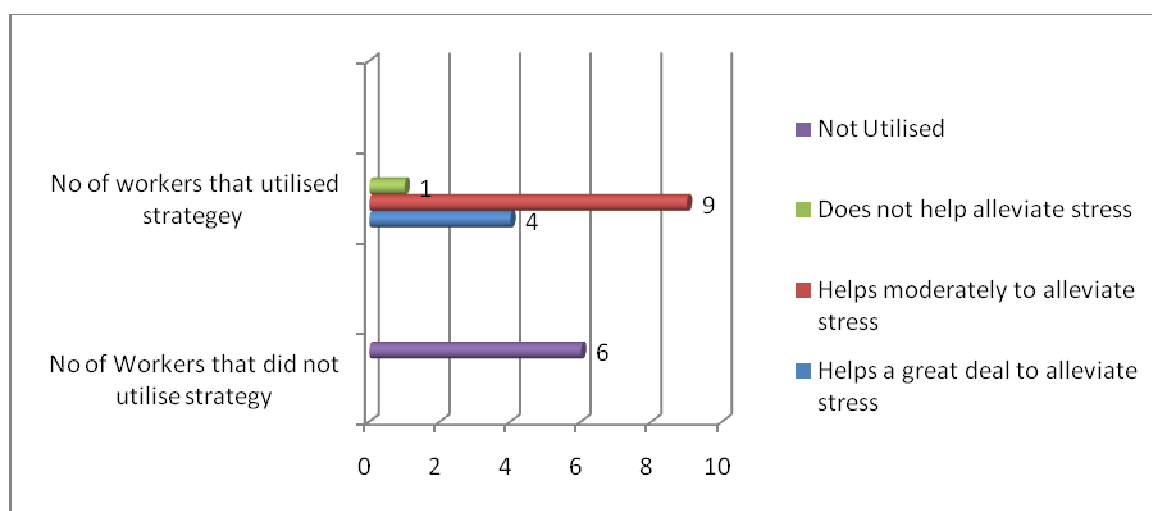
(N=20)

Figure 53 describes the amount of respondents that utilised team building via supervision as a coping strategy to reduce occupational stress. Whilst eight respondents did not make use of this strategy to alleviate occupational stress, the remaining 12 respondents did. Of these, one found the strategy to be ineffective in alleviating occupational stress, whilst a further nine found the strategy to moderately alleviate stress. Only two respondents reported that this greatly helped to reduce stress. Since nine of the 20 respondents found this strategy to moderately help alleviate stress, it may be argued that this data does show support for aforementioned literature stating that the activation of teamwork and the potential to work together by newly qualified social workers collaborating closely with their supervisors can generally add to an working environment less conducive to occupational stress (Botha, 2002:215; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002:242; Nye, 2006:96). One of the respondents said, "It has helped to strengthen the bond between colleagues, and also helped us to deal with stress together".

#### 5.4.4.5 Concrete methods for coping with stress

The following section will focus on the variety of concrete coping strategies newly qualified social workers employed, as well as the effectiveness of these strategies in helping them to cope with occupational stress.

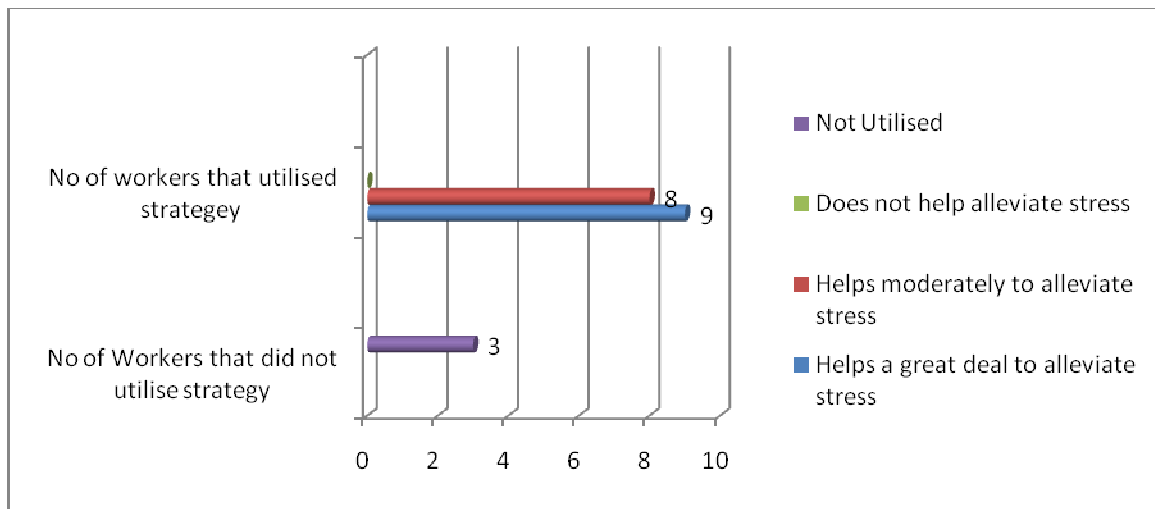
##### (a) Utilising acceptance



**Figure 5.54: Utilising acceptance**

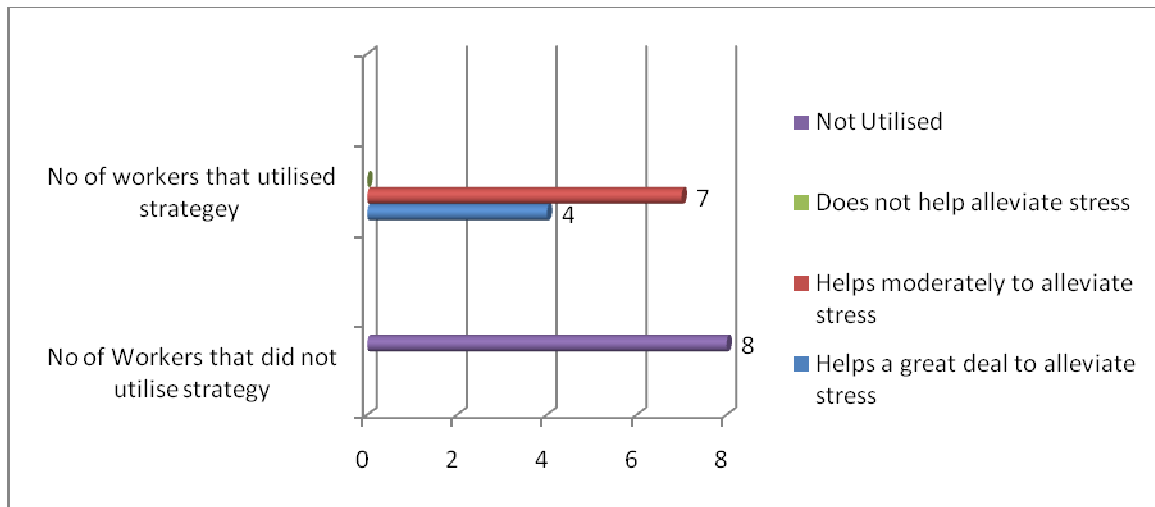
(N=20)

Figure 54 displays the amount of respondents, which utilised acceptance of negative emotions, and the expression of emotion, as a coping strategy to help alleviate stress. While six respondents did not make use of, nine reported that acceptance moderately alleviated stress, and a further four that acceptance helped a great deal to reduce stress. This shows strong support for afore mentioned literature stating that acceptance can increase self-efficacy and competence of workers, and in this way help to alleviate stress (Kastram, 1999:346). One respondent commented, "One needs an outlet for anxiety, and acceptance can provide this outlet". The above data does highlight that those newly qualified social workers that did utilise acceptance as a coping strategy did experience an alleviation of their occupational stress, to some extent.

(b) *Utilising forgiveness***Figure 5.55: Utilising forgiveness**

(N=20)

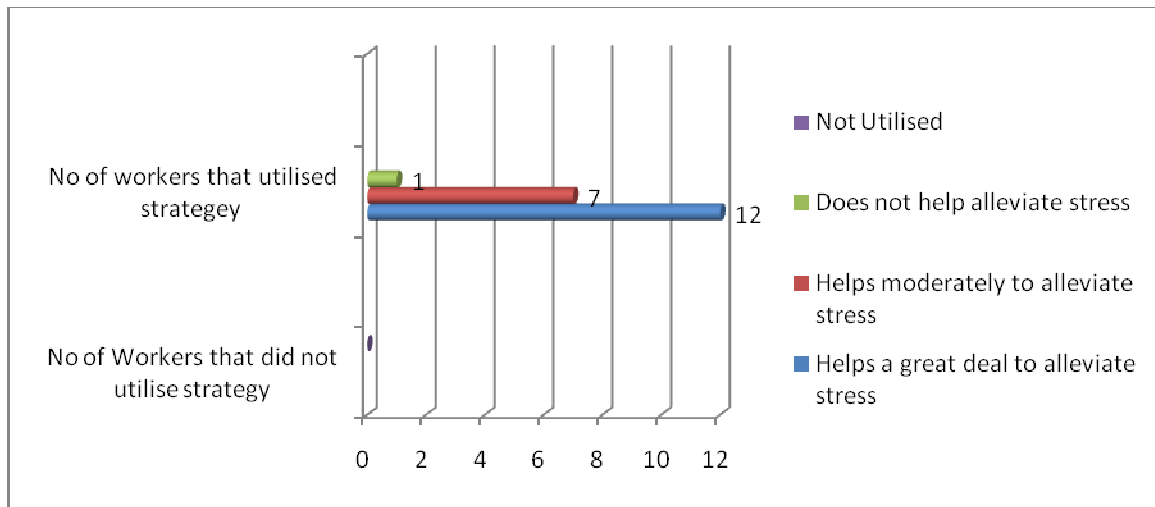
The above figure highlights the number of respondents that utilised forgiveness, with regard to being able to forgive themselves for faults or failures, as a coping strategy to reduce occupational stress. Whilst three respondents did not make use of forgiveness, eight reported that it helped moderately to reduce stress and a further nine that it helped a great deal to reduce occupational stress. This figure provides support for literature mentioning that newly qualified social workers who can forgive themselves for not being able to solve all client problems experience less anxiety, and thus less occupational stress (Kastram, 1999:347). One of the respondents replied, "Forgiveness allows you to let go of the situation and allows you to move on". Another said, "Being able to forgive allows you to work more positively with the client system".

(c) *Cultivating a healthy lifestyle***Figure 5.56: Cultivating a healthy lifestyle**

(N=20)

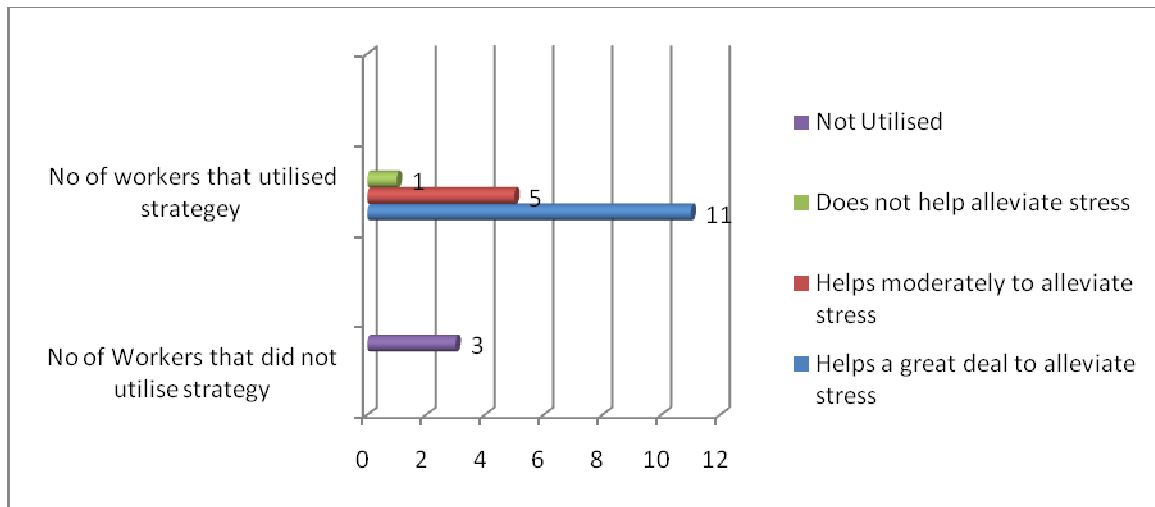
Figure 56 describes the amount of respondents that utilised cultivating a healthy lifestyle with regard to alleviating occupational stress. Whilst eight of the respondents reported not making use of this strategy, seven found it to moderately alleviate stress, and a further four that it greatly reduced occupational stress. This shows support for afore mentioned literature stating that cultivating a healthy lifestyle can restore energy to drained newly qualified social workers, as well as provide them with confidence and a sense of increased self efficacy (Furnham, 2006:373; Kaye & Fortune, 2001:32). One respondent said, “Daily exercise helps me to relax and forget work” Although this coping strategy was not utilised by all newly qualified social workers in the sample, those that did highlight that it can be effective in aiding alleviation of occupational stress.



(d) *Positivity***Figure 5.57: Utilising positivity**

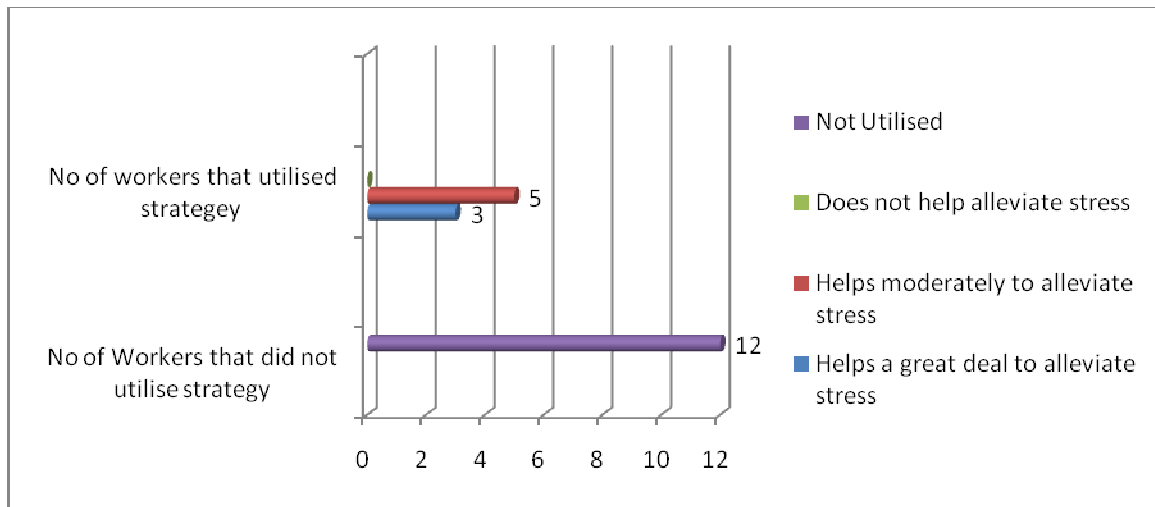
(N=20)

Figure 57 highlights the number of workers that utilised positivity to help to alleviate occupational stress. Only one worker found this strategy to be ineffective. Seven respondents found it to be moderately effective in reducing stress, and 13 respondents found that positivity helped a great deal to alleviate occupational stress. This shows strong support for aforementioned literature stating that positivity can help newly qualified social workers gain a sense of control over their work, as well as help them develop positive relationships within the workplace, all factors that help alleviate stress (Kastram, 1999:348; Zhong-Xiang *et al.*, 2008:228). “Positivity helps you get through large amounts of work and counteracts negativity which is counter productive”, was the comment of one respondent. From the above data, it is quite clear that positivity is well utilised amongst the newly qualified social workers in the sample, and that it is effective in alleviating occupational stress.

(e) *Utilising faith***Figure 5.58: Utilising faith**

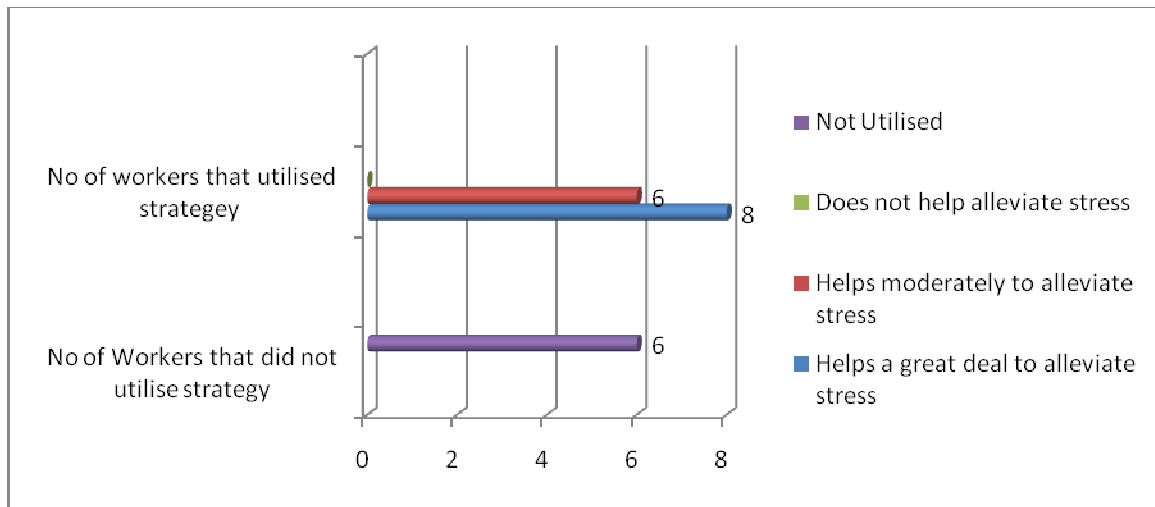
(N=20)

The above figure describes the amount of respondents that utilised faith as a coping strategy to deal with occupational stress. Figure 58 highlights that three respondents did not utilise faith. Whilst faith was ineffective for one respondent, it was moderately effective in alleviating stress for five workers, and helped reduce stress a great deal for 11 out of the 20 respondents. This shows strong support for literature highlighting that faith can help the newly qualified social worker gain perspective in life, as well as cultivate clear goal and objectives, as well as combat feelings of vulnerability and helplessness (Kastram, 1999:349; Kaye & Fortune, 2001:33). One respondent commented “Keeping faithful, and talking to God, can help me remain relaxed and helps keep me positive.” Another stated, “The power of prayer helps to increase my confidence regarding work”.

(f) *Utilising relaxation techniques***Figure 5.59: Utilising relaxation techniques**

(N=20)

Figure 59 describes the amount of workers that utilised relaxation techniques to alleviate occupational stress. Although five workers found this strategy to be moderately effective and a further three that it helped a great deal to alleviate stress, 12 of the 20 respondents did not utilise this strategy. In light of the fact that those that did utilise this strategy found positive results in terms of stress alleviation, it may be argued that these results support aforementioned literature stating that newly qualified social workers may, with practice employ relaxation techniques that may alleviate the effects of stress, as well as aid them in coping with stressful situations (Tyson *et al.*, 2002:456; Zhong-Xiang *et al.*, 2008:224). In response to this, one respondent stated, “Relaxation techniques help to physically relax my body.”

(g) *Utilising a change in workplace environment***Figure 5.60: Utilising a change in workplace environment**

(N=20)

The above figure describes the amount of respondents that utilised altering their workplace environment, with regard to the addition of music, colour, decoration and further personalisation, to help to alleviate occupational stress. The figure shows that six of the 20 respondents did not make use of this strategy to alleviate stress. Further, the figure shows that six respondents felt changing their workplace environment helped to moderately alleviate occupational stress, and a further eight felt it helped a great deal. This does display an element of support for aforementioned literature stating that making a conscious effort to alter the surrounding work environment to better suit the newly qualified social worker, and doing so on a regular basis, can help to relieve the occupational stress experienced within that environment (Potter, 1998:121). A respondent commented, "If the office is friendly it increases your willingness to work, and music can help you to relax". Another said, "Enjoying change within your working environment can help you to remain positive."

## **5.5 CONCLUSION**

In the following chapter, the conclusions and recommendations that can be drawn from this exploration will be highlighted. Conclusions will be drawn with regard to the occupational stressors that most frequently affected the newly qualified social workers in the sample, thus describing those most responsible for experience of occupational stress. Conclusions will also be drawn with regard to those coping strategies that were the most effective in dealing with experienced occupational stressors, as well as which coping strategies were and were not utilised by newly qualified social workers. The following chapter will also touch on recommendations that can be made as a result of these conclusions.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter serves to sum up the findings of the empirical investigation provided in the Chapter Five. This chapter also aims to highlight findings in a manner that may bring to light which potential stressors are most often and most strenuously experienced by newly qualified social workers, presently practicing in Non-Governmental Organisations in the Western Cape. This chapter also aims to elucidate which coping strategies these newly qualified social workers are presently employing, as well as how they experience those strategies in terms of alleviating their occupational stressors.

#### 6.2 CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions drawn from the empirical analysis presented in Chapter five shall be divided into those pertinent for occupational stressors experienced by newly qualified social workers, and then coping strategies employed by these workers.

##### 6.2.1 Occupational stressors experienced by newly qualified social workers

###### *6.2.1.1 Stressors experienced less regularly by newly qualified social workers*

It is clear from the analysis of the data presented within the previous chapter that there are particular stressors that are experienced far less regularly by the majority of respondents involved in the sample of this study. Lack of effective supervision, gender-associated problems, age-associated problems and lack of control were all potential stressors that the majority of the sample of respondents did not experience within their role as social worker. It may be assumed from this that levels and standards of supervision with regard to newly qualified social workers is at a satisfactory level. It can also be assumed that discriminations with regard to gender

and age within the workplace is less common within social work workplaces within NGOs in the Western Cape. Lack of control within the workplace and minimal instances of this as a stressor experienced by newly qualified social workers within the sample may point to better instances of supervision, as well as better management and team building in general.

#### ***6.2.1.2 Stressors experienced occasionally by newly qualified social workers***

The presenting data also highlights those stressors which the majority of respondents found to occur from time to time within the workplace. With regards to these stressors, some of the respondents were found to never experience them, others to always experience them, but the majority to experience them with a frequency somewhere in between always and never. In short, these were stressors where the respondents were more spread across the varying frequencies of experience. Conditions within the workplace, lack of job satisfaction, under-load, emotional labour, language-associated problems, lack of understanding, the communities attitude towards the social worker, role conflict, uncertainty, the application of social work theory, experiencing loss upon entering the working sphere, responsibility, and low perceived self efficacy were all stressors which, on the whole, were experienced intermittently by the majority of the sample.

#### ***6.2.1.3 Stressor experienced on a frequent basis by newly qualified social workers***

There were also stressors which, on the whole, were experienced on a much more frequent basis by the majority of the respondents. These were stressors said to be experienced on a very regular, almost 'everyday' basis by the respondents in the study. These included over-load, remuneration and the contemporary problems of the client or service user. These three stressors stand out as those experienced the most frequently by the newly qualified social workers interviewed within this study. From these findings, it is possible to conclude that the workloads experienced by those newly qualified social workers involved were a large source of stress for them and that these workloads were stressful because of their size, with respondents

feeling that they were over loaded with work. These findings also point to the amount of money present in the respondent's salary being a constant source of stress for them. Their remuneration stands as one of the most frequent sources of stress within the study. It can also be assumed that the problems of their clients form a large and frequent source of stress for the newly qualified social workers within this study. These problems, many of which cannot easily or readily solved are in themselves a constant source of stress for the respondents involved.

#### **6.2.1.4 *Personality traits and occupational stress***

The personality traits of respondents within the study were also discussed with the intention of providing findings that might elucidate those traits which might make certain newly qualified social workers more predisposed to experiencing occupational stress. The first of these personality distinctions was whether respondents were extraverted as opposed to being introverted. Whilst the majority of respondents reported that they were extraverted in nature, it was also clear that this did not contribute to the amount of occupational stress they experienced. The second personality distinction was neuroticism versus stability. Whilst the majority of respondents felt they were had more stable personality types, they also felt that this did not contribute to the occupational stress they experienced. In the conscientious versus expedient comparison, respondents were more evenly spread in terms of which trait they felt they carried. In saying this, both personality distinctions held fairly even numbers of respondents feeling that either trait did not contribute to their stress, or alternatively that it did contribute moderately to their occupational stress. This wide spread of responses might indicate that this particular personality distinction does not play such a huge part in determining how much stress is experienced by respondents. In the open to experience and closed to experience category, the majority of respondents felt they fell into the open to experience trait, but once again, these respondents were split in those feeling it contributed to their stress, and those who felt it did not. This makes it difficult to conclusively say whether this trait has any bearing on how much occupational stress is experienced. The last personality distinction was between agreeable and hostile. Here the majority of respondents felt they were more agreeable, but yet again, they were divided in



terms of those who felt this contributed and did not contribute to their occupational stress. These findings lead one to argue that personality may play a lesser role than expected with regard to how much stress newly qualified social workers experience.

### **6.2.3 Coping strategies employed by newly qualified social workers**

In this section, the discussion of coping strategies employed by newly qualified social workers in response to occupational stress will be divided into several categories being: solution focussed coping, emotion focussed coping, social support, utilising supervision to cope with stress and concrete coping methods.

#### **6.2.3.1 *Solution focussed coping***

Within solution focussed coping strategies, the reassessment of self image, the identification of available choices and the identification of available resources were strategies that were most often utilised by respondents, and additionally, were the most successful in helping to alleviate occupational stress. All three of these solution focussed strategies helped respondents to moderately and greatly alleviate stress. Whilst identifying the cause of stress was less utilised by respondents, it did show promise in helping to moderately alleviate stress. Deliberately identifying stressors was much less utilised amongst respondents. In short, the majority of these solution focussed strategies seem to show promise in their ability to alleviate stress for newly qualified social workers.

#### **6.2.3.2 *Emotion focussed coping***

Within emotion focussed coping, distancing and escape avoidance were least utilised by respondents to cope with stress. The minority of respondents that did utilise these strategies were mixed in their opinions about how effective these strategies were in alleviating stress. Avoidance and vigilance were more frequently utilised by respondents, and were also regarded as being fairly effective in helping to alleviate stress on a moderate to good level. Positive reappraisal, however, was

utilised by all respondents and also yielded the best results, with every respondent reporting either moderate or very good alleviation of occupational stress through the utilisation of this coping strategy.

### **6.2.3.3 Social support**

Within the social support category of potential coping strategies, only tangible assistance, the provision of tangible and material/ financial aid was not well utilised. Appraisal support, informational support and emotional support were all well used, and in all cases, respondents reported that these strategies were effective in helping to alleviate occupational stress.

### **6.2.3.4 Utilisation of supervision**

With regards to the utilisation of supervision as a method to help to deal or alleviate occupational stress, only using supervision to help regulate caseload, and using supervision to resolve conflict in the workplace were poorly utilised by respondents. In all other cases, coping strategies were well used by the majority of respondents. These included cultivating an atmosphere of trust with supervisor, utilisation of supervisor as role model for behaviour, approaching the supervisor for reassurance, learning from the supervisor, asking for feedback from the supervisor, utilising supervision to clarify the role as social worker, utilising supervision to gain organisational clarity, utilising supervision to keep abreast of new developments, and utilising supervision to strengthen team building. All of these strategies were also effective for the most part in helping newly qualified social workers to alleviate occupational stress. This carries with it the vital importance the newly qualified social worker/supervisor relationship has within the organisation, as well as its vital role in helping to alleviate stress.

### **6.2.3.5 Concrete methods for coping with stress**

Amongst the differing concrete methods for coping or alleviating occupational stress, utilising relaxation techniques and cultivating a healthy lifestyle were those two strategies least employed by respondents. Although they were least employed, those respondents who did make use of these coping methods did report that they were successful in helping to alleviate or cope with occupational stress. Acceptance and cultivating a change in working environment were used by more respondents, and both methods were reported to be effective in helping to alleviate stress. Forgiveness, faith and positivity were utilised by the most respondents, as well as yielding the most positive results in terms of helping respondents alleviate stress. It is apparent that these coping strategies are very dependent on the attitude with which the worker approaches their day to day life, their job and the way they perceive stress. It is perhaps this attitude that enables such coping methods to be so effective.

## **6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Recommendations made as a result of this study are made with the conclusions drawn above in mind.

### **6.3.1 Notable stressors**

With regard to occupational stressors experienced by newly qualified social workers practicing within NGOs, within the Western Cape, there are noteworthy recommendations. It is clear from the above findings that the workload experienced by newly qualified social workers is significant, and this does contribute to their overall stress. *The amount of cases newly qualified social workers must attempt to deal with at any given time, especially within NGOs, is a matter that should be addressed.* Although this is often dependant on the number of social workers present within an organisation, and this indirectly on available funds, it is a matter which needs attention, as this, in itself affects the amount of social workers remaining within the industry.

*Remuneration is another contentious issue which merits attention. As one of the predominant and frequent stressors uncovered within this study, remuneration or salary remains an ongoing cause for concern, especially for those social workers within the NGO sector. Despite NGOs' reliance on donations, fundraising and small governmental subsidies for the salaries they pay their workers, small meagre NGO pay rates will remain a detractant for those newly qualified social workers entering the field of practice. Newly qualified social workers often view themselves as professionals, and as such, expect remuneration that reflects this. Retention strategies that incorporate the NGO sector should become a consideration for those large NGOs whose national and local branches are understaffed.*

### **6.3.2 Notable coping strategies**

*In terms of successful coping strategies, emotion and solution focussed coping that incorporates active coping by the newly qualified social worker seem to remain the most effective. It is with this in mind that programs/courses dealing with active participation in taking ownership of stress be installed within NGOs for all newly appointed social workers, as it is in this active participation, that newly qualified social workers can be taught to approach their stress from the correct vantage, as well as allowing these workers to be aware of potential stressors from the outset.*

This study had also demonstrated the importance of social support and the merits such support has in terms of helping to not only cope with occupational stress, but also allow newly qualified social workers feel less vulnerable to potential stressors. *It is in this light that NGOs as well as supervisors make attempts to cultivate strong organisational and team bonds, so that support systems within the workplace are cultivated.* In this way an organisational buffer to stress can be created, which protects its own workers in times of crisis.

The importance of the supervisor/newly qualified social worker relationship has also been highlighted by this study. *It is vital that NGOs reinforce the notion that supervisor's and their new supervisee's are encouraged to cultivate a trusting, friendly relationship, where stress can be shared freely, as well as the ability to rely on one another.* Testament to this is that fact that within this study, one of the most

notable stressors for respondents was workload/over-load. In contrast, utilising supervision to regulate caseload was one of the least utilised coping strategies. This speaks volumes, in terms of simple ideas which might alleviate overall stressors experienced by newly qualified social workers. A cultivation of strong, trusting bonds within supervision would enable newly qualified social workers the space to approach their supervisors with their concerns over caseloads. The fact that supervision, in many other aspects provided respondents with many levels of stress alleviation is proof of this.

The most effective concrete coping strategies were those that were related to the attitude the worker with regard to stress. Perhaps it might be important for organisations and supervisors to stress that newly qualified social workers take an active and reasoned approach to their stress, as part of their work day regime. *Conceptualising their stress on a day to day basis may be a positive way in which newly qualified social workers can go about cultivating the correct attitude with regards to stress alleviation.*

### **6.3.3 Further research**

It must be noted that whilst this study has elucidated the experiences of newly qualified social workers, with regard to their experiences of occupational stress,, as well as their coping strategies to deal with this stress, it has done so within the framework of a particular area within the Western Cape. Further research, with regards to other areas of the Western Cape, as well as greater South Africa, may paint a wider picture of the occupational stress experienced by newly qualified social workers, and the manner in which they are coping with it. With a greater level of detail additional research would provide, a more national image of social worker stress could be formulated. In this way, policy making in terms of public welfare and social services may be geared to provide better support for the social workers practicing within this sphere. A national image of social worker occupational stress could provide trends that might accrue more efficient resource provision and allocation, so allowing social workers to more effectively cope with the occupational stress they experience.

This study has also focussed on the newly qualified social worker in particular. Further research with regard to occupational stress experienced by social workers well versed in their field and their practice might provide insight into those occupational stressors which are universal to the profession of social work, within South Africa. Such information could also be useful in determining national policies to support social workers with regard to the local context, as well as elucidate ways in which universal occupational stressors may be reduced by management.

#### **6.4 SUMMARY**

To summarise, this study has been presented in several facets. Chapter one outlined the motivation for the study itself, the rationale behind this, as well as the aims and objectives for the study as a whole. Chapter two highlighted the local, South African context in which newly qualified social workers can be viewed, as well as the public welfare environment in which these workers practice. The second chapter of this study also highlighted the scope and nature of the South African Non-governmental organisation, with regard to their mission, role and structure, within the South African welfare state. Chapter three focussed on the range of occupational stressors existent in the social work workplace, as well as the manner in which they might be experienced by newly qualified social workers in the South African context. It also focussed on potential personality traits, and how these traits may predispose newly qualified social workers to experience occupational stress. Chapter four outlined the variety of coping strategies available to newly qualified social workers, from perspectives in coping, potential support, supervision and concrete coping strategies. Chapter five provided an in depth examination of a sample of 20 newly qualified social workers, with regard to the occupational stressors they experienced in practice, the coping strategies they employed in response to these stressors, and their perceptions regarding stress and coping within their role as social workers in South Africa. This, the last chapter of this study, highlighted the conclusions to be drawn from the previous exploration, what they might mean in a local context, as well as describing possible recommendations to be made with regard to occupational stress in a social work context, coping with said occupational stress, and recommendations for further research.

There were several conclusions drawn from this study. The first of which was that newly qualified social workers did experience frequent sources of occupational stress within their role. Whilst there were a wide spectrum of stressors experienced by newly qualified social workers on an occasional basis, occupational stressors such as very heavy workloads, unsatisfactory remuneration and the multivariate problems of the client population stood out as stressors experienced on a very frequent basis. The second conclusion to be drawn from this study was that personality traits may play less of a role than expected in determining how much newly qualified social workers experience occupational stress. The third conclusion to be drawn from this study was that a wide range of coping strategies were not only available to newly qualified social workers but that a great deal were effective in helping newly qualified social workers to alleviate their occupational stress.

Several recommendations were also drawn from this study. The first of these recommendations was that the issues of heavy workload and remuneration, as prolific stressors for newly qualified social workers be addressed by, not only management within non-governmental organisations, but by government, in efforts to increase the resources available to newly qualified social workers. The second recommendation raised was with regard to coping with stress. This recommendation highlighted the importance of active ownership of stress and coping by newly qualified social workers, the cultivation of a supporting environment within the workplace, the emphasis on the supportive function of supervision and the cultivation of social worker perspective that stress is a task that should be managed daily. The last broad recommendation made by this study is with regards that further research into the topic of social worker stress, not only in other areas of South Africa, but across social worker generations might provide valuable information which might enable management, as well as government to better curb occupational stress experienced by social workers in practice.

In conclusion, the aims and objectives of this study have been achieved. This study has introduced the context of the newly qualified social worker within South African NGOs, within the Western Cape, as well as highlight the characteristics and role of these NGOs within the local context. This study has also highlighted and explained the range of factors that might contribute to occupational stress of newly qualified social workers within an NGO. In addition, this study has described the coping

strategies employed by newly qualified social workers in response to occupational stress in the workplace. Lastly, this study has investigated the experiences of newly qualified social workers in NGOs of their occupational stress and the existing coping strategies they do employ. In doing so, this study has achieved its broad aim of illustrating the perceptions and experiences newly qualified social workers have, with regard to the factors that contribute to their occupational stress, as well as the coping strategies they employ to address this stress.



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## Questionnaire

### Section A

#### Identifying Details

Sex: .....

Number of Months in Practice as Qualified Social Worker: .....

Age : .....

### Section B

#### Experiences of Stress as Newly Qualified Social Worker

By indicating on the available scale, respondents are called to highlight to what extent they experience the specific stressor. The scale, numbered from 1 to 3, shall be representative of differing levels of experience of stressors. If a three is indicated, respondents are asked to please comment on how this stressor affects them, and why it affects them, in the space provided.

1 = never

2 = sometimes

3 = Always

#### **Place**

Conditions in the workplace ( <i>Bad lighting, noise, lack of space or cramped workspace</i> )	1	2	3

Lack of job Satisfaction ( <i>Lack of comfort and happiness from Job</i> )	1	2	3
Over-Load ( <i>Having an inordinate amount of work and too little time to complete</i> )	1	2	3

Under-Load ( <i>Where the individual's skills and expertise may not be fully utilised</i> )	1	2	3
Remuneration ( <i>Pay / Salary / Benefits</i> )	1	2	3
Lack of effective Management / Supervision	1	2	3

**Person**

Emotional labour ( <i>The emotional strain from having to fulfill a particular role within the workplace.</i> )	1	2	3
Language ( <i>language barriers in practice</i> )	1	2	3
Gender ( <i>As a source of Stress in practice</i> )	1	2	3
Age ( <i>Stressor when working with older service users</i> )	1	2	3
Culture ( <i>Differing cultural norms as a source of stress</i> )	1	2	3

**Problem**

12Lack of information ( <i>with regard to service user's problems</i> )	1	2	3
The Communities Attitude towards the Social Worker	1	2	3
Contemporary Problems of Service User ( <i>Poverty, crime, violence, rape, child abuse</i> )	1	2	3

### Process

Role Conflict ( <i>Being unsure or dissatisfied with the role expected of the individual within the workplace</i> )	1	2	3
Uncertainty ( <i>Uncertainty regarding decision making within the workplace</i> )	1	2	3

The application of social work theory in practice	1	2	3

### Personnel

Experiencing Loss ( <i>New role as social worker / loss of old routine and identity as student</i> )	1	2	3
Responsibility ( <i>Being given increasing amounts of responsibility in terms of one's job</i> )	1	2	3
Low perceived self Efficacy ( <i>Individual believes that they do not have the competence to achieve a goal or solve a problem</i> )	1	2	3
Lack of Control ( <i>individual perceives that their work-life is out of control</i> )	1	2	3

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### **Personality Factors and Stress**

Respondents are asked to please indicate, in terms of the big five personality characteristics, which personality trait they fall under (NOTE: In each case, respondents must choose one or the other), and then also highlight how much they feel this personality characteristic contributes to their perceived stress.

1 = Does not Contribute

2 = Contributes to a moderate extent

3 = Contributes to a large extent

<u>Extraversion</u>			<u>Introversion</u>		
(extroverted, confident, outgoing)			(shy, introverted, withdrawn)		
1	2	3	1	2	3

<u>Neuroticism</u>			<u>Stability</u>		
(anxious, nervous, lower self esteem)			(more confident, sure of their abilities)		
1	2	3	1	2	3
<u>Conscientious</u>			<u>Expedient</u>		
(greater sense of obligation and expectation)			(less concerned with rules)		
1	2	3	1	2	3





## Section C

### Coping with Occupational Stress and Stressors

Respondents are asked to indicate which coping strategies they employ. If a Yes is highlighted, the respondents is asked to then indicate to what extent these strategies help to alleviate occupational stress. Indicate by circling a yes or a no, and then the corresponding number. If a three is indicated, please comment on how this coping strategy affects you, and why it affects you, in the space provided.

1 = Does not help to alleviate stress

2 = Does help in a moderate way to alleviate stress

3 = Does a great deal to alleviate stress

### **Solution Focussed Coping**

Do you deliberately identify the stressors within your life?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do you deliberately identify the causes of the stressors?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do you focus on self image, and what you would like your image to be?	No	Yes	1	2	3

Do you identify the choices available in terms of changing your self and situation?	No	Yes	1	2	3

Do you identify resources available to you to reduce stress?	No	Yes	1	2	3

### Emotion focussed Coping

Do You Utilize Avoidance ( <i>attempt to separate oneself from source of stress e.g. vacation</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You Utilize Escape avoidance ( <i>wishful thinking, recreational drugs, smoking, drinking</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You Utilize Vigilance ( <i>seeking help from others, directing attention toward stressor</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You Utilize Distancing ( <i>acknowledges problem but does not deal with it</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3

Do You Utilize Positive reappraisal ( <i>create positive meaning from stressful events</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3

### Social Support

Do You Utilize Appraisal support ( <i>being assisted by an individual to better understand problem</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You Utilize Informational support ( <i>getting information from someone on how to deal with problem</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You Utilize Emotional Support ( <i>receiving emotional support from other people in your life</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You Utilize Tangible assistance ( <i>material and financial support</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3

### Coping With Stress Through Utilisation of Supervision

Do you cultivate an atmosphere of trust your with supervisor / discussing worries with supervisor?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You Use the supervisor as a role model for behaviour etc?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You Go to the supervisor for reassurance?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You Learn from the supervisor?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do you ask for feedback from the supervisor?	No	Yes	1	2	3

Do you use supervision to clarify your role as social worker?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do you use supervision to gain organisational clarity?	No	Yes	1	2	3

Do you use supervision / supervisor to help you regulate caseload?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do you use Supervision to keep abreast of new developments?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do you use supervision to help resolve conflict?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do you use supervision to strengthen team building?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Other...	No	Yes	1	2	3



### Concrete methods for coping with stress

Do You Utilize Acceptance ( <i>acceptance of negative emotion and expression of emotion</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You Utilize Forgiveness ( <i>being able to forgive oneself for failures</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You have a Healthy Lifestyle ( <i>healthy diet, exercise</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You Utilize Positivity ( <i>healthy positive outlook</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3

Do You Utilize Faith ( <i>spirituality</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You Utilize Biofeedback ( <i>checking one's body for the signs of stress</i> ) ?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You Utilize Relaxation techniques?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Do You Change your workplace environment ( <i>music, colour, decoration</i> )?	No	Yes	1	2	3
Other...	No	Yes	1	2	3

