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The Effects of Compassion Fatigue Among ChildWelfare Workers

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THE EFFECTS OF COMPASSION FATIGUE AMONG CHILDWELFARE
WORKERS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Henok Kidane
Linda Rimel
May 2025

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ABSTRACT

Background: Research has shown that compassion fatigue (CF) is a state of physical and emotional exhaustion in which workers empathize with their clients' suffering. CF has been found to impact child welfare workers, leading to high turnover rates, multiple placement changes for foster children and youth, and burnout. The knowledge gap is that limited research has been conducted to examine the effects of CF among child welfare workers. Objective: This systematic review proposes to synthesize literature on compassion fatigue among child welfare workers' overall well-being. Methods: The following database was used: One Search, Google Scholar, and PubMed. The keywords include ("compassion fatigue" or "secondary traumatic stress"), "mental health," "burnout," and "social workers." For inclusion in this systematic review, we systematically reviewed published English articles from 2014 to 2024.

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CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEM FORMULATION

Introduction

This chapter explores compassion fatigue (CF) among child welfare workers. First, this chapter will discuss the prevalence of compassion fatigue. Second, we will discuss the risk factors found in compassion fatigue for child welfare, which are experiencing low satisfaction at work, lack of social support at work or home, and those who practice poor self-care. Third, impact factors would affect workers' feelings, the quality of their work, and the high caseload. Fourth, the prevention factor of CF would be a self-care plan.

Defining Compassion Fatigue

CF is a pressing problem within the field of child welfare, significantly impacting workers who are routinely exposed to the trauma and distress of vulnerable families. Figley (1995) uses the term CF to describe professionals working with clients who are experiencing trauma. CF is a psychological phenomenon commonly observed in professions that require frequent and intense emotional engagement with individuals who are suffering or traumatized, such as healthcare and social work.

Compassion Fatigue and Secondary Traumatic Stress Interchangeable

CF and Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) are interchangeable.

Research shows that child welfare workers who work with clients who have traumatic experiences have developed CF and, over time, grew STS. These findings demonstrate that these two concepts are considered to be interchangeable. According to Reinks (2020), STS is closely related to CF, which can manifest symptoms such as emotional numbness, trouble concentrating, and feeling discouraged, which can stress child welfare professionals. Child welfare workers can be exposed to this exposure to their cases if there is any type of trauma that has been built up.

Measurement of Compassion Fatigue

CF can be measured using various self-report assessment tools specifically designed to capture the unique dimensions of this phenomenon. These tools typically assess critical components of CF, including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced compassion satisfaction. There are a few commonly used measures of CF. One is the Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) Scale. The ProQOL Scale is one of the most widely used measures of CF and related constructs, developed by Beth Hudnall Stamm. It consists of three subscales. The first is Compassion Satisfaction, which measures satisfaction and how it is derived from being able to help others. The second is burnout, which assesses feelings of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

The third is STS, which evaluates symptoms related to exposure to others' trauma. Respondents rate the frequency of various experiences on a Likert scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of CF.

Levels of Compassion Fatigue

There is evidence to suggest that CF varies by the type of profession (e.g., Ondrejková & Halamová, 2022). Ondrejková and Halamová (2022) conducted a study to determine the prevalence and levels of CF among different helping professions. Based on data gathered from 607 helping professions (nurses, doctors, paramedics, home nurses, teachers, psychologists, psychotherapists, coaches, social workers, priests and pastors, and police officers), the researchers found that CF was highest among doctors followed by teachers and nurses. Social workers' CF level fell slightly below those of nurses.

Age and Education

Studies have found that levels of CF were high among younger nurses with lower educational levels. Wang et al. (2021) conducted a study to estimate the levels of CF among oncology nurses. The research design was a systematic review of ten electronic database articles. Based on the data gathered from 21 systemic review articles from 6533 oncology nurses across 6 different countries, the researchers found that geographical locations in Asia with oncology nurses significantly affect the prevalence of CF.

Risk Factors of Compassion Fatigue

The risk factors found in CF are female workers, new workers, high caseload, and working in child welfare.

Female Workers

The risk factors found in CF are female workers, new workers, high caseload, and child welfare. Female workers in the profession of child welfare have a higher risk of CF. According to Sprang et al. (2011), 50% of child protection workers who were female workers had a high risk of CF out of 363 workers sampled in this study. You can see that child welfare workers who work with clients who have traumatic experiences have developed CF and, over time, grew STS. You can see that these two concepts are considered to be interchangeable.

New Social Workers

New social workers are especially at high risk of CF because they take on a new role for the first time. Studies have shown that 18.5% of new workers in the field of child welfare experience CF in one year or less (Hook et al.,2009). The same study also shows that the percentage in two years was 34.5% (Hook et al.,2009). This can be due to constant exposure to trauma stories and experience of working with abused and neglected children. The design used in this study surveys that were given to staff members in three organizations providing child welfare services.

High Caseloads

Studies found that mental health professionals working in patient care settings with high caseloads experience post-traumatic stress disorder. According to Singh et al. (2020), individuals who received training and practice in cognitive behavioral therapy and exposure to STS in the workplace are more likely to have CF. In the same study, the number of clients on the caseloads and STS are more likely to appear for mental health professionals (Singh et al., 2020). Research shows that CF has a negative impact on mental health and the overall well-being of professionals. CF and STS are shown to be interchangeable, as this is shown in this article.

Impact of Compassion Fatigue

High Turnover Rate

Many studies found that CF had the most vital and significant effect on high turnover rates (Xiaoyi et al., 2021; Diana et al., 2019). According to Diana et al. (2019), 20% of nurses leave their jobs within their first employment. This is due to the ongoing stress and feelings of burnout experienced by nurses, which contribute to job dissatisfaction and an increase in turnover rates. This raises concerns about the quality of care provided for the clients. Research shows that factors toward CF can have an impact on turnover rates. Implementing mindfulness, self-care plans, and debriefing with coworkers and supervisors can mitigate CF among nurses (Diana et al., 2019).

Multiple Placement Changes

There is evidence suggesting placement changes can have adverse outcomes for children in foster care (Conell et al., 2006). As you can see, this can also take an emotional toll on social workers, leading to a higher chance of having CF. When placement changes become frequent, workers may feel they need more support. According to Conell et al.(2006), children who experience multiple placement changes are likely to experience attachment difficulties.

Burnout

The literature consistently demonstrates a strong relationship between CF and burnout among helping professionals, including social workers. CF and burnout share overlapping symptoms, such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment. While CF specifically arises from repeated exposure to others' suffering and trauma, burnout is a more general response to chronic workplace stressors. However, both conditions can coexist and mutually reinforce, exacerbating the negative impact on professionals' well-being and job performance. Research suggests that CF may precede burnout, with initial feelings of empathy and compassion gradually giving way to emotional exhaustion and cynicism. Conversely, burnout may also increase vulnerability to CF by diminishing professionals' capacity to effectively cope with the emotional demands of their work. Recognizing and addressing both CF and burnout is essential for promoting the resilience and

well-being of helping professionals, including social workers, and ensuring the delivery of high-quality care to those they serve.

Poor Psychological Health

There is evidence suggesting that women's mental health partners who are providing specialized mental health care to those with psychological illnesses are at risk of being personally affected by their jobs. Akhtar et al. (2024) conducted a study measuring CF, STS, burnout, psychological problems, and resilience in women mental health professionals. Based on the data gathered from 120 women's mental health, it was found that CF was higher among mental health participants who are women than men. The design used in this study was a professional quality life scale for CF. This study shows that practitioners or social workers have poor health due to the high levels associated with the job, which can include working with clients regularly who are facing traumatic experiences.

Prevention of Compassion Fatigue

A self-care plan is the best way to prevent CF because it helps reduce stress and recharge. According to Salloum et al. (2015), self-care practices such as socializing, having hobbies, and taking pleasure trips such as vacations have helped lower burnout and CF. Self-care can bring a wide range of activities that people may engage in to manage their physical and emotional well-being. It is essential to have a self-care plan, as it helps you have CF and STS. Bringing in

self-care strategies that can be incorporated can help understand trauma with workers and clients.

Conclusion

This chapter found that CF is common among child welfare workers. Having high levels of CF for child welfare workers can lead to high turnover rates, as this can have an impact on the workers. Bringing in new workers in the child welfare profession can lead them to CF as not getting the support they need. Studies have shown that self-care can reduce the effects of CF by improving workers' overall health and well-being.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, we will summarize past studies that examined the effects of CF among helping professionals and describe the gaps in current studies on CF. Next, we will pose the research question and hypothesis. Then, we will explain the Stress Process Model, which informs the research question. This chapter concludes with a description of the study's significance.

Literature Review

This literature review will examine three past studies that help us understand CF among helping professionals. According to Cocker et al. (2016), CF has negative adverse effects on mental health professionals. This can be reducing sympathy or developing empathy or satisfaction with work. For example, a systematic review of 13 studies was identified; most of these studies were nurses. Another systematic review of 3 studies focused on community service workers, while no studies on emergency service workers (Cocker et al., 2016). The design used for this systematic review is the Professional Quality Life Scale, which measures CF and STS and Burnout (Cocker et al., 2016).

Studies have found that CF hurts job demands and mental health professionals (Singh et al., 2020). Singh et al. (2020) state that relationships with

other health professionals and supervisors' support are considered work-related and CF. The same study also shows that only 30% of CF healthcare professionals have decreased burnout (Singh et al., 2020). For example, a systematic review of 15 quantitative studies was included and assessed to look at the negative impacts of CF in the mental health profession (Singh et al., 2020). The design used an inductive analysis approach to determine job demands and the mental health profession.

Studies have found that CF, burnout, and Compassion Satisfaction levels have increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Lluch et al., 2022). According to Lluch et al. (2022), protective and risk factors, such as gender, profession, and workplace, were associated with CF in this study. The same research shows in terms of gender that more than 50% of women have a higher chance of CF (Lluch et al., 2022). Regarding the workplace, research showed that workers suffer less burnout. For example, a systematic review of 76 cross-sectional and longitudinal studies revealed that COVID-19 impacted CF, Burnout, and Compassion Satisfaction (Lluch et al., 2022). The design used for this systematic review is a systematic review and Meta-analysis of PRISMA guidelines.

Gaps In Literature

CF and its effects are well investigated in the mental health profession. After reviewing these three systematic review articles, I found that prior CF studies have centered around the mental health profession. The knowledge gap

is that limited research has been conducted to examine the effects of CF among child welfare workers.

Theory

The Stress Process Model focuses on the stressors and factors that mediate or moderate the effects of stress on health outcomes (Pearlin, 1981). The model considered stressors as events and conditions that challenge coping skills and threaten to overwhelm them psychically and mentally. Child welfare workers who experience CF can relate to this model as it shows repeated exposure can lead to social workers suffering and experiencing emotional overload and exhaustion. This acts as a continuous stressor that can lead to CF. This can lead child welfare workers to do a poor job of helping their clients get the services they need.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The research question would be: what are the effects of CF among child welfare workers? Guided by the stress process model, this systematic review will synthesize existing studies to determine the impact of CF on child welfare workers' overall well-being, including health outcomes. This research question is essential to address because CF can lead social workers to have emotional exhaustion, increased burnout, and decreased empathy. Moreover, CF can negatively impact the social worker's performance in implementing case

management, building client relationships, and establishing professional boundaries.

Significance of Study

Understanding CF among child welfare workers is essential because it gives social workers a better understanding of what preventive measures and support systems can be implemented to ensure their health and well-being. Research can help identify factors contributing to CF's development of prevention strategies and provide support systems for child welfare workers to maintain their well-being. Also, findings can potentially lead to improved quality of care provided to children and families in the child welfare system. Findings can also highlight the high risk that child welfare professionals face due to the constant exposure to trauma from children in their care, impacting their jobs and leading them to burnout.

Conclusion

In conclusion, research has shown that CF is prevalent among helping professionals and has also demonstrated its adverse effects. If unaddressed, CF can result in significant adverse outcomes. An examination of systematic review articles revealed a gap in the literature on CF among child welfare workers. Theories such as the stress process model have concluded that CF affects workers' well-being and overall health.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

Our systematic review aims to investigate the effects of CF on child welfare workers and effective mitigation strategies. By expanding on existing literature, we seek to understand how CF impacts social workers, manifesting as secondary traumatic stress and burnout. Additionally, we will explore implementing self-care plans to address CF. In this study, CF is the independent variable, while self-care emerges as the dependent variable, representing a strategy to counter its effects.

Search Strategies

This systematic review analyzes the effects of CF among child welfare workers. A comprehensive literature search was conducted on CSUSB One Search, Google Scholar, and PubMed. The Search strategy used keywords related to CF and child welfare workers. Search terms used to conduct this research were “Compassion fatigue,” “mental health,” “Burnout,” “self-care,” and “social workers.” Secondary traumatic stress,”.

Inclusion and Exclusion

The inclusion criteria for original research were primarily published in English peer-reviewed journals between 2014 and 2024. These articles focused on adverse effects mitigations to avoid CF and on how mental health has a higher impact on CF than on child welfare workers. Studies focused on the social worker population and examined CF in this population. Exclusion criteria are not provided for this chapter.

Data Extraction

The following data will be extracted from the full-text articles: author, aim of the study, study design, sample characteristics and size, measurement of CF, measurement of mental health outcomes, and main findings of the study (See Table 1).

Table 1. Data Extraction Form

Title	Authors (Publication Year)	Study Aim(s)	Study Design	Sample Characteristics & Size Measurement	Measurement Of CF	Measurement Mental Health Outcomes	Findings

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study proposes using a systemic review design to synthesize recently published articles on the effects of CF on child welfare workers' mental health. This review highlights the importance of examining and understanding systemic review articles. It covers what search strategies were used to determine how CF can impact child welfare workers. The limitations of this paper would be more than exclusion; instead, it would include what to look for.

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This research project was completed collaboratively between two partners: Henok Kidane and Linda Rimel. The following sections were completed as follows:

1. Abstract: Henok Kidane and Linda Rimel
2. Chapter One, Introduction: Henok Kidane and Linda Rimel
3. Chapter Two, Literature Review: Henok Kidane and Linda Rimel
4. Chapter Three, Methods: Henok Kidane and Linda Rimel