Exploring child welfare social workers' experiences and perception of working in rural under-resourced agencies in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa.

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DECLARATION

I, Zintle Dyoda, hereby declare that:

- This work is being submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Science (Clinical Psychology) in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College, Durban, South Africa.

- This thesis is my independent work and has not been submitted previously for any degree or examination at any other university. The supervisor mentioned on the cover page of this thesis was responsible for the supervision of this research. This study has been appropriately acknowledged for any success it may have achieved.

- All references, citations, and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged in accordance with the American Psychological Association (APA) Sixth Edition referencing style (2010).

Signed:

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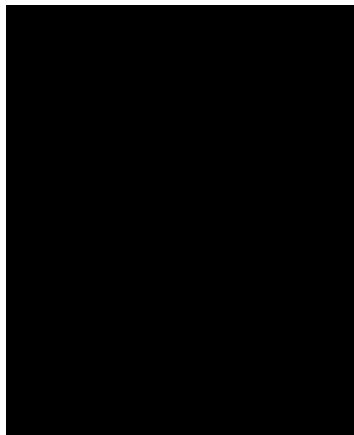
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to all the child welfare social workers in Mnquma Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape, as well as individuals in some other places, who, under the prevailing circumstances, work in difficult conditions due to rural poverty; and under-resourced agencies whose service delivery is compromised by factors beyond their control; those who are suppressed and taken off from dominant platforms of discourse.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

Background: The Social Work child welfare system is a rewarding field which is also complex and challenging. Agencies in rural based settings are tormented by increased levels of occupational stress, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue. Social workers in these agencies experience continuous transformation in service delivery and resources, as well as working conditions.

Aim: This study sought to explore the experiences and perception of social workers in rural based child welfare agencies. The intended motive was to establish an understanding of the experiences of child welfare social workers in rural under-resourced agencies.

Methods: The study utilised a qualitative approach, which enables a comprehensive description of the participants' feelings, experiences, and perceptions of working in under-resourced agencies. The sample was drawn from the population of three agencies in Mnquma Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape. The municipality falls in the B category and consolidates the towns and rural areas of Butterworth, Centane and Ngqamakhwe. The Municipality is generally rural in nature and relies on social grants. A total of eight child welfare social workers were recruited for this study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews that were audio-recorded. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from the transcribed interviews.

Results: The results were examined in light of empirical evidence from related literature and the Maslach's Multidimensional Theory of Burnout. Seven themes were obtained from the data: (1) Childhood Related Personal Experience, (2) Agency-Based Perception of Burnout, (3) Occupational Stress, (4) Nature of the Working Conditions in Rural-Based Agencies, (5) Inadequate Support for Agency Child Welfare Social Workers, (6) Staff Turnover Rates in Rural Under-Resourced Agencies and (7) Varied Ways of Coping with Stress on the Job. The study has revealed that child welfare agencies face various challenges due to conditions of chronic poverty, unemployment, inadequate transportation, geography, and special health care access. The families with children are vulnerable, since they are most negatively affected.

Findings: The research findings have revealed that social workers of the child welfare agencies experience burnout and occupational stress due to rural poverty, leading to staff turnover. The study recommended that agencies should give emotional and clinical support to social workers on a regular basis. Also, the importance of wellness and self-care for social workers should be emphasised. Moreover, there is need to prioritise brief crisis interventions for rural social workers, which include critical incident stress debriefings and psychosocial debriefings, as well as trauma risk management strategies built upon to trauma-focused debriefing principles.

Recommendations: The study also recommended that the agencies focus on an organisational culture that reflects a bottom-up management approach. Lastly, there should be additional professional oversight in a form of adequate supervision, as well as a shift in terms of managerial style to an approach that is more strengths-based. These possible recommendations address challenges or barriers faced by social workers, in order to improve the quality of their working experience.

Keywords: child welfare, social workers, rural under-resourced agencies, occupational stress, burnout and poor working conditions.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter comprises the background of the study, statement of the problem, the rationale and significance of the study. The chapter also highlighted the purpose and objectives of the study, along with the research questions and assumptions of the study. The study outline was also presented at the end of the chapter.

1.2 The problem in context

The field of social work is as diverse as the clients being served by the profession. It is built upon the basis of looking at the needs of clients and communities experiencing relatively complex situations, in order to make the situation stable by inculcating skills necessary for the promotion of growth, change and empowerment (Ellett, 2008; Howe, 2017; Coulshed & Orme, 2018). Social workers are at the frontline and prepared to engage in actions necessary in the face of crisis and implement solutions. Exposure to such experiences has a huge impact on the social workers' personal life (Pretorius, 2020). Historical evidence suggests that all domains of social work primarily focus on the provision of immediate, short-term interventions when assessing the needs of clients.

Child welfare is a challenging facet of social work. It centers on child neglect, as well as physical, sexual and/or psychological child maltreatment that stems from childhood. The goal is to protect families and increase family-based living situations that are permanent (Gelsler, Berthelsen, & Muhonen, 2019; Pretorius, 2020). Social workers spend their days assessing tirelessly the child's state of being safe from harm, when there are claims of sexual abuse, physical violence and neglect, impacting on parents' ability to provide for the physical and emotional needs of the child. Moreover, when assessing child safety, a social worker aims to maintain the parent-child relationship in order to nurture the physical, emotional and social development of the child. They also preserve the family at large and establish mutuality through therapeutic alliance during the process of child removal (Gelsler et al., 2019; Featherstone, Morris & White, 2014)

The level of complexity in child welfare offices compels social workers to endure the pressure that comes from being assigned to assess the urgency of the situation and to make decisions about the child's future. The overriding difficulty facing child welfare social workers is to take transformative decisions over the lives of children and families in the hope that such decisions do not in any way lead to additional damage (Broadhurst & Mason, 2020). The intense quality of work and stress encompassing rural child welfare social workers increase the likelihood of developing burnout, compassion fatigue, and occupational stress. Besides the predisposition of labouring from stress and fatigue, particular focus should be placed on social workers in rural-based child welfare agencies. Rural social work further aggravates the chances of suffering from the effects of stress because of the difficulties facing child welfare social workers, such as limited resources and geographic isolation (Bryant, Garnham, Tedmanson, Diamandi, 2018). The distinctive challenges encountered by rural child welfare social workers, together with resource constraints these social workers have, greatly increases job dissatisfaction leading to a decline in productivity.

1.3 Background of the problem

The child welfare system is a rewarding field which is relatively complex as social workers support children through the strengthening of the family system. However, rural based child welfare is consistently tormented by increased levels of occupational stress, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue (Philips, Lizano, He, Leake, 2020). In South Africa, the requests for the services of child welfare agencies are heightening despite the evidence that resources in these agencies are diminishing. This in turn increases the rates of burnout. The adverse impact of the economic recession is expanded in rural based child welfare agencies and further sustains the scarcity of resources (Pharris, Munoz, Hellman, 2022). A study by McGowan, Auerbach, and Strolin-Goltzman (2009) on turnover in the child welfare workforce found that the scope of turnover rate is 20% to 60% in child welfare services. In 2021, there was a 15.0% social worker turnover rate in child welfare services, which translate to approximately 2, 400 departures during the preceding month (Katz, Julien-Chinn, & Wall, 2022). In this context, it is important to understand that an increased rate of turnover is not

merely an organisational problem but greatly reduces the positive impact the organisation has to the community (McGowan et al., 2009).

The implications of burnout do not only cause considerable physical strain on the social worker, but also contains the psychological components, such as feeling emotionally numb and apathetic (Bryant et al., 2018). These symptoms prevent social workers from being productive and execute their work with great judgment and correct review of crisis related situations. A direct impact can be observed from children who may be subjected to being unnecessarily removed from safe environments and remain in dysfunctional and harmful ones (Bryant et al., 2018). Social workers are known for attributes such as compassion, empathy, and mutual respect (Kheswa, 2019; Van Huyssteen & Strydom, 2016). They use practical and effective use of empathy to be emotionally attuned to the feelings of the client, while utilising emotional understanding (Philips, Lizano, He, & Leake, 2020). When a social worker shows excess empathy towards the clients' trauma related narrative, this turns into a personal experience for the social worker (Philips et al., 2020; Van Huyssteen & Strydom, 2016).

The progressing stresses the social worker experiences may be a traumatic response to the direct inferences of the agency. This also contributes to increased level of burnout and turnover (Faller, Grabarek, & Ortega, 2010; Katz et al., 2022). As mentioned by Mazzola, Schonfeld, and Spector (2011), occupational stress among rural based child welfare social workers is seen from difficult caseload manageability, insufficient supervision, unclear job expectations, and high conflict workplace disputes. The rural based child welfare system has in the past been acquainted with increased levels of occupational stress and lack of support from the agency in an effort to mitigate stress levels experienced by social workers (Jones, Heckenberg, Wright, & Hodgkin, 2021; Mazzola et al., 2011). The effect in the increase of occupational stress is caused by high turnover rates due to the number of caseloads new social workers undertake from previous social workers (Pharris, Munoz, & Hellman, 2022). This has a direct impact on the child welfare agencies' morale and also puts tensions in the working relationship between the agency and community partners. Issues of burnout, occupational stress and compassion fatigue are not the only challenges which rural child welfare social workers in rural under-resourced agencies experience (Faller et al., 2010). Their stress levels are also increased by unique problems in rural communities, like geographical isolation and limited resources.

1.4 Location of the study

Particular interest was drawn to the rural communities in the Eastern Cape Province. This multicultural province of Eastern Cape is along the southeast coast of South Africa (Denne, Stevenson, & Perty, 2019). The diversity of this province showcases several environmental and developmental aspects, which protrude from factors such as unemployment, underdeveloped infrastructure and poverty (Denne et al., 2019). Child welfare social workers from Mnquma Local Municipality child welfare agency were interviewed to determine their subjective experience of working in a rural based agency and to determine their perspectives on occupational stress, burnout, and the rural agency support available. This municipality was selected on the basis of its unique situation regarding social worker job dissatisfaction, burnout and occupational stress.

1.5 Purpose of the study

The study sought to explore the experiences and perception of social workers in rural based child welfare. The intended motive was to establish an understanding of child welfare social workers' experiences in rural under-resourced agencies.

1.6 Objectives of the study

The study objectives are:

1.6.1 To explore the experiences of social workers who work in rural child welfare agencies.

1.6.2 To examine the challenges experienced by child welfare social workers.

1.6.3 To determine if occupational stress, burnout, turnover and challenges faced by child welfare social in rural under-resourced agencies are related.

1.6.4 To identify available support to improve retention rates and proffer recommendations to address these challenges in order to enhance the quality of work.

1.7 Research questions

The research questions are:

1.7.1 What are the experiences of social workers working in rural based child welfare agencies?

1.7.2 What challenges are experienced by child welfare social workers?

1.7.3 How do occupational stress and burnout increase the rate of turnover?

1.7.4 What can rural child welfare agencies do to address the effects of burnout and occupational stress in order to increase retention rates of their experienced social workers?

1.8 Rationale/Significance of the study

The rural areas are often characterised by scarce resources, limited mental health and other essential services. As such, child welfare social workers in rural based agencies often do not receive adequate support and effective services delivery that is needed to provide a healthy environment for children in child care centers. This leave them feeling de-motivated and unsupported, and, as such, their ability to be productive is threatened (Burns, O'Mahony, Shore, & Parkes, 2018; Zimbelman, 2018). The researcher was motivated to conduct this study because of experience obtained during training as an intern and in working with children who were victims of suspected abuse and trauma, as well as working closely with social workers from under-resourced agencies.

The study aims to understand the experiences of child welfare social workers in rural based settings. This study is of significance to the field of social work and other helping professions in this area. It provides insight on services and support needed at the agency level in alleviating the effects of occupational stress. The researcher hopes that rural under-resourced agencies could provide those services and support to avoid turnover, thus increasing overall effectiveness and productivity. Furthermore, although findings of this research may not be useful at global level, they may be beneficial at the local level as a possible source of information for researchers and students in the field of psychology and social work. This facilitates better understanding of areas that demands improvement and support for social workers in under-resourced agencies.

1.9 Definition of research concepts

Social work: Social work is a profession that has been developed to administer a large and complex human service system put in place by society (Engel & Schutt, 2016). Social work is "a profession in which trained professionals are devoted to helping vulnerable people and communities work through challenges they face in everyday life" (Ferguson, 2018, p. 55). In this

research, social work is defined as one that exhibits social change, promoting and enhancing relationships in humans (Canda, Furman, & Canda, 2019), provides liberation and ensuring that childrens' needs are taken care of (Onyeme et al., 2019).

Child welfare system: The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2020, p. 2) defines child welfare system as a "group of services designed to promote the well-being of children by ensuring safety, achieving permanency and strengthening families. This is the definition that the researcher concurs with in this study. *Rural-based settings*: In the context of this study, rural-based settings would be defined as services rendered to people who are rural bound.

Burnout: Several studies define burnout syndrome as a "response to chronic work stress, mainly related to those professions and services characterised by constant, systematic and intense attention paid to people in need of care. Faced with this situation, workers frequently develop a sense of professional failure, in addition to a series of negative attitudes towards those people" (Sa´nchez-Moreno, de LaFuenteRolda´n, Gallardo-Peralta, & Barro´n Lo´pez de Roda, 2015, p. 2369).

Compassion Fatigue: the concept of compassion fatigue was developed by (Eng, Nordstrom, & Shad, 2021). According to the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project (2015, p. 3), compassion fatigue is described as "the secondary traumatic stress and refers to the emotions and behaviour by social workers when helping the clients, and may be manifested in the demonstration of aloofness, coldness, depersonalisation and lack of interest in the organisational goals and values"

Occupational Stress: Occupational Stress is defined "as a biological and psychological reaction of the body to an aggression" (Dumitrescu, 2014, p. 696) It is stress felt by the social worker due to high job demands, high caseloads, unclear job description and job expectation, and poor supervision.

Rural Communities: "Rural communities are defined as areas with low population densities. According to literature, the definition of what is rural is rooted in a sense of place, as such rural community can be described as rural when there are common challenges to rural communities such as limited resources, geographical isolation, and inadequate public transportation" (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2018, p. 10-11).

1.10 Outline of the study

      Chapter One outlined the general context, background of the problem as well as the rationale and significance of the study. **Chapter Two** presented relevant literature on the proposed study. This comprised relatively recent studies and findings on child welfare social workers on rural based settings. **Chapter Three** explored the chosen theoretical frameworks that underpin this study. **Chapter Four** detailed the methodology followed in the study. **Chapter Five** included a discussion of the data collected in relation to the review of the literature. **Chapter Six** comprised the conclusive section of the study and recommendations based on the research findings, as well as limitations of the study.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviewed relevant literature which comprised recent studies on child welfare social workers in rural based settings. The elements of social work in under-resourced areas were also reviewed, including the phenomenon of rural child welfare, social work as a scarce and critical profession, rural social work practice, rural based child welfare agencies in context, working conditions, burnout and/or occupational stress among rural child welfare social workers and caregivers.

2.2 The phenomenon of rural child welfare

Child Welfare in South Africa was established 84 years ago. It is the central organisation that constitutes 267 members and outreach projects in every part of South Africa. It is one of the largest non-profit organisations in South Africa and is responsible for the delivery of services on the following fields: Child Protection, Child Care and Family Development (Schmid & Patel, 2016). At the national level, one of the important aims of Child Welfare South Africa is to promote a safer and caring environment for children, as well as ensuring that Child Welfare services are fairly distributed to disadvantaged communities, including those in rural based settings (Abdulwakeel, 2017). However, research on rural child welfare in the South African context is limited. The available literature on rural child welfare is from United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia. This is mainly because of lack of research funds, as well as fewer rural researchers (Lohmann & Lohmann, 2017).

Furthermore, in this section of the literature, some studies attempted to define rurality, while others define the field of practice (rural social work), that is the distinctiveness of the field. A study by Clary, Ribar, Weigensberg, Radel, and Madden (2020) on challenges of child welfare clients in rural communities found that finding a single and comparable definition of rurality is a challenge. This study concurred with what Riebschleger and Pierce (2018, p. 2) concluded, that there is no sole definition of rurality, as it is definined by "a combination of a community's geography and setting, population density, and the culture and characteristics of its people".

According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2020), the child welfare system in rural areas is faced with different challenges, which vary from client-related stress to work environmental stress. A study by Tang and Li (2021) found that workers in rural child welfare constantly work in crisis-management situations, which demand critical thinking and decision making about the safety of children and their well-being. They concluded that, this, on a daily basis, can be stressful and demanding both physically and emotionally. Kruks-Wisner (2018) made a distinction between rural and non-rural child welfare agency. In his study, he found that environmental and cultural factors play a significant role in the practice of rural and urban social work. He concluded that that understanding the organisational environment and its cultural diversities would help better equip available rural researchers with the knowledge that rurality has a significant influence in the practice of child welfare. Kim and Hopkins's (2017) study also found that the perception people have on how well organisations function influences the differences between rural and urban child welfare practices, as this is supported by theories on environmental organisations.

Furthermore, research shows that the magnitude of agencies is also an important fact that impact on the practice of child welfare. According to Tavormina and Clossey's (2017) study on child protective welfare services in rural areas, practitioners in local and agency structures have different perspectives on how they experience their work and work environment. They found that this is further explained and influenced by the concept of rurality and its size. In accord with Lee (2016), this poses a challenge on the differences between rural and urban practice, which can be revealed by exploring the organisation itself along with the perception these workers have on the organisation and its environment.

2.3 Social work: A scarce and critical profession

The field of social work is diverse. It includes "domains of mental health and addictions, within the legal field, community work, health care, education settings, and child welfare" (Hursley, 2018, p. 8). As such, it may be difficult to simply define social work. In this research, social work is defined as one that exhibits social change, promoting and enhancing relationships in humans, provides liberation and ensuring that childrens' needs are taken care of (Canda et al.,

2019; Onyeme et al., 2019). Therefore, human behaviour and social systems are two theories that guide social work interventions, which are aimed at promoting interaction between people and their enviroments. Social workers understand that empathy is important for building meaningful relationships with both families and children. Research conducted by Rollins (2020) on social worker perspective found that social workers engage with clients on daily basis and this requires the ability to fully understand and be sensitive to their thoughts, feelings and human experience. This is affirmed by Foriester, Killian, Westlake, and Sheehan (2020), as they found that the understanding of clients' diverse human experience rests upon the general psychological phenomenon and empathy. As such, when they engage and listen to their client's narratives, a mutual understanding is shared.

Knight's (2015) study on trauma-informed social work practice found that pain child welfare social workers experienced on account of trauma is received with empathetic understanding. As he observed, this engagement process involving understanding and mutuality helps them to intervene appropriately by means of intervention strategies. However, Kanno and Giddings (2017) argue that even though empathetic engagement is based on the understanding of the human experience of clients, it can also trigger social workers' own personal traumatic experiences. Conforming to what Teater's (2019) study concluded, the clients' healing process facilitated by the social worker can be emotionally exhausting and this may be exacerbated by the client's trauma laden narrative. This also concurs with Ibrahima and Mattani (2019) view that child welfare social worker engage in empathetic understanding with an aim to understand the family's history of abuse and traumatic experiences. Based on these studies, it is needless to say that when a therapeutic relationship is formed between a child welfare social worker and the client, the practice of unconditional positive regard is also important (Molnar, et al., 2020).

The social work profession is viewed as the leading profession in terms of experiencing poor physical health; poor job satisfaction (Brimhall, Lizano, & Barak, 2014) and impaired well-being (Graham, Shier, & Nicholas, 2016). A study by Hipp, Bernhardt, and Allmendingen (2015) found that there was an existing correlation between poor job satisfaction and conditions to which the social workers are subjected to. Additionally, in a longitudinal study of the effects of leader-member exchange and diversity climate on job satisfaction and intention to leave

among child welfare workers, Brimhall et al. (2014) also proposed that social workers worldwide tend to express their dissatisfaction at the workplace and that a significant number of social workers also work long hours. Thus, according to Unison (2017) the overwhelming effect of work-related stress comes as means of internal and environmental difficulties that stem from job dissatisfaction, lack of positive work interactions and engagement in the work place.

2.3.1 Rural social work practice

There are fewer research studies available that specifically examined rural child welfare in the South African context; several studies have explored unique characteristics of rural social work practice and the challenges thereof. (Clary et al., 2020). In their study on challenges in rural social work practice, Humble, Lewis, Scott, and Herzog (2015) found that social workers in rural communities often face numerous challenges due to locale, lack of transportation, and potential worker burnout. Payne (2020) supports this in stating that issues such as geographical barriers, confidentiality, and scarcity of resources, transportation difficulties and professional isolation have been identified as problematic and serve as a hindrance in rural communities. According to Mackie's (2012) study, social work practitioners in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan face professional persistent challenges which are difficult to deal with. These difficulties include unemployment, poverty, lack of own and public transportation. (Chowdhury and Ravi (2022) argues that despite the zeal and dedication to help, social workers have to face a difficult situation of rural poverty that is prevalent yet concealed when compared to urban poverty.

The rural community is known for being isolated from the outside world. In their review of literature, Li, Westlund and Liu (2019) emphasize the necessity to improve rural communities' resilient capacity through adjusting their internal components' function and structure to survive the external changes. They discovered that rural culture is mainly characterised by harshness and judgment towards those perceived to be unique or different. A study conducted by Bryant et al. (2018) on what social workers should know about ethics concluded that recognizing ethical issues and dilemmas that arise in professional practice crucial for social work practitioners. One of the main tenets they found from the NASW Code of Ethics is the issue of confidentiality. They discovered that the rural culture is characterised by closeness which in turn poses a difficulty in maintaining a professional distance. Ferguson (2018) argues that effective rural

social work practice requires immersive levels of expertise and practical skills that match the sophisticated demands of their work. Moreover, it is highly unfortunate that the majority of rural social workers lack professional preparation for this kind of work. This in turn makes it difficult to deal with the pressure that comes with working in these agencies.

Bainguel (2019) states; working in the rural areas is not a smooth sailing process; it is comprised with challenges and difficulties. One of the challenges, as indicated by Maslach and Leiter (2016), is the lack of resources and professional support. Maslach and Leiter (2016) state that it there is a great need for social work services in rural areas. The paradoxical view is that the people living in rural areas take time to accept and attune to the social worker. This puts a lot of responsibility on the social worker as they need to work hard to build a trusting relationship and gain acceptance from the rural community.

As mentioned by Fook (2022), practicing in a rural based setting can threaten the profession as it serves as a challenge on the identity the social worker. This concurs with the findings of Zimbelman's (2018) study on ethics in rural settings. The found that in rural setting, ethical issues are unavoidable, thus creating dilemmas unique to rural social work practice. Furthermore, dual relationships, boundary issues, conflict of interest, and competency emerged as the main themes. (Zimbelman, 2018). Hypothetically, the community members may frequently envision more involvement from the social workers, besides being a service provider. They may also expect them to engage in community activities, which may result in multiple role relationships, thus leading to an ethical dilemma. According to Fook (2022), this may overlap with personal and professional boundaries of the social worker and, the expectations from the community may lead to tremendous stress, as they try to sustain a balance between the professional role and professional identity.

Lastly, according to Bennett, Borders, Holmes, Kozhimannil, and Ziller's (2019) study on experiences of service providers within the rural areas of northwestern Ontario and northern Manitoba in Canada, social workers practicing in rural areas maintain professional identity when they are away or outside the region. The findings gave extensive understanding of the realities that arise from working in small communities and the pressure it poses on the practitioners. This comes with greater challenges accompanied by expectations. Findings gave the impression that

social workers resort to informal decision-making processes, which confront the effects of intersecting roles, community gossip, and personal isolation. Furthermore, social workers practicing in rural areas have been dedicated to tackle issues related to equitability, availability of services, and geographical isolation that potentially affects the rural population significantly (Hursley, 2018). Therefore, in conclusion in this section, there has been several research studies done on rural social work practice which have found that characteristics of rural social work practice consists of several challenges which contribute worker burnout.

2.3.2 Childhood trauma and empathetic understanding

Empathetic understanding refers to the ability to understand, recognise and respond to the feelings and thoughts of another (Price & Hooven, 2018). A child's psychosocial and biological development is profoundly affected by the effects of physical and psychological trauma in the early years, and their effects can persist well into adulthood because traumatic events occur during these crucial developmental phases (Greenberg, Baron-Cohen, Rosenberg, Fonagy, & Rentfrow, 2018). It is a paradox that trauma-affected individuals are at the risk of illnesses that negatively affect their health, but they can also learn valuable lessons as a result (Downey, 2022; Royce, 2022). There is a wealth of evidence about the negative effects of trauma, but new data suggests that adversity can also facilitate the development of pro-social behaviours and empathy following a traumatic event (Lim & DeSteno, 2016).

Studies reviewed in this section argue that although somewhat counter-intuitive , this might be predicted if trauma not only increase fear of future threat but also renders the individual; more sensitive to suffering in others. In their research, Simon and An (2015) investigated whether empathy differed in health and maltreated individuals by examining their emotional responces to people in distress. Their qualitative results indicate that self-reported empathy was lower in the moderate maltreatement group compared to the control groups, hiowever thematic analysis indicated that both matrealtrmrnt gropups displayed themes of impared empathy. . their results supportv the notion that childhood maltretaement is associated with impared empathy, and suggest that such imparement may digffer depending on the level of maltreatement. Miron, Seligowski, Boykin and Orcutt (2016) examined if survivors of childhood

abuse exhibit fear of self-compassion and whether it relates to pychological functioning. Findings of their study suggested that fear of self-compassion may be uniquely related to trauma phathology for survivors of childhood abuse, hihlighing the potential value iof addressing fear of self-compassion directly in posttraumatic intervention.

Berzenski and Yates (2022) examined the development of childrens empathy from age six to eight as predicted by maltreatment, the results highlighted nauanced ways in which maltreatement experiences of different subtypes contribute to the development of empathy in school; aged children. Indviduals with a childhood maltretaemnt history tend to hve various psychological symptoms and impared social functyioning. A pilot study by Joss, Lazar, and Teicher (2020) aimed to investigate the ralted therapeutic effects of a mindfulness-based intervention. Findings suggested that the mindfulness-based intervention improved mindfulness, nonattachment, and empathy, which contribute to reduced interpersonal distress, rejection sensitivity, and other psychological symptoms.

Empathy, which is a combination of psysiological and cognitive processes, may be a topol to help address burnout and secondary traumatic stress. Wagaman, Gelger, Shockley, and Segal (2015) explored the relationship between the components of empathy, burnout, secondary traumatic stress and compassion satisfaction. Findings suggest that components of empathy may prevent or reduce burnout and secondary traumatic stress while increasing compassion satisfaction and that empathy should be incorporated into training and education throughout the course of a social worker's career.

In addition, trauma offers the possibility of personal and psychological growth through learning from an event. Thus, the process of coping with trauma can result in improvements in one's personality and psychological state (Ghiasi, Mohammadi, & Zarrinfar, 2016). In Knight' (2015) study, emphasis is placed on helping survivors understand how their past influences the present and on empowering them to manage their present lives more effectively, using core skills of social work practice. Findings suggested that altered empathy in adults who experienced childhood trauma suggests that the effects of childhood trauma persist throughout adult life.

Further, overcoming adversity can proactively engage in altruistic and prosocial behaviours (Lim & DeSteno, 2016; Overgaauw, Rieffe, Broekhof, Crone, & Guroglu, 2017).

Hence, individuals who have experienced trauma in childhood have higher empathy levels in adulthood than those without trauma (Greenberg et al., 2018). The likelihood of cognitive empathy as well as affective empathy increasing would be prevalent, since empathy has multiple facets. As Price and Hooven (2018) observe, cognitive empathy, also known as mentalising, is the ability to understand another's thoughts and feelings, while affective empathy is the ability to respond appropriately to their mental state. In conclusion, findings in this section suggest that the experience of a childhood trauma increases a person's ability take the perspective of another and to understand their emotmental and emotional states, and that this impact is long-standing. Results across various studies showed that, on average , adults who reported experiencing a traumatic event in adulthood had elevated empayhy levels compared to adults who did not experinece a traumatic event.

2.4 Contextualising the situation of child welfare agencies in rural areas

The South African social workers in rural based agencies experience continuous transformation within service delivery, resources as well as working conditions. This has a negative impact towards the way services are being rendered to children in this area. They face challenges that subject them to difficult circumstances. Some of these challenges are characterised mainly by 'potential social isolation, health disparities, cultural and social differences, economic stress, persistent poverty, limited job opportunities, transportation challenges, and poor access to goods, services, resources, and trained professionals (Newland et al., 2014, p.3). These factors contribute to their psychological wellbeing (Onyeme, Price, & Edum-Fotwe, 2019). As Riebschleger and Pierce (2018) confirms, these circumstances differ to those faced by social workers in urban and suburban areas, which then create challenges for those practising in rural based agencies.

Traditionally, social workers in rural based agencies have been providing services by means of community agencies, shared agency space, satellite offices as well as mobile units in order to extend their services even to those who may have difficulties accessing them due to transportation and travelling challenges (Chowdhury & Ravi, 2022). Child welfare agencies are facing difficulties when it comes to recruiting and retaining of social workers. Even though these difficulties are apparent in child welfare, they have also been reported in both mental and general facilities (Savold, et al., 2021).

According to Lazar, Mihai, Gaba, Ciocanel, Rentea, and Munch (2019), child welfare social workers in rural based agencies face numerous challenges, which consequently affect the execution of their work. Hence, social workers in rural child welfare work under difficult working conditions, but strive to channel an optimistic stance and remain focused on the motive behind their work, which is protecting the vulnerable population of children who are unable to protect themselves. Moreover, the major issues affecting agencies in rural areas in South African include: "the shift from institutional approaches to the social developmental approach; the working conditions of social workers and childcare and youth care workers in rural areas; and the specific types of problems which occur in rural areas" (Lazar et al., 2019, p. 329).

Also, Lewis and Kings' (2019) study has revealed that even though child welfare social workers and social workers in general made positive remarks concerning some aspects of their work-life, social work profession is demanding, and is based on multiple measures of workload, complicated tasks, as well as quality management. Hence, due to the job strain expressed by social workers, employers encourage supportive working conditions and appreciate the value of work which social workers do.

2.4.1 Turnover, recruitment and retention

Turnover rates among rural child welfare agencies are still a problem with unavoidable consequences (Marsh, 2020). The negative effects of burnout and increased turnover rates among agencies, contribute on the misuse of resources. Even though there are increased turnover rates and reduced revenue, job stagnation remains the biggest problem, as families who desirably need the services increase every day. Studies on this section show that turnover has been deemed a longstanding issue which has destructive consequences of burnout among child welfare social workers in rural areas (Russ, Morley, Driver, Harries, & Higgins, 2022). Moreover, some of the studies reviewed in this section suggest that agencies in rural areas are often faced with avoidable challenges that translate to recruitment and retention of social workers (Brown, Walters, & Jones, 2019; Rose & Palattiyil, 2020). Furthermore, studies have focused on aspects of the workplace and the characteristics of child welfare workers that may be associated with leaving.

High turnover rates that plague child welfare agencies are costly and disrupt services. In their two- study paper de Guzman, Carver-Roberts, Leake, and Rienks (2020) utilized data from public child welfare caseworkers to examine the predictors of self-reported intent to stay and its association with actually staying at the agency. Results of Study 1 indicated that the self-reported intent to stay was a key predictor of staying (as was number of years on the job). Results of Study 2indicated that self-efficacy, peer support, supervision, and organizational support were key predictors were key predictors to stay. Li, Huang, and Chen (2020) investigated the indirect effects of organizational climate on turnover through involuntary child welfare workers' job satisfaction. Findings suggest that turnover among child welfare workforce has been linked to workplace demographics, individual-level attitudes, and organizational conditions.

Another study by Griffiths, Royse, Culver, Piescher, and Zhang's (2017) examined the quantitative feedback from a Southern state's frontline child welfare workforce, examining worker intent to leave as those who intend to stay employed at the agency, those who are undecided, and those who intend to leave. Findings revealed a stratified pattern of worker dissatisfaction, with stayers reporting highest satisfaction levels, followed by undecided workers, and then leavers in all areas (e.g., salary, workload, recognition, professional development, accomplishment, peer support, and supervision. Retention of the child welfare workforce is an ongoing challenge. Katz, Julien-Chinn, and Wall's (2022) study evaluated the association between child welfare worker's perception of agency leadership and their intent to remain in their agencies.. They found that participants who viewed leadership more positively were more likely to intend to remain at their agencies than those who viewed it less positive. According to Fisher, Newton, and Sainsbury (2021) employees who decide to remain in child welfare are individuals who are loyal to stay in the profession of child welfare, are effective and productive regarding work, and have shown genuine care for other people.

A systematic review of literature conducted by (Brown, Walters, Jones, and Akinsola (2017, p. 18) revealed that "rural social workers tend to be from rural areas or have completed training in rural settings; poor job satisfaction predicts turnover among rural social workers; rural versus urban differences for satisfaction, burnout, intention to leave, and turnover are mixed; and greater work-life balance and supervisory support increase retention among rural social workers". According to Griffiths, Royse, Culver, Piescher, and Zhang's (2017) study on a state-

wide survey of child welfare workers, a pattern of work dissatisfaction levels was high among those who intended to stay, followed by undecided social workers, and then those intending to leave the agency in all spheres such as salary, workload, recognition, professional development, accomplishment, peer support, and supervision. A recent study by Griffiths, Collins-Camargo, Horace, Gabbard and Royse (2020) made a comparison between working in urban areas and dissatisfaction with workload. The findings revealed that social workers intending to leave and undecided workers were higher than those who stayed. They found that a younger child welfare workers of colour who had intentions of leaving the agency within 12 months reported significant feelings of dissatisfaction with the supervision process and low sense of accomplishment towards their work (Griffiths et al., 2020).

In this section it has been evident from studies reviewed that high rates of turnover in rural child welfare do not only disrupt the cohesion of organisational culture, but also service provision to children and families (Tang & Li, 2021) The ability of rural child welfare agencies to retain its employees poses a great challenge and this leaves rural child welfare social workers feeling unappreciated and underrated by the agency. This maintains the countercyclical movements of job turnover (Gelsler et al., 2019; Griffiths et al., 2020). When the organisational culture stays poor, the workers' mindsets shift from positive to negative, and they begin to channel their focus on aspects of the job that are negative, and their perception of the work environment remains skewed (Munro & Hordie, 2019). This occurrence gives rise to the perception that work is strenuous and unrewarding, which maintains and promotes the belief that child welfare system is broken to such an extent that repair is not possible (Cherian, Gaikar, Paul, & Peck, 2021).

2.5 The working conditions in rural based agencies

In light of several research studies conducted on poor working conditions of rural child welfare social work practitioners, retaining social workers and improving working conditions in rural areas is still lagging behind. According to Chiarelli-Helminiak, McDonald, Tower, Hodge, and Faul's (2022) study, social workers experience lack of resources and infrastructure; community members' lack of understanding of the role of social workers, and social workers being used as dustbins for unresolved problems in the community; have to travel long distances to render social work services to clients; lack of support from supervisors and the organisation;

clients' cultural/traditional customs and practices hampering social work service delivery; and lack of confidentiality" (Chiarelli-Helminiak, et al., 2022, pp. 940-941)

This study concurs with Chiarelli-Helminiak, et al's., (2022) research findings. They found that the profession of social work is stressful, yet these workers remain underpaid. Sometimes they leave the country because of pressing matters such as poor working conditions, low salaries and insufficient facilities to accommodate them. Furthermore, in line with the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2019) poor working conditions is one of the challenging contributing factors of retaining social workers in rural areas as well more isolated parts of the country (Sawaneh & Kamora, 2019). As such, that social workers move to other countries and its sectors because of more conducive working conditions, as well as a favorable income. In this section literature on burnout and occupational stress among rural child welfare social workers as well as the coping strategies are reviewed.

2.5.1 Burnout and occupational stress among rural child welfare social workers

As Edu-Valsania, Laguia, and Moriano (2022) describes, burnout is a state of being emotional exhausted, depersonalised and having feelings of personal and work dissatisfaction. The risk of developing burnout is high among child welfare social workers in rural under-resourced agencies. This is due to the nature of their work, in which they are assigned to evaluate the safety of families and make important decisions which involve matters of life and death (Kesarwani, Hussain, & George, 2020). Several studies in this section have shown that there is burnout and occupational stress among rural child welfare social workers within the work environment. According to Nadon, De Beer, and Morin (2022, p. 82) occupational stress comprises "high caseloads, conflicting roles, and demanding job expectations with little or no positive reinforcements". Thus, social workers in these agencies may feel overwhelmed and demotivated towards their work (Guthier, Dormann, & Voelkle, 2020). Leake, Rienks, and Obermann (2017) stated that child welfare workers experience high levels of burnout and occupational stress, contributing to poor job performance. Using a sample of 2302 child welfare case workers and supervisors from three states they examine sources and consequences of burnout. They found that compared to client-related burnout, staff experienced higher levels of burnout related to agency-level factors. Furthermore, work-related burnout was also more

strongly associated with job stress, job dissatisfaction, and intent to leave than was client-related burnout. Suggestions are offered to help improve staff retention and reduce burnout

Schelbe, Radey, and Panisch's (2017) study identified the following stressors among child welfare social workers which are administrative requirements, workload, unsupportive colleagues, and challenging parents and hurt children. In Hamana's (2012) study, burnout was investigated in relation to social worker's demographic characteristics (age, family status, education, and seniority at work), extrinsic and intrinsic work conditions and social support by colleagues, direct supervisors, and organization managers. findings indicate, burnout was significantly negatively correlated with age, seniority, intrinsic (psychological) work conditions, and social support within the organization. Colleague and supervisor support contributed significantly to explaining the variance in burnout intensity. Solomonidou and Katsounari's (2022) study aimed to explore work stress among social workers working in nongovernmental services in Cyprus and the factors affecting work performance, as well as possible causes of occupational stress and work burnout. Results show that important sources of work stress for these social workers include the excessive workload, working overtime, dealing with role ambiguity/conflict and having to confront unmet persona expectations and a negative public perception of the profession. These work stressors combined with the insufficient support and understanding of the impact of occupational stress could be a primary focus of prevention of burnout among professional social workers.

Gyori and Perpék's (2022) study focused on the relationship between professional working conditions and burnout Hungarian social professionals. The results suggested that in order to prevent the burnout of professionals, it is essential not only to create organizational motivating conditions for work, but also to prepare them for the substantive parts of work, real life situations, the associated expectations for their role and conflict management, and provide on-going professional support. Lizano, He and Leake's (2021) research focused on workforce health and well-being. They found that stressful and difficult work conditions have deleterious effects on workers' health and mental health and may results in occupational stress and burnout. Vang's (2020) study aimed to estimate the prevalence and relationship of burnout and secondary traumatization among Danish child protective workers. They found that burnout and secondary traumatization were distinct phenomena among these child protection workers. They were at

higher risk for burnout eighteen percent (18.3%) than secondary traumatization which was four percent (4%).

Stress and burnout are reported to be high among social workers. Hussein's (2018) study utilised a unique and large dataset of 3786 social workers working in adults and children's services to examine factors associated with burnout. He found that the varying significant impact of work-engagement, administrative support and work experience are moderating factors to burnout across adult and children service specialisation. Moreover, rural child welfare social workers are also vulnerable to burnout due to stress induced by uncooperative clients, discouraging and opposing public servants, as well as lack of independence in their decision making (Bayes, Tavella, & Parker, 2021). Walters, Jones and Browns' (2019) study has revealed that participants' satisfaction with their workload, as well as organisational environments, was average. However, scores on personal burnout were the highest after work-related and client-related burnout.

In addition, as McFadden, Mallett, Campbell, and Taylor (2019) state, social workers working in child protective and child welfare services in rural areas are well-known for high-ranking levels of occupational stress. As Jones et al (2021) observe, it is on average estimated that social workers in child protective and child welfare take on caseloads that are two to four times larger than the recommended amount in order to meet the standards of their job. The passion rural child welfare social workers have for helping the disadvantaged communities and its people is what initially drew them into the profession. Eventually, the accomplishment and satisfaction they receive from doing their job of helping the society propels them to stay in a profession that is known for overwork and underpayment. The organisational stress profoundly affects the production and motivation of child welfare social workers in the workplace, thus leading to burnout. This leaves them with symptoms of depression, anxiety and emotional exhaustion.

Some of the work-related stressors, such as burnout and turnover as previously discussed cause occupational stress. Being exposed to complex patient care, limited time, unclear demands and expectations, and being unable to fulfil your goals make child welfare social workers experience emotional and physical fatigue, which is one of the symptoms of occupational stress (Molnar et al., 2020) Occupational stress can also be perpetuated by excessive workload with no

sense of reward, lack of restraint, conflicting values, as well as lack of integrity (Leitao, Pareira, & Goncalves, 2021). When child welfare social workers' work demands too much from them, they tend to perceive that all tasks they need to accomplish are difficult and impossible to finish, consequently increases burnout. When they begin to experience the symptoms of burnout they often rely on supervisors to understand and discuss interventions for cases (Cleveland, Warhurst, & Legood, 2019).

Reviewed literature in this section indicates that social workers in general experience burnout. Hence, they become distrustful and disparage the motives of the agency they work for as well as their clients (Gómez-García, Alonso-Sangregorio, & Llamazares-Sánchez, 2020). They may possess an uncaring spirit and lack of empathy towards their clients. Research has indicated that emotional exhaustion is one distinctive symptom of burnout; it is a state of being emotionally drained due to prolonged stress (Chemali, et al., 2019).

2.5.2 Coping strategies for rural social workers

According to Pirkkalainen, Salo, Tarafdar and Makkonen (2019), active coping is proactive behaviour and deliberate efforts to deal and resolve the problem, along with the use of supportive social networks. Participants who used active coping strategies were less likely to depersonalise their clients, and become more satisfied with their work. Furthermore, avoidant coping strategies increased feelings of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, and lower levels of self-esteem, all of which are dimensions of burnout. In this section, researchers have examined how coping contributes to burnout (Payne, 2020; Schaufeli, 2017). In her research on burnout, Wacek (2017) concluded that when a social worker engages in an avoidant coping strategy, they are doing so responding to symptoms of burnout. Some of these avoidant coping strategies are not generally less deliberate, such as watching more television or sleeping more. By prioritising more time to active coping, such as stress management techniques and self-care practices, such actions serve as a preventive measure against burnout. Shin et al. (2014) also found that there was a relationship between positive coping strategies and burnout subscales. These studies differ with Weinert, Maier, Laumer and Weitzel's (2019) who also conducted research on the same construct. They found that positive coping strategies do not correlate with burnout subscales.

According to Payne (2020), the amount of leisure time providers spent positively correlates with burnout. Pharris, Munoz, and Hellman's (2022) study on the relative role hope and resilience play in mitigating burnout among child welfare professionals found that resilience has been identified as an important factor in coping with workplace burnout. They also found that a second construct, hope, has also been described as an important buffer to adversity and burnout. Based on these findings, it is therefore relevant to refer to the time spent watching television, taking time off work, as avoiding coping with burnout rather than strategies to cope with burnout. In addition, despite the fact that Pharris et al. (2022) found statistically significant correlations between competence and coping and burnout symptoms within the care context, the relationship between variables were not detected by regression analysis. Therefore, it can be concluded that how one handles their stressors are as important as the actual stressor itself.

Although social work can be an extremely gratifying profession, the difficulties inherent in the social work field cause added stress to the worker. As Anderson (2000) identifies, there are two tertiary coping scales, which are engaged and disengaged coping. A person who engages in actively managing their stressors does so by solving problems, reconfiguring their cognitive processes, engaging social support, and expressing their feelings (Anderson, 2002). The individual is involved in disengaged coping when dealing with stressors in an avoidant manner by ignoring problems, wishing for the best, withdrawing from social interactions, and criticising themselves. Results of Anderson's study show that disengaged coping was not associated with a higher score on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation subscales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory compared to those who engaged in engaged coping. A more recent study on the same construct by Heverling (2011) addressed the prevalence of burnout and coping strategies within a sample of forty child welfare direct service workers. Surveys measured participant's levels of burnout in three areas to include: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and personal accomplishment. Results revealed a group of dedicated workers that are under stress due to the urgency of their work. Based on the reviewed literature it can be said with no doubt that while social work is rewarding, restorative and inspiring, it is also exhausting, demanding and emotionally draining at times. The reality of social worker burnout has never been more relevant than in the current context. Caring for others takes a toll, so as a social worker, it is absolutely imperative that they also take care of themselves.

2.6 The role of the agency: influencing turnover and retention

Child welfare supervisors have a unique vantage point, leading local service delivery efforts whild representing a klarge organusational bureucracy. They also play a key rolein workforce stability, as high child welfare turnover remains a real problem that affects clients, communities, and agency budgets. Using a qualitative thematic content analysis to analyse data collecetd from a sample of public child welfare supervisors in a southern state, findings of Griffiths's (2019) study provided suggestions for systematically addressing workforce turnover through the unique persp[ective of the child welafre supervisor. Supervisors made recommendations to improve agerncy infgrastructure, organuisational climate, and organisational culture as areas for immeduate consideration to address this significant problem. The support form supervisors are important and their contribution aids as an eye opener (Chamni-Malaeb, 2022).

Bayes et al. (2021) states that the lack of stability within the work environment serves as an obstacle to the social workers, since they are faced with the process of rapport building and working towards the establishment of good interpersonal relationship with each other, as well as building a network of support, which "serves as a protective factor amongst burnout" (Bayes et al., 2021, p. 688). Burns, Langenderfer-Magruder, Yelick, and Wilke's (2023) study evaluates workers' comments at the end of a survey with the intention of elevating workers' voices about their frontline experiences. Four primary themes emerged from the data: rewarding, but difficult; unsupported; overworked; and undervalued. Whereas some participants reflected on positive frontline experiences, many identified aspects of the job that created significant professional or personal challenges.

Johnco, Salloum, Olson, and Edwards's (2014) qualitative study assessed how factors impact employee retention and turnover in focus groups with 25 employees at different stages of employment: resigned case managers, case managers employed for less than one year and more than three years, and supervisors. Results suggested few differences in themes identified by groups. Two broad themes emerged for retention: supportive environment and opportunities within the agency. Two broad themes emerged for turnover: organizational issues and stress. The poor support from supervisors and management can cause a great amount of pressure and stress, thus leading to turnover (Gelsler et al., 2019; Nadon et al., 2022). Griffiths et al. (2020) explored

the qualitative survey findings from a statewide sample of eighty six child welafre workers in one state. Social workers were asked to provide suggestions for improving workforce retention and nine themes emerged: compensation, decreased workload, organisational culture, job factors, professional development, frontline supervusion, performance management, leverage external partners, and competemnt and engaged leadership.

In addition, high turnover rates amongst child welfare social workers further leads to feelings of burnout and occupational stress and actively perpetuates uncertainty and unpredictability, which pushes social workers to seek employment in a place where they feel needed and supported (Leitao et al., 2021; McFadden, Campbell, & Taylor, 2014). When not addressed in a correct conduct and vigorously moral, high turnover rates, poor retention and unstable work environments, rural child welfare would continue to lack competence and dedicated social workers who struggle to address effects of burnout and occupational stress. Reviewed literature has indicated that child welfare agencies opt for solution-based interventions with a focus on job satisfaction, but there is limited research on determining positive outcomes of these strategies and the balance thereof considering the pressure, increased number of caseload and constantly changing and developing system of child welfare. Also, there is limited research on how agencies plan to improve retention and modify work environments to more conducive and cohesive ones (Gelsler et al., 2019; Nadon et al., 2022).

In this section, reviewed literature has indicated that burnout is not an individual but an organizational issue. Hence, it is a process of responding to a stressor that arises within the environment of the organization and the adaptation to the culture of the agency (Lizano & Mor Barak, 2015). This view is problematic, as agencies have the potential of reducing burnout and its effects on child welfare social workers. This can be achieved through the decrease of caseloads, motivating workers to practice self-care, and to exercise job rotation as a strategy to help them gain experience and skills, while taking new responsibilities. In that way work efficacy is maintained, while burnout is being reduced (Knight, 2015). Thus, the agency can solve burnout among workers by understanding its signs and symptoms and not only the concept.

2.6.1 Importance of agency support

Child welfare social workers are at risk of burnout due to the demanding nature of their work. This condition can have drastic consequences for the psychosocial and emotional wellbeing of social workers and the vulnerable children and families they serve in child welfare organisations across the world., however burnout and the associated risk of turnover and reduced self-efficacy can be prevented through effective workplace support and intervention. Olaniyan, Hetland, Hystad, Iversen, and Ortiz-Barreda (2020) conducted a scoping review to uncover what is known about workplace support and their relationship with workplace outcomes among child welfare workers. They explored four databases and identified fifty-five primary studies investigating workplace support and workplace outcomes among child welfare workers. Findings showed that workplace support has a positive impact on workplace variables like job satisfaction, engagement, commitment, and other negative variables.

Bowman (2022) provided an overview on the impact of burnout on child welfare workers' health, mental health and turnover. The author proposed that the workplace wellness in child welfare organisation model be utilised with a focus on child welfare on site crisis and mental health support and growth-needs focused interventions such as supervision, specialization and promotion. Quality supervision is defined by having a deep understanding of the requirements, responsibilities, expectations, as well as challenges of child welfare (Tang & Li, 2021). In addition, a child welfare supervisor should spread casework equitably, remain flexible, and suggest ways to improve competence and performance, while communicating realistic expectations (Gelsler et al., 2019). In addition to good listening skills, respect is one of the characteristics that child welfare supervisors should be able to communicate (Nadon et al., 2022), to give an expression of appreciation especially when a job is well done and a provision of emotional support (Tang & Li, 2021). In his review of the literaure, Prada-Ospina (2019) investigated support in the workplace and found that lack of support from the agency leads to burnout, and noticed that burnout was highest when the organisational manager was unsupportive. In contrary, Barck-Holst, Nilsome, Akerstedt, and Hellgren (2021) and Luo and Lei (2021) found that support from the organisation was not related to burnout.

Reviewed literature in this section suggests that perceived agency support can be examined through multiple angles. Experiencing agency support from supervisors can be seen as

an act of self-care, since supervisors are able to validate, to act as a means of sharing experiences, and to provide their own direct experiences. In child welfare, supervisors not only discuss and review cases, but also help social workers emotionally process difficult case circumstances and replenish mental reserves. As an additional benefit, supervision can teach the child welfare social workers how to gain professional support from other members of the child welfare community (Gelsler et al., 2019). As a result of receiving support from supervisors, emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation are reduced, since supervision provides space for social workers in child welfare to process both professional demands and personal experiences and any concerns related to counter-transference (Gelsler et al., 2019).

2.7 Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework is the outline of theoretical paradigm that guides and supports the research approach (Varpio, Paradis, Uijtdehaage, & Young, 2020). The theory used to enhance this study was Maslach's (1998) multidimensional theory on burnout, which was implemented to extrapolate how child welfare social workers' experience and perceive working in rural under-resourced agencies in the Eastern Cape Province. Findings from the literature review highlighted that rural these agencies are tormented by increased levels of burnout.

2.7.1 Maslach's multidimensional theory of burnout

The multidimensional theory of burnout developed by Maslach is commonly applied to social workers and other professionals who experience stressful work demands (Bianchi, Truchot, Laurent, Brisson, & Schonfeld, 2014). According to Maslach and Schaufeli (2018), burnout is a psychological stressor and a source of frustration at work. The Maslach's multidimensional theory is used in a wide range of professions and workplaces. Recent empirical research has formulated the concept of burnout as a work condition (Bianchi et al., 2014). With the support of recent empirical research, Maslach's multidimensional theory of burnout was used for this study to explore the experiences of social workers who work in rural child welfare agencies and to examine the challenges they face in these agencies due to organisational factors. Through this theory the researcher would also determine if occupational stress, burnout, turnover and challenges faced by child welfare social in rural under-resourced agencies are related. Based

on the findings, available support to improve retention rates and proffer recommendations to address challenges in order to enhance the quality of work will be identified.

Additionally, according to Maslach's multidimensional theory, there are six aspects of work-life that can show a significant mismatch between individuals in the workplace (Maslach & Schaufeli, 2018). Those six areas of work-life mismatch are workload, control, community, (4) reward, values, and fairness (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). According to Maslach and Schaufeli (2018), the value of the six areas of work-life within a workplace is significant for Maslach's theory.

Figure 2.1 Three elements of burnout[1]
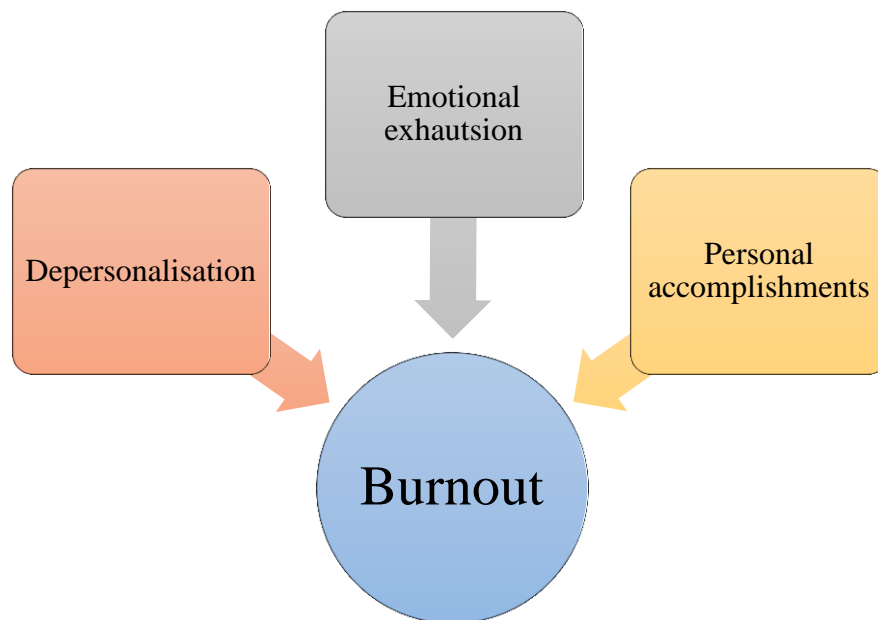
Emotional exhaustion is a state of being emotionally worn-out with depleted emotional resources. Personal work involving conflict and work overload contribute to emotional exhaustion significantly. Workers may experience feeling drained and fatigued without any way of refueling their energy. The lack of energy makes it difficult for them to look forward to what the next day has in hold for them (Ferrelra, da Costa Ferreira, Cooper, & Oliveira, 2019).

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[1] Three elements of burnout figure created by author

[2] The seven dimensions of burnout among Australian general practice registers, by Prentice et al (2022), page 249

Depersonalisation is the act of being detached, adverse and suspicious of others. This further leads to a decline of physical reality. This is usually the case where one feels emotionally exhausted and resorts to detachment as an emotional buffer in order to protect and shield the self. The process of detachment often leads to dehumanisation. This component is representing the "interpersonal dimension of burnout" (Maslach, 1998, p.40). In accordance with Brandstätter, Job, and Schulze (2016), dissociation or numbing of emotions might be associated with emotional detachment, which refers to an incapacity to connect emotionally with others, by avoiding situations that trigger anxiety. Moreover, people are able to defend their personal limitations as well as through this form of psychological awareness (Brandstätter et al., 2016) When confronted with an emotional need of another individual, one must also be authentic within. however, when the effects of depersonalisation give rise, this is often difficult (Alola, Olugbade, Avci, & Öztüren, 2019; Brandstätter et al., 2016). According to Alola et al. (2019), nonchalant attitudes are likely to occur when employees are faced with difficult circumstances at work, in an effort to protect their current resources. Thus employees distance themselves from customers and become cynical when uncivil interactions occur in an effort to avoid losing scarce resources. By contrast. Negative encounters resulting from incivility may lead to cynism among employees (Alola et al., 2019).

Reduced personal accomplishment refers to diminished feelings of capability, as well as effectiveness at work. This low sense of self efficacy further contributes to the development of depression and anxiety, thus making it difficult to cope with job demands worsened by limited environmental support, and opportunities for professional growth and development. Furthermore, workers may feel inadequate in their ability to help clients, and judge themselves as failures. The following section will give a brief review of various studies that conceptualised using Maslach's Multidimensional Theory of Burnout, looking at the three dimensions of burnout, namely emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment in different contexts.

- Friganovic, Selic and Ilic (2019) defined burnout as a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and lack of social accomplishment. Their study on stress and burnout syndrome and their associations with coping and job satisfaction in critical care nurses; and found that coping mechanisms and job

satisfaction are associated with incidence of burnout symptoms in a work context. Based on the Maslach's conceptualisation they concluded that burnout is a serious problem for healthcare systems and affects almost all profiles of healthcare workers.

- Adeli and Mbutitia (2020) addresses how burnout levels vary based on age and experience of the student affairs personnel (SAP) and the implication this has on their motivation and retention in Kenyan universities. They found that higher percentage of the younger SAP and those who had worked for less than five years are more affected by burnout than the other categories. This is evident when they become exhausted, and finally become less interested in personal development or they quite their job.

- Thomas, Bakas, Miller, Johnson, and Cooley (2022) found that most nurses reported high (46%) to moderate (37%) levels of emotional exhaustion, and concluded that there is no relationship between burnout and turnover.

- Sciarra (2020) conducted a study of this guided by Maslach's multidimensional burnout theory and the job demands resources model to determine if there was a difference in level of burnout between graduate and undergraduate nursing faculty and what effect academic teaching level, tenure status, and educational preparation have on the level of burnout reported by nursing faculty. Results revealed academic teaching level, tenure status, and educational preparation had no significant impact on the level of burnout. Nursing faculty reported emotional exhaustion and depersonalization related to job demands; however, they reported a high level of personal accomplishment.

- According to Arrington-Judkins (2021) child protective social workers encounter multiple stressors and high demands in the workplace and that burnout is prominent in the social service. In their qualitative action research study, they explored the social workers' experiences of burnout and organizational issues related to burnout experiences. They used the Maslach's multidimensional theory as a theoretical framework. Four themes were identified; the lack of positive social interaction, physical and mental exhaustion from field work, impact of stress on work demands, and lack of incentives on the job.

- Prentice, Elliott, Dorstyn, and Benson (2022) explored burnout risk factors among medical trainees and aimed to conceptualise both constructs. Using the Maslach's multidimensional theory of burnout participants described burnout as an insidious syndrome lying on a spectrum, with cohesive descriptions under seven themes which are presented in the figure below:

Figure 2.2: Themes of Prentice et al's (2022) study [2]

Altered Emotion   Compromised Performance   Disengagement   Dissatisfaction

Exhaustion   Overexertion   Overwhelmed
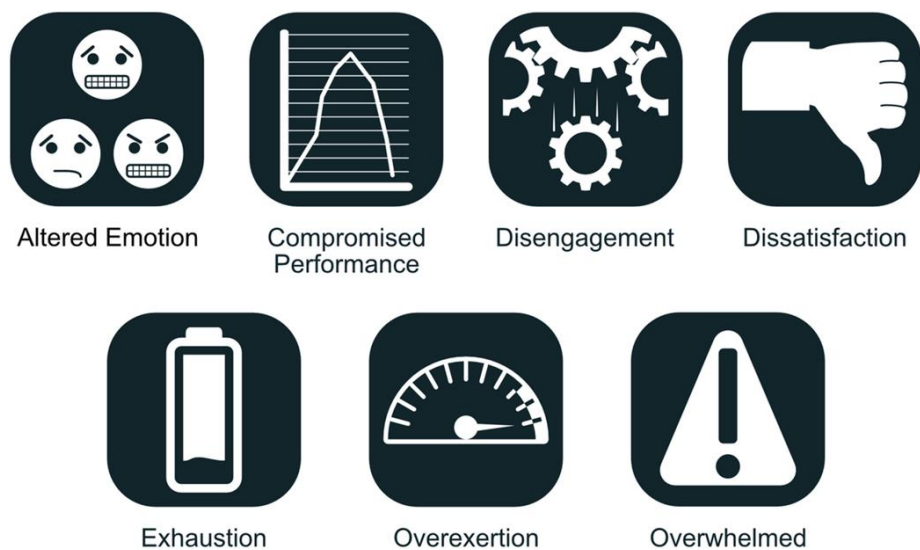
- Ross's (2021) study focused on personal characteristics when evaluating student engagement on their campuses. Using the multidimensional theory of burnout, the findings suggest that a student's level of participation is far more dependent on the context in which they interact.

- Stevens and Hannibal's (2022) highlights the extent of the presence of the key components identified by the multidimensional theory of burnout: exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and job detachment and feelings of organisational ineffectiveness and failure. The research findings indicated that each element of the multidimensional theory of burnout is prevalent among workforce. Exhaustion was evident through increased levels of workload, poor work design, a lack of

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[2] The seven dimensions of burnout among Australian general practice registers, by Prentice et al (2022), page 249

resources and change fatigue. There was prominent evidence to indicate feelings of job detachment where employees are seeking alternative employment and feeling disengaged with the organisation. Lastly participants indicated low levels of confidence in leadership, poor communication and an overall lack of accountability.

- According to Kurbatov et al's (2020) study, physician burnout, including surgical trainees, is multidimensional. Findings revealed three discrete clusters of responders with differential risk for burnout. The highest risk group demonstrated the lowest grit score, low interest in innovation and leadership, higher financial stress, and concordantly, the highest rates of anxiety, dread, and self-reported burnout.

- Hassan and Ibourk's (2021) study confirmed the two-dimensionality of the Burnout measurement scale, depersonalization and emotional exhaustion, the multidimensionality of the scale of teacher self-efficacy (six dimensions) and the uni-dimensionality of the scale of job satisfaction. A negative correlation has been revealed between the teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction on the one hand and the two dimensions of burnout, on the other hand.

- In their study, Kesarwani et al (2020) reviewed and analysed the prevalence of burnout among healthcare professionals in India and the factors associated with burnout. Using the Maslachs multidimensional theory of burnout prevalence of burnout was twenty-four percent (24%) in emotional exhaustion domain, twenty-seven (27%) in the depersonalisation domain, and twenty-three (23%) in the personal accomplishment domain. Furthermore, young age, female gender, unmarried status, and difficult working conditions were associated with increased risk of burnout.

- Travis, Lizano, and Mor Borak's (2016) study seeks to advance understanding of the differential impact of job stressors (work-family conflict, role conflict and role ambiguity) and burnout (emotional exhaustion and deprsonalisation) on employees' disengagement (work withdrawal and exit-seeking behaviors). Findings suggested that work-conflict, role ambiguity and role conflict were found to impact work withdrawal and exit-seeking behaviors indirectly through burnout.

Additionally, there are six areas of work-life that can exhibit tremendous mismatch among individuals and those in the workplace based on Maslach's multidimensional theory (Maslach & Schaufeli, 2016). Those six areas of work-life mismatch are presented in the following figure:

Figure 2.3 The six areas of life-mismatch[3]

1. Workload	2. Control
4. Reward	3. Community
5. Fairness	6. Values

The *work overload* mismatch results when the work load is more than what the employees could produce. In this instance, the workers are expected to work using limited resources and little time and that produces stress (Savaya, 2014). When workers feel chronically overworked, they struggle to "rest, recover and restore balance" (Maslach, 1998, p.38). According to Quinn-Lee, Olson-McBride, and Unterberger's (2014) assessment of burnout among hospice social workers and its relationship to death anxiety, the major factors contributing to burnout were high workloads and insufficient support. In Quinn-Lee et al's (2014) study, workload was identified as a contributor to burnout. Participants were hospice social workers with high caseloads and who were responsible for handling 40 clients, providing grief support, and providing bereavement visits. Respondents cited high workloads inclusive of attending to 40 patients, conducting grief groups, and bereavement visits, other work responsibilities, and being

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(a) [3] The six areas of life-mismatch figure created by Author

unable to meet deadlines as leading to stress and burnout, as well as not getting enough sleep or eating well Quinn-Lee et al., 2014).

Lack of control takes place when workers feel that they are unable to take control of their work. This could be a result of rigid laws and rules within the work place or tightened supervision, resulting in workers unable to think independently (Sciarra, 2020). The absence of control in their work hinders their ability to solve problems and make well informed decisions for which they are held accountable (Maslach & Schaufeli, 2018; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In the areas of work life, control plays a huge role on how employees shape their work lives (Leiter & Shaughnessy, 2006). The *Insufficient reward* mismatch involves limited employee reward and recognition that is of relevance to their work. This leaves workers feeling underestimated in their ability to work. External rewards such as benefits and salary are regarded as prominent, but the intrinsic rewards such as the sense of achievement after doing something significant in one's work are critical (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Breakdown of community is when workers lose the essence of positively connecting with co-workers in the place of work. At times, the organisational culture may encourage isolation among workers or distant social stunts (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In addition, unresolved conflicts within the workplace or organisational environment further result in a destructive and disorganised environment. This escalates negative emotions such as hatred and frustration and decreases the possibility of welfare at work (Maslach, 2017). Based on the results of Savaya's (2014) study of 363 social workers, conclusions were made that the place of employment is one of the significant factors associated with burnout. *Absence of presence* may take place when the workplace system is unjust and unfair, which contributes to the hindrance of mutual respect. This unfairness is as a result of inequalities among the distribution of workload, as well as favoritisms and nepotism in the handling of promotion posts. In the event of unfair treatment, working relationships can be damaged (Leiter & Shaughnessy, 2006). A mismatch in fairness induces cynicism, while fair treatment results in greater involvement and engagement at work (Leiter & Schaufeli, 2018).

Value conflict is an imbalance between skills, or experiences expected to fill a certain job position, and personal values and principles. This may escalate to a point where a worker may feel that some job demands require something that is challenging their individual values

(Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Marsh (2020) suggests that the increase in the mismatch between an individual and work increases the chances of developing burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). As the sixth and last area of work life, values, involves employees' perceptions of the degree to which their personal values are aligned with those of the organisation. In contrast to a values match, a values mismatch occurs when employees are indifferent to the organisation's values.

Figure 2.4: Three aspects of burnout and six areas of work life[4]
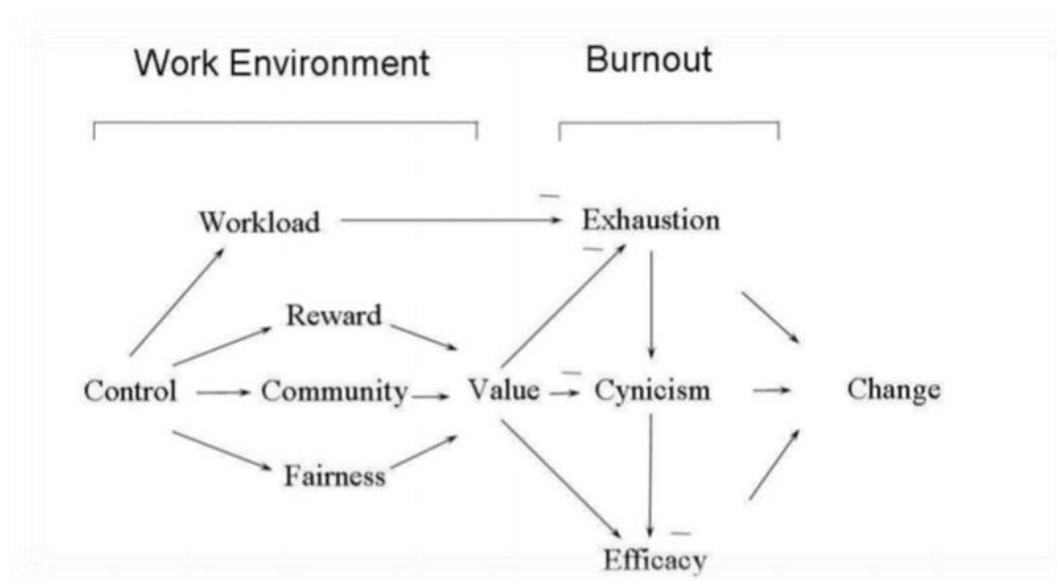
Figure 2.4 depicts a view of the areas of work-life showing the six areas, three characteristics of burnout, measurable outcome, as well as change evaluation. According to the figure, values are interconnected with energy, involvement, and efficacy in nearly all work-life areas. Exception to this rule is the pathway from manageable workload to exhaustion, which illustrates the relationship between stresses related to work demands. The figure also depicts control as occupying a foundational role. The link from control to four other work-related factors (workload, reward, community, and fairness) is direct, but the path from control to values is indirect. To summarise, the mediation relationship proposes that control is associated with the

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[4] The areas of work life model of burnout: tests of mediation relationships, by Leiter and Shaughnessy, (2006), page 330

three characteristics of burnout in the five other areas of work-life. A second element of the model is that reward, community, and fairness - all three areas of work-life - are related to workplace burnout and values. The third characteristic of work-life is that it relates to outcomes through burnout, that is, it impacts on vital outcomes by influencing the energy, involvement, and efficacy people experience at work. Paths from the areas of work-life to outcomes would illustrate other mechanisms through which some of these influences may take place.

2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, related literature on the proposed study was reviewed. Recent studies and findings on child welfare social workers in rural under-resourced agencies explored unique characteristics of rural social work practice. They highlighted that rural these agencies are tormented by increased levels of occupational stress, secondary traumatic stress, and high turnover rates, lack of recruitment and retention, as well as burnout. The stress levels are also increased by unique problems in rural communities, like geographical isolation, confidentiality, limited adequate transportation, lack of social services, less job opportunities and limited access to mental health service into rural communities as a result of rural isolation, as well as residents who are considered as having an unwavering stand in their cultural, political, family ethical values and general upbringing.

The challenges which social workers in under-resourced areas experience affects their ability to exercise what initially drawn them to the profession. They face a challenge of tackling issues related to equitability, availability of services, geographical isolation that potentially affects the rural population significantly. However, limited focus has been put on assisting them cope with the demands of their work especially in the Eastern Cape Province, as it is known for the scarcity of resources and poor rural and industrial development. Additionally, the Maslach's Multidimensional Theory of Burnout provided a precise and clear definition of burnout with an aim to determine the root of the problem and give relevant solutions. The following chapter would discuss the research methodology that would be used to achieve the aim of this research.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Research methodology is a description of how researchers plan and conduct empirical studies on whatever they believe can be known (Newman & Gough, 2020). Although defining the term methodology is quite complex, detailed descriptions of the methods and techniques employed in the study should be provided. The purpose of this is to provide a clear overview of the sampling method, data collection and analysis. The research setting is described with meticulousness, logic and precision (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). Additionally, rationale and justification for selecting the research design thought to be the most suitable for the study are provided. This chapter of the study reflects on the methodology used in conducting this research study. It explores the research paradigm, approach and design. It further outlines the sampling techniques used to select participants as well as steps taken during data collection processes. In this chapter, the researcher discusses the data analysis, various steps taken to ensure data trustworthiness, ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

3.2 Context of the study: Butterworth

Butterworth, also known as *Gcuwa* is in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The town has a population of approximately 45 900 and is located 111kilometres north of East London on the national highway N2 (Mahata, et al., 2021). There is a large Black population in the town and Xhosa is the predominant language. Females make up 57 percent of the town's population, while males make up 43 percent (Zantsi & Bester, 2019). The Mnquma Municipality falls in B category and consolidates the towns and rural areas of Butterworth, Centane and Ngqamakhwe (Mnquma Local Municipality, 2019). The Municipality is generally rural in nature and relies on social grants as means of survival. Mnquma Municipality relies primarily on Butterworth for its services, contributing 77 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP). Today, it has several major industrial sites in its surround ding area, including Zitulele and Ibeka. The city's industries produce processed foods, beverages, tobacco products, beer, tiles, clothing, leather and wood products, chemicals, rubber and plastic products (Magengelele, 2021). There

is a railway line that runs between Mthatha and East London; however, there is rarely a passenger train here. The town of Butterworth is quite small, with a commercial district and a residential area with middle-to-high income housing. Since 1976, Black high-income groups have largely taken over the central town, which was exclusively White. Since 1994, white occupancy has not been re-established post 1994. In Butterworth, development has followed the N2 line, resulting in long narrow townships to the east of town, in the direction of Walter Sisulu University (WSU), about 5 kilometers away. In addition, the N2 goes through the central business district (CBD) of Butterworth, which creates conflicts between uses, with pedestrians, hawkers using the same space as the high-speed road (Zantsi & Bester, 2019). The diversity of this town showcases several environmental and developmental aspects, which emanate from factors such as unemployment, underdeveloped infrastructure and poverty (Denne, et al., 2019). Child welfare social workers from Mnquma Local Municipality child welfare agency were interviewed to explore their subjective experience of working in a rural based agency and to elicit their perspectives on occupational stress, burnout, and to establish if any rural agency supports are available. This Municipality was selected on the basis of its uniquely identified situation regarding social worker job dissatisfaction, burnout and occupational stress. Throughout this study, the agency as well as participants' information will be treated confidentially to ensure anonymity.

3.3 Research paradigm

A qualitative approach is utilized in this study, which uses an interpretivist framework. Interpretivism holds that multiple realities exist, coupled with subjective meanings that correspond to existential as well as theory-based position (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). To the current study, the interpretivist paradigm is relevant. This is because researchers who purport to be interpretivists adopt an insider's perspective, by which social reality is approached from the perspective of those concerned or involved in the study (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). In light of the topic and research questions guiding this study, the adopted research paradigm is deemed appropriate. In this way, interpretivism is used to approach reality as it is experienced and understood by the participants (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The participants are the ones who produce subjective meanings of scripts they have written about the world they live in. To answer the research questions, the participants' opinions and viewpoints are of utmost importance.

Mahata et al (2021) claims that understanding any researchable problem requires understanding its context, which should be viewed through the eyes of participants as social actors.

3.4 Research approach

The study employed a qualitative research approach utilising the interview method. According to Newman and Gough (2020, p. 8), this type of approach is mainly explorative in nature. It allows researchers to "collect data in the form of written or spoken language, or in the form of observations that are recorded in language and analyses the data by identifying and categorizing themes". It is used to obtain an understanding of underlying reasons, and motivations of a phenomenon (Magengelele, 2021). Moreover, one-on-one interviews serve as a source of provision for prospective quantitative research and helps in uncovering trends regarding thoughts and opinions about the problem (Magengelele, 2021; Newman & Gough, 2020). Qualitative research has the advantage of allowing researchers to listen to the narrative of participants. In this way, participants' experiences can be understood in depth rather than generalised (Tolley, Ulin, Mack, Robinson, & Succop, 2016). This approach enables researchers to explore experiences of participants so that they receive a detailed perspective and enhanced understanding of themes that came up from data collected (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Utilising one-on-one interviews helped produce a comprehensive description of the participants' feelings, experiences, perceptions and understanding of their experience of working in rural based settings (Zantsi & Bester, 2019).

3.5 Selection of participants

The sample was drawn from the population of three agencies in Mnquma Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape. These three agencies were used since they represented a range of ethnicities and races, as well as a variety of client problems. The sample was obtained through an agency's field office directors. In this study, potential participants were recruited using non-probability sampling technique. Non-probability sampling is a "sampling technique where the samples are gathered in a process that does not give all the participants or units in the population equal chances of being included" (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016, p. 1). Instead, various methods that are subjective in nature are utilised to choose the different parts to be included in

the sample. The reason for choosing non-probability sampling is that the implementation process tends to be quicker (Etikan et al., 2016).

The researcher purposively selected both male and female child welfare social workers in Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Government sites (DSD) as participants in this study. Using this sampling technique, the researcher was able to select study participants from the sample population who were suitable for the study and who met the requirements of the sample description. This implies that participants in this study were not just chosen because they were easily accessible or available during the time when the researcher wanted to conduct the research. Instead, participants were selected because they met set criteria. Two most important requirements were that participants were chosen for their experiences, which were of relevance to the study topic and were primarily selected based on their willingness to participate in the study.

The sample of the study consisted of eight child welfare social workers working in rural based agencies in Mnquma Local Municipality (Mnquma Local Municipality, 2019). Two of the participants were male and six were females. All participants had a baseline experience of working for a minimum of 2 years in a rural based child welfare agency in Mnquma Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape. The majority of participants belonged to the Black African ethnical group. Based on the qualitative nature of the study and its scope, this study used a small sample. Similar studies have used approximately the same number of participants as the current study (Walters, Jones, & Brown, 2020). An idiographic approach to qualitative research, such as this one, involves a small number of participants (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). A distinctive idiographic approach implies subjectivity, variance, and often cultural differences. On the other hand, Braun and Clarke (2021) argues that idiographic research emphasizes an understanding of the individual as individually unique and complex. This is because idiographic studies are descriptive and detail-oriented. In addition, the sample was based on data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.6 Data collection method

The method that was utilised to collect data for this research study were semi-structured interviews. Twenty to twenty-five semi-structured interview questions were conducted, with follow-up questions using a series of closed and open-ended questions. The aim was to obtain qualitative data regarding participants' experiences of working in a rural based and under-resourced agency. The use of closed and open-ended questions allowed participants to add more information, share their feelings, attitudes and their understanding of the subject (Alam, 2021). Johnson, Scheitle and Ecklund (2021) states that one of the advantages of conducting interviews as compared to questionnaires is that the conversation between researcher and participant is believed to be natural, which may lead to rich and realistic information. Another advantage of utilising interviews is that there is a possibility that the researcher and the participant will establish a good, close and harmonious relationship, gain trust for each other, which is unlikely to occur when using quantitative methods (Johnson et al., 2021).

3.6.1 Interviews

A semi-structured interview schedule is normally used as the data collection instrument to obtain consistent, rich and thick data. Each participant was asked questions on the interview guide in the same order. However, probes were asked depending on participants' responses. The researcher selected a semi-structured format instead of a structured format to create an opportunity to ask follow-up questions when necessary. In addition, this technique was utilised to better understand the described changing dynamics participants shared. Individual interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 period and the national and UKZN COVID-19 prevention guidelines were observed.

3.7 Research instruments

In this section, focus is on the two research instruments used, namely the researcher as the key instrument and the interview schedule. The interview schedule was developed after an extensive review of relevant literature, examining the research problem and possible questions to generate relevant data to illuminate the research problem.

3.7.1 Researcher as key instrument

A key instrument of qualitative research is the researcher (Bahrami, Soleimani, Yaghoobzadeh, & Ranjbar, 2016). As a result, the researcher is inextricably linked to the research and can impact the research process so much. In qualitative research, credibility of the researcher is of primary importance (Hayashi Jr, Abib, & Hoppen, 2019). The reason for this is that it is she or he who plays the most important role as the main instrument for collecting and analysing data. Data collection was spearheaded by the principal researcher. During data collection, she was acutely aware of a number of elements including the fact that researcher competence is a critical factor in determining the quality of data. In order to prepare for quality data collection, the researcher spent sufficient time and resources on researcher training as well as preparation.

3.7.2 Interview schedule

The method of interviewing is effective qualitative research. The intent of which is to explain how social actions are motivated by subjective factors and meanings being attach to those social actions (Bearman, 2019, p. 5) . In this study, an interview schedule was used to collect data and generate answers to key research questions guiding the study. Although there were possible list of questions identified by the researcher, the interview schedule was not specific about the order and structure of the questions instead the topics and questions could be adjusted based on how the conversations develop. However, it included both closed and open-ended questions with follow-up questions. The researcher intended to explore the experiences of child welfare workers in rural based agencies and topics for questions were drawn on such purpose. In addition, questions were generated from available literature on rural social work. The questions were generated in such a way that social workers' perceptions of occupational stress and burnout as employees of child welfare agencies are better understood. Several questions asked participants about the way they see the rate of turnover in their agency and what could possibly contribute to that phenomenon. More questions explored how participants received support from the agency and ways in which this could be improved. Answers to these questions would hopefully give insight on effective services/support to mitigate occupational stress and improve retention rates. Follow-up questions were asked to obtain a better understanding of participants' dynamic narratives.

3.8 Data collection procedures

When conducting research, it is important to comply with certain ethical principles (Alexander, 2019). Applying these ethical principles certifies the research and prevents potential harm to participants and the general population at large (Alam, 2021). To conduct this study, the researcher approached the Department of Social Development provincial head office and requested gatekeeper's permission to work with selected agencies**-see gatekeeper's permission request letter-** (Appendix A). The researcher was advised to submit a concise overview of the study along with clearly defined objectives and methods that will be used to collect data. These were submitted. The researcher was advised to send an email to the identified agencies. A letter requesting to conduct research and recruit participants was sent to three agencies in Mnquma Local Municipality along with a brief study proposal an interview schedule. Once permission was granted by the chief social workers'/office managers in each agency- **see permission to conduct research study-** (Appendix B), a group email was sent to eligible child welfare social workers inviting them to consider participating in this research study **-see invitation to participate in research-** (Appendix C).

The researcher applied for ethical approval from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) using the letters submitted by three agencies. The study was granted ethical approval (HSSREC/00002886/2021) **-see ethical approval letter-** (Appendix D). In possession of the certificate of clearance as well as letters from the gatekeeper, the researcher began by introducing herself to the research field and familiarising themselves with it by taking local gatekeepers through a presentation of the research plan. This included chief social workers, social worker managers as well as social work supervisors at selected agencies for the purpose of establishing initial contact

According to Neuman (2014), the researcher who enters a research site must make use of common-sense judgment as well as appropriate social skills. With this knowledge, the researcher was able to foster an open and trusting relationship with potential participants. Having done so, a group email was sent to eligible child welfare social workers inviting them to consider participating in this research study. Participants who displayed an interest to participate in this study replied either via email or telephonically to the researcher and gave consent –**see informed consent sheet-** (Appendix E) to participate in the study. The date and time for the interview was

scheduled with participants and interviews took place at their professional place of practice. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the recruitment and interview process. All individual data collected were treated confidentially and coded to ensure anonymity of participants. Pseudonyms were used in the write-up to ensure confidentiality; participants could not be identified. The findings were presented in the form of a report as aggregated data only and will be provided as such to all three agencies. No identifying details about individual participants or sites were reported.

Participants were also informed that taking part in this research was strictly voluntary and they had a right to withdraw from the study at any time without expecting any form of penalty (Newman & Gough, 2020). A total of eight participants displayed interest and were interviewed by the principal researcher. All the interviews were audio-recorded after permission was received from participants **-see audio-recording consent form sheet- (**Appendix F). Neither biasness nor exclusion based on gender, age and ethnicity took place. The study remained transparent in terms of its aims and participants were not required to reveal their names on the audio recordings. In instances where the researcher or participant revealed their names, name of the agency, places and significant events on the audio-recording, these were anonymised on the verbatim transcripts so that the participant cannot be identified using whatever was said on the recording. There were no compensations given to participants for partaking in this research. The basic rules of ethics in research are to avoid threat or harm to participants in any way (Adams, et al., 2021). The researcher ensured that no harm was caused because of involvement or participating in this study. The principle of beneficence was observed throughout this study to ensure that the research promotes the well-being of participants (Neuman, 2014).

The duration of each interview was approximately 45-60 minutes. The reason for this was to obtain qualitative data that is rich and thick. Before each interview started, participants were required to complete a demographic form **–see demographic information sheet- (**Appendix G), which requested for the following information: participant's name, age, gender, race, home language, marital status, highest qualification, occupation, location of office, years of experience, and number of years working in a rural based agency. This allowed for their demographic information to be accurately recorded. Once the interviews **-see semi-structured interview**

schedule- (Appendix H) were completed, the participants were thanked for their valued time and input. The interviews were then transcribed and each individual transcript was sent to the interviewees by electronic email to read through in order to ensure that the researchers have captured what was shared in the interview. Participants were given an opportunity to add additional comments if deemed necessary. This process is called member checking (Candela, 2019). Once data collection was concluded, the process of analysis began.

This study hoped to bridge the gap in the literature on child welfare social workers' experiences of working in rural based settings in the South African context. The content of the various questions in the interview schedule may require participants to share personal reports of their experience of working in a rural based setting. This self-reflective process may be an uncomfortable situation for some participants, as certain questions may be more emotionally significant. In the event of participants reporting undue distress because of their participation in the research, they would be debriefed by the researcher who is a trained clinician and referred for follow-up counselling if deemed necessary. Furthermore, participants also had the right to withdraw from the study at any point in time should they have experienced distress, without any penalty for doing so. However, none of the participants withdrew from the study. To ensure this, at the end of each interview, the researcher gave participants a debrief form **–see debrief form-** (Appendix I) which includes contact details if they required further information about the study.

In this study, all documentation of data transcribed from audio-recordings as well as coded data for each interview was stored a password-protected file saved on a USB flash drive. The researcher as well as the supervisor is the only ones who have access to this information. The USB flash drive will have all the data collected from the interviews and transcriptions. It will be safely stored in a locked filing cabinet during and after the research process. It will remain there for a period of five years after the study is concluded, including signed consent forms and audio-recordings. After this time, all the documentation will be destroyed by shredding and copies of consent forms, demographic forms, data transcribed from audio-recordings as well as coded data for each interview will be kept with the research supervisor. The participants will be given a copy of the results and discussion section of the dissertation. This is to allow them to comment on the degree to which the collective results math their individual

experience(s). it is also to ensure that confidentiality has been maintained throughout –**see letter for participants regarding results-** (Appendix J).

3.9 Data analysis

The qualitative data received was analysed using a method called thematic analysis (TA) as inspired by Braun and Clarke (2021). Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 209) describe TA as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data". It puts emphasis on the rich descriptions of data collected and making informed theoretical interpretations thereafter with the aim of regulating meaning through common themes. Furthermore, in line with what Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, and Snelgrove (2016) alluded to; TA is flexible in nature as it accommodates the researchers' choice of theoretical framework when compared to other methods of analysing qualitative data. As such, it is through this flexibility where the richness of complex descriptions in data collected, significant themes of relevance are obtained (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

In this study, Braun, Clarke, and Hayfield's (2022) six phase approach to thematic analysis was followed. In the initial stage of data analysis the researcher read and re-read transcribed interviews to become familiar with its content. The researcher made use of note taking as she listened and read in order to note down ideas. This process required the researcher to actively and critically read and listen to words and begin to think about the meaning of the data (Braun et al., 2022). The researcher generated codes. Braun et al (2022, p. 430) state that "codes are the building blocks of analysis and can provide a pitchy summary of a portion of data or describe the content of the data kept together in order for the researcher to carefully listen and see if themes constructed were relative to the coded data.

After codes were generated, the researcher began the process of transforming data into meaningful and cohesive categories and provides labels that have a potential relevance to the research question. The researcher carried out this action to make qualitative data easier to understand and interpret and identify themes. In the third phase the researcher became involved in an active process of analysis as she moves from codes to identifying or constructing emerging themes. The researcher "reviewed the coded data to identify areas of similarity and overlap between codes" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 210). The researcher explored how themes generated

linked together to tell the overall story about the data. The audio recordings and transcripts were kept together in order for the researcher to carefully listen and see if themes constructed were relative to the coded data.

In the fourth phase, the identified themes were reviewed with reference to the coded data as well as the overall data set. According to Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 214), this phase is "essentially about quality checking". As such, the researcher checked and re-checked for potential themes over extracts of data that were arranged comprehensively and explored if themes related to the data. At this stage, it was important for the researcher to proofread the data in order to ascertain that the themes were captured meaningfully and explained the whole data set. The value of the collected data and the relevance it has in relation to research question was further evaluated by the researcher in the fifth phase. The researcher was required to look at the data from every conceivable angle without overlooking or ruling out alternative explanations. The last phase consisted of reporting and discussing findings, which are linked to the literature. Further, critical analysis began using data extraction. The researcher ensured that the final write up is clear, convincing and indescribable to form an "argument that answers the research questions" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 204).

3.10 Rigor of the study

In qualitative research, rigor or trustworthiness is important in order to ensure that reliability and validity is maintained throughout the study (Elo et al., 2014; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). According to Nowel et al. (2017, p.3). According to Nowel (2017, p.3) "trustworthiness is one way researchers can persuade themselves and readers that their research findings are worthy of attention". The researcher chose the widely approved criteria of evaluation inspired by (Lincoln & Guba (1985) as cited in Alexander, 2019) to reflect on trustworthiness in this study. The criterion is briefly outlined below:

Credibility (internal validity) in a study relates to the truthfulness of data and its interpretation. In Laumann's (2020, p. 106198) words, credibility refers to the "fit" between the views of participants and how the researcher represents them. This required the researcher to be confident that the findings of the research mirror the true reflection of participants' experiences (Polit & Beck, 2017). To establish credibility in this study, the researcher used techniques such

as prolonged engagement with participants, persistent observation as well as member checking. Credibility was also ensured when transcribing recorded interviews. The recorded interviews were transcribed with caution and each individual transcript would be sent to the interviewees by electronic mail to read through to ensure that the researcher captured what the participant shared in the interview. All the participants were treated with respect during the process of conducting the study and thereafter. They were also informed that they have the right to listen to their individual audio recordings and read through their transcripts of interviews to ensure that accurate information given during the interview was captured accurately. Participants were given an opportunity to add additional comments if deemed necessary. In addition, participants were also given an option to provide feedback on the findings (Appendix I).

Transferability (external validity generalisability) is evidence of research findings that can be applied to a wide variety of people or situations (Kyngäs, Kääriäinen, & Elo, 2020). The researcher aimed to provide a thick description of participants' demographics as well as data-rich description inclusive of direct quotations of participants' responses. As a result, the data were placed in a context that clearly explained each participant's view regarding the topic at hand so that the reader could understand. To ensure a full understanding of the interview excerpts, it was assumed that the reader would benefit from knowing the contexts within which the discussions took place. Additionally, the use of purposive sampling strategy allowed for greater transferability in this study, and the study sample included participants with relevant experience on the topic.

Dependability (reliability) is the consistency of research data. To attain dependability, the researcher ensured that the process of this research is "logical, traceable, and clearly documented" (Kyngäs et al., 2020, p. 44). It was hoped that when readers examine the research process that unfolded, they can evaluate the consistency of research data. In this study, the researcher ensured that the data collected and themes derived from the data are logically connected. Hence, an overview of a detailed step-by-step of data collection and analysis process are provided. The findings are explained clearly, the quotations provided correspond to the interpretations and are reasonable and the study's findings and conclusions agree. To assist the

reader in better understanding the study design, the process of sampling methods was outlined in detail.

Confirmability (objectivity) focuses on whether the findings of the research are based solely on collected data. This necessitated the researcher to show how interpretations of the data and conclusions drawn thereof have been made (Kumar, 2014; Kyngäs et al., 2020.) Confirmability was accomplished at the time when constructs such as credibility, transferability, and dependability were established (Nowell et al., 2017). In this study, confirmability was ensured by giving insight into the researcher's background as well as perceptions, references of other theories and their perception in relevance to the topic. The researcher is clearly identified and reflections on the effect of her position on the findings are also highlighted. Throughout this study, it was essential for the researcher to match the interpretation of the data with the relevant theory and different sources from literature. It was also essential that the researcher worked close with her supervisor when reflecting on the data obtained in order to minimise researcher bias during data interpretation.

3.10.1 Reflexivity

In this study, the researcher was aware of the implications of her privileged position. As such, during the process of conducting interviews, the researcher engaged in reflexivity by recording participant comments and her thoughts, keeping the discussion and dialogue open with each participant, editing and reflecting on the subjective statements of the researcher on a continual basis. Having gained vast experience in working with children suspected of abuse and trauma during her internship and volunteer work motivated the researcher to conduct a study outside of her field. In this process, the researcher worked closely with social workers from under-resourced agencies. Because the researcher was researching a phenomenon, they were familiar with, and it was necessary to assess their own contributions as a researcher throughout the study.

Dodgson (2019, p. 221) described reflexivity as "the process through which researchers understand and deal with the complexity of their presence in a research setting." Researchers

often view reflexivity as an important tool for ensuring the quality of qualitative research. Using reflexivity, researchers can learn about their personality and personal values, which may affect the way they collect and analyse data (Dumitrescu, 2014). Being an intern psychologist helped the researcher when collecting data and conducting interviews. They shared some of the participants' experiences, was able to better able to understand their difficulties. Due to the researcher's training in psychology and doing research outside their profession, they were not familiar with some of the theoretical underpinnings of this research study. Therefore, the researcher worked closely with the study supervisor to understand the participants' lived experiences within the lens of Maslach's Multidimensional Theory of Burnout and engaged in further research.

As the primary instrument for data collection in this study, so it was vital to practice researcher reflexivity. As part of the reflexivity, the researcher acknowledged the interview as an interaction between two parties, and considered how her own presence may have affected how the interviews were conducted. Having been born and raised in Butterworth and volunteered in some of the care agencies, and being an African woman, the researcher is aware that in the process of data collection and analysis, their positionality matters. The experience of working in under-resourced agencies and being raised in Butterworth helped the researcher to better relate to participants and understand their experiences. Furthermore, as a resident of Butterworth, the researcher acknowledged how her position may have affected the participants' responses. Although the researcher was provided with clinical guidance by the research supervisor, they also made a great deal of effort to be self-reflective. During the entire research process, the researcher's contribution became apparent in terms of understanding meaning through the lived experiences of study participants. This was achievable by means of being appreciative of the interplay between personal and methodological considerations.

3.13 Limitations of the study

There are various limitations to the study. The methodology or design used might influence the research study limitations (Kumar, 2014). The design and methodology used in a study may have altered the interpretation or conclusion drawn from findings of the research

(Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019) . The limitations of the study are listed below: diversity of sample and sample size, data collection method, generalisability of findings and data transcription.

3.13.1 Diversity of sample and sample size

The diversity of the sample in this study is limited. All the eight participants drawn were from the African ethnic group. This has been evident from literature, that child welfare social workers who practice in rural based agencies especially in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa are predominantly African (Schmidt & Azzi-Lessing, 2019). As such, the findings of this study mirror the experiences of child welfare social workers from a Black, African perspective. Nonetheless, because ethnic diversity was not a criterion, it had no bearing on the study's findings. In terms of the sample variety, this study has some limitations. There were six females out of eight participants. Despite the efforts to include a balance of male and female participants, most participants were females due to the purposeful sample and the participant's response rate (Stratton, 2021). The diversity of sex, on the other hand, was not an essential condition for participant selection and had no impact on the study's findings. Researcher bias may have been difficult to mitigate. When selecting participants, the researcher may make subjective or generalised assumptions. However, the researcher made an effort to mitigate researcher bias.

3.13.2 Data-collection method

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used to gather data. Face-to-face interviews, offer a greater response rate, interview flexibility, and the possibility for the participant to seek for clarification (Alam, 2021) . Nonetheless, there is a risk of bias being introduced, as well as the fact that it takes time for the researcher as well as the participants. For the convenience of the participants, individual interviews were scheduled during office hours. However, this did not interfere with their day-to-day responsibilities in the workplace. The researcher was able to explore the participants' responses to obtain more detailed information because the interviews were semi-structured. However, it is possible that bias was introduced due to the choice of probes employed to get more detailed information.

3.13.3 Generalisability of findings

The study samples demographic make-up has an impact on generalising the findings to different contexts. The scope of this research was limited to social workers currently employed at the targeted child welfare agencies in the Eastern Capes' Mnquma Local Municipality. As a result, due to the socio-political history of South Africa, which is unique, the findings may not be generalisable to non-African child welfare social workers working in rural-based agencies outside of Mnquma Local Municipality, the Eastern Cape Province and South Africa as a whole. Furthermore, because working conditions and exposure to diversity varied across rural under-resourced agencies in South Africa, the findings of the study cannot be applied to all African child welfare social workers working in rural under-resourced agencies in South Africa.

3.13.4 Data transcription

Interviews with participants were conducted in both Xhosa and English and then transcribed verbatim. To ensure that the information gathered is accurate, the transcripts were translated to English and back to Xhosa. Despite the fact that both transcripts were supplied to participants to check that the researcher transcribed, translated, and interpreted what they said, it is crucial to note that misinterpretations and loss if minor meaningful nuances may have occurred.

3.14 Summary of the chapter

In this chapter, the research methodology followed in this study was described. The context described through highlighting its key features, such as geographical and demographic characteristics, socio-economic profile and other elements important to the study. Detailed research designs and methods were presented in this chapter. Thematic analysis was used to explore the experiences of child welfare social workers' experience of working in rural based agencies in the Eastern Cape Province. This approach was discussed in detail including the sampling and data collection methods with detailed steps followed during data analysis. The principles of research ethics were also detailed including trustworthiness. The findings of the study are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The process of analysing data requires structure, order and meaning to the large amount of data that has been collected (Newman & Gough, 2020). Data analysis in qualitative research aims at identifying statements from a general perspective to a more specific one which is also inclusive of the relationship between these statements (Lester, Cho, & Lochmiller, 2020) . In this study, data were collected by means of one-on-one interviews with eight child welfare social workers. This chapter begins with an outline of the underlying assumptions, as well as the profile, of all participants. The socio-demographic profile of all eight participants is tabulated in Table 1. Moreover, in this chapter the base themes are introduced and discussed. A summary of the following themes: (1) Childhood Related Personal Experiences, (2) Agency-Based Perception of Burnout, (3) Occupational Stress (4) Nature of the Working Conditions in Rural-Based Agencies (5) Inadequate Support for Agency Child-Welfare Social Workers (6) Staff Turnover Rates in Rural Under-Resourced Agencies and (7) Varied Ways of Coping with Stress on the Job, is depicted in figure 3. Each theme was interpreted and discussed with verbatim quotations taken directly from interview transcripts.

4.2 Demographic profiles of the participants

Child welfare social workers were recruited among three agencies in Mnquma Local Municipality. Fourteen participants were invited, however, a total of eight social workers were able to complete the entire interview process. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, six invited participants were unable to partake as the shift to work-from-home was implemented in their offices. All eight participants interviewed were child welfare social workers currently working in a rural-based agency in Mnquma Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape. The majority of participants were females with only two males forming part of the study. Table 5.1 illustrates the relevant participants' socio-demographic profiles, including age, race and home language.

Table 4.1: Socio-demographic profile of participants

	Age (yrs)	Race	Home language	No of years in a rural-based agency	Sex	Occupation
1. Participant 1	38	African	IsiXhosa	9 years	Female	Social worker
2. Participant 2	33	African	IsiXhosa	7 years	Male	Social worker
3. Participant 3	29	African	IsiXhosa	7 years	Female	Social worker
4. Participant 4	30	African	IsiXhosa	7 years	Male	Social worker
5. Participant 5	40	African	IsiXhosa	7 years	Female	Social worker
6. Participant 6	41	African	IsiXhosa	10 years	Female	Social worker
7. Participant 7	50	African	IsiXhosa	9 years	Female	Social worker
8. Participant 8	39	African	IsiXhosa	10 years	Female	Social worker

Table 5.1 shows that the age of participants ranged from twenty-nine to fifty years old, with a mean age of thirty-seven years old. All eight participants belonged to the Black African race and were isiXhosa speaking, although the language of communication during the interview process was predominantly English. All participants had a baseline experience of working for a minimum of two years in a rural based child welfare agency at Mnquma Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape. This consisted of NGOs and Government sites (DSD). They had working experience ranging from seven to ten years. The transcription codes for the material text are as follows: as a researcher, PI represents the principal investigator, participants one, two, three, four, five, six, seven and eight is a representative of each participant. In order to better understand the lived experiences of child welfare social workers in rural-based agencies, the following emergent themes were identified.

Figure 4.1: The summary of emergent themes

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┌─────────────────────┐
│  1. Childhood       │
│  Related Personal   │
│  Experiences        │
└─────────────────────┘
          │
┌─────────────────────┐
│  2. Agency-Based    │
│  Perception of      │
│  Burnout            │
│                     │
│  2.1. Organisational│
│  Factors            │
│   -Remuneration     │
│  and Benefits       │
│   -Work-based       │      ┌─────────────────────┐          ┌─────────────────────┐
│  Interventions      │      │  6. Staff Turnover  │          │  7. Varied Ways of  │
│  for staff          │──────│  Rates in Rural     │──────────│  Coping with Stress │
│  2.2. Emotional     │      │  Under-Resourced    │          │  on the Job.        │
│  Exhaustion         │      │  Agencies           │          └─────────────────────┘
│   - Secondary       │      └─────────────────────┘
│  Trauma             │                │
│   -Feelings of      │      ┌─────────────────────┐
│  accomplishment     │      │  5. Inadequate      │
└─────────────────────┘      │  Support for Agency │
          │                  │  Child Welfare      │
┌─────────────────────┐      │  Social Workers     │
│                     │      └─────────────────────┘
│  3. Occupational    │              │
│  Stress             │──────┌─────────────────────┐
│                     │      │  4. Nature of the   │
└─────────────────────┘      │  Working            │
                             │  Conditions in      │
                             │  Rural-Based        │
                             │  Agencies           │
                             └─────────────────────┘
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4.3 Theme 1: Childhood related personal experiences

All the eight participants seemed to have childhood related experiences that were perceived as helpful and somehow encouraged child welfare social workers to work with children and families who reside in rural areas. The participants inferred that their past experience moulded their desire to serve others and advocate for their rights, as well as social change. Thus, their experiences have motivated them to pursue a career in social work. They have a wish to help people in situations they once found themselves in, which gives them an

opportunity to pass on the insight they learnt, through their own lived experience. The following response from in-depth interviews helps illustrate this point:

"Eh…. I am a product … my parents were married but they divorced later maybe I was 3 to 4 years old when they divorced. So, when I grew up, I was changing places; I wanted to stay with my mother since my father was not an easy man. I believe the fact that I studied Social Work in my... at the back of my mind I knew that I wanted to make a change in the lives of children. You would see that even if you are staying with relatives, it is okay. I am not saying my relatives were bad people or maybe the people I stayed with…. were somehow what can I say they were okay, but I myself was longing to stay with my parents, and their relationship was …if I can put it as….it was toxic you see right?" (Participant 1).

Therefore, the participants shared that when parents' divorce, the effects of divorce can be difficult. The participant was forced to adjust to family dynamics, new housing and new life situations. Thus, social work gave her the drive to change this narrative. One participant for example explained that being raised in a single parent family was not always negative. This is supported by the following response from in-depth interviews:

"Uh…. hey my sister…with me it was okay… I was raised by a single parent when my father passed on. I knew my father but he was involved… and then I was raised by Mom and her sister, my aunt. So, in the absence of my father God blessed us with two mothers, you see. So, that setting you see really rooted me deep into the family. So, when it comes to family, I do not compromise and then when I went to high school, I moved from home to stay at my grandmother's place where by were so many. We used to take care of them and all that, you see. Yes, I think that also gave a background in terms of loving and caring" (Participant 2).

One participant described that experiencing abuse and neglect in childhood can lead to adverse outcomes in adulthood. She shared the following:

"I grew up in, if I may say, an abusive environment at home. So, in that abusive environment there were no people I could go and talk to, you see. Because it is quite traumatic for children to grow up in such an environment, I feel like working here where

there are cases in which parents are raising children in abusive environments. So, I think it helped me, so that I could help other children who are going through the same experience, because growing up in abusive environments can have long term effects to the child that parents are unaware of" (Participant 3).

One participant further indicated that their career in social work was influenced by a desire to help those who are unable to help themselves. As children who grew up in rural areas and witnessing other children who grew up without supervision and support, the participants were inspired to make a difference and pursue social work. He expressed the following:

"Uummm…to be honest when I did this Social Work degree, I wanted to make a change to those who are unable to change themselves. I did not know that I was going to focus on children because I did not know the scope of the work that we are doing. All I knew is that when you are doing Social Work you will be able to make a change, to assist the rural people. So, when I graduated and started working, I was motivated by seeing children who had no means of living, who had no one around them to support them. So that pushed me as a person who wanted to make a difference" (Participant 4).

Experiencing parental loss during childhood motivated them to advocate for those facing similar situations. One participant shared the following:

"Oh! Yes! (enthusiastically) …because in my situation my parents passed away when I was very young. I think I was 4 years when my father passed on and then at least my mother passed on when I was 24. You know, that is why I decided to do Social Work because we were child headed families. And because we come from rural areas we did not know much. As a person who grew up in a child headed family, I decided that I want to advocate for children's rights" (Participant 5).

The loss of her parents influenced one participant to make a premature transition from childhood to adulthood. She learned from the experiences of her widowed mother. Hence, as a family they had limited opportunities due to a lack of finances and resources, and witnessing that in childhood inspired her to become social workers and help others. She explains:

"As I stated in my introduction, I grew up in a family of eight kids. My mother was widowed when she was 35 and she is currently 75 years old. So, when I got to school, I

liked people with resources. When you are helping people, you are doing great things. Okay, when this family wanted to go to school my mother approached my uncle who was a teacher but he refused…" (Participant 6).

For one participant, growing up without parents made her want to assist others who are not sure where to go for help. She expressed the following:

"Yes, as I grew up, I was supposed to be a foster child. Because I grew up without parents, because they both died when I was still very young; I was 7 years old. So, I grew up with my grandmother who was not working and my maternal grandmother who was old, but not old enough to have old age grant. So, when I heard about those people, I told myself that I want to be one of them, so that I can help children in need" (Participant 7).

Therefore, being a member of a household headed by grandparents came with its challenges, the most important of which was unemployment. Thus, the participants' difficult upbringing helped them become more sensitive to those experiencing similar situations. Their intervention is motivated by increased levels of empathy, which stems from difficult events they once experienced. This is further supported by the following response from in-depth interviews:

"Okay, I grew up in rural areas and in a very disadvantaged background. It is not like the area I grew up in has got all people who are poor but my home, in particular, was the poorest. So having grown there and well aware of my suffering, I know what it feels like to be in need" (Participant 8*).*

Overall, the participants' experiences seem to convey the same message. Having experienced as children what their clients are going through, the participants now utilise their wealth of knowledge to make the world a better place. It was the harsh conditions they experienced as children, as well as their limited resources and access to various facilities, that encouraged them to follow a career in social work. Despite working in under-resourced agencies, the inability to make changes leaves them feeling despondent. Thus, being unable to help others due to similar challenges they have experienced in the past, makes them more liable to burnout.

4.4 Theme 2: Agency-based perception of burnout

The participants were asked to explore their experiences in order to gain understanding of how they conceptualised their perception of burnout. Follow-up questions were administered in order to ascertain their perspectives on how burnout impacts on child welfare workers, particularly those working in rural-based agencies. Many factors are mentioned by participants that contribute to burnout. Some are organizational factors (remuneration, benefits and work-based interventions for staff) while others are more personal factors (secondary trauma and feelings of accomplishment or sense of duty).

4.4.1   Organisational Factors

Four of the participants provided a similar description of burnout consistent to feeling chronically overworked, to a point where they find it difficult to stop working and rest in order to recover, rebuild and be productive again in their work, while maintaining a balanced perspective and practising self-care. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

> *"Of burnout? I think burnout happens whenever you are faced with too much to do. You see, but in this sense then were talking about work-related issues. So, here burnout is caused by too much workload"* (Participant 2).

They shared a common feeling that burnout and high workload are related. These participants highlighted that burnout results when the workload is more than what the employees could produce. A heavy workload that these participants are facing also contributes to a change in mood and behaviour. Hence, a consequence of this is decreased motivation, and self-care practices. One of the participants shared the following:

> *"My understanding of burnout is that it has to do with being overworked or not really taking care of yourself as an individual in the workplace and then you end up being maybe frustrated, depressed and demotivated. I think it is something along those lines…that is my understanding about the burnout"* (Participant 4).

Two of the participants added to say that working under pressure and dealing with tight deadlines made them develop distress symptoms, such as depression and frustration. In addition, inconsistent quality of work is as a result of this imbalance. The following responses were given:

"So, you find your case load is more than the ratio you are supposed to work with. So we have to deal with that and do your level best to be on time and on target to meet your deadlines. Uh and burnout as well… I even felt personally that I even had a depression that has like escalated to bipolar because, being at work your own personal stuff" (Participant 6).

"Very far away from the town… So, we are not working according to the ratio that we are supposed to work. So, we have overload of clients and now the quality of our work is ruined, because the chair is full. I am supposed to help this client and there are lots of clients that are there waiting for me" (Participant 7).

4.4.1.1 Remuneration and Benefits

Six participants felt that burnout is caused by a lack of recognition and reward, inclusive of external rewards such as bonuses, benefits and salaries. They shared that this problem is pertinent in their respective rural under-resourced agencies. One of the participants shared the following:

"There is no motivation my sister; there is no motivation, you see…obviously if you work here and you get paid better you would have incentives that will motivate you to stay and do your job. Bonuses at the end of the year - that is motivation, you see. So, if that does not happen then why would you stay; because everyone wants that paper, you see" (participant 2).

These participants express that this leaves them feeling unacknowledged, unmotivated, frustrated and undervalued in their work capacity. Three participants mentioned that they are paid a low salary, which is only able to meet the basic needs of the immediate future:

"Then we would not have a problem with staying here and working here. But now you find that when you get paid it is hand to mouth you see, and if ever you would lose your

job there is nothing you will get, even if we say you are working here until you pension there is nothing you are going to get. There is no medical aid; it is just…you get the small salary…yeah" (Participant 3).

"I personally feel that there is too much work in the profession and we are being under paid…. I stated that you want to do your best but then there are these limitations. It is frustrating when you are in the helping profession. You want to do your best. You want the results at the end of the day, and you always wish you could spread your wings and do beyond your scope of work" (Participant 6).

"That we know, and all other professionals know that Social Workers are the least paid professionals and also as the Social Workers in DSD we are supposed to be the core… the department is supposed to put Social Workers first but when it comes to remuneration it is not like that" (Participant 7).

It was also a major concern that the indoctrination that they are to work hard and serve those in need comes from their goodness of heart, but one participant expressed that even so they cannot hide the fact that they must have money in order to afford all the things that make life bearable. One participant shared the following:

"We cannot deny it, we need money to survive, you see. So, Social Workers are not well paid, just the profession itself. I can say even here in South Africa it is not perceived as a profession; you see" (Participant 8).

Moreover, the future of the workers is not being catered for, as there is no pension or provident fund. One participant shared the following:

"Look, you know, I mentioned that there are no benefits and pensions, and age is going …" (Participant 5).

4.4.1.2 Work-based Interventions for staff

Three participants expressed concern over lack of staff-centred interventions such as trauma counseling that cater for social workers' emotional needs, in order to cope with stress and trauma on the job, to debrief or ventilate. Two participants shared the following:

"…I do not think the wellness is taken seriously, so people are going through the problems that you have mentioned without having any programme that is taking care of them, because we are dealing with different problems each and every day. Maybe you can be exhausted or you could be frustrated but there is nothing that is helping you to deal with your problem, so that tomorrow you are able to face those problems again" (Participant 4).

There is no time for us to ventilate. No trauma counselling that we receive. We are supposed to render the services to clients and no one is looking at us as Social Workers" (Participant 7).

Moreover, one participant further complains that there are no motivational training and workshops offered by the agency. She shared the following:

"As I said there is no motivation, you find that there are no in-service training and workshops, which give you motivation and confidence that as a Social Worker my services are still needed. But now you find that it is 8 o'clock to 4 o'clock and you are tired but I do not see anything tangible I can say I did" (Participant 1)

4.4.2   Emotional exhaustion

It is evident that emotional exhaustion is also a central part of burnout. Six of the participants expressed feelings of physical and emotional tiredness that results in depression, wearing out as well as debilitation. As such, emotional exhaustion makes it difficult for them to look forward to what the next day has in store. These participants expressed that they feel like their emotional resources used up as they try to cope with continuing difficulties at work. Hence, despite the hardships, as an agent of change, one feels compelled to remain motivated since people look up to our services with feelings of hope and perseverance. This is supported by the following response from in-depth interviews:

"You see, you even sometimes get lazy to come to work and usually feel like there is just too much baggage in it. Your body does not agree. You have taken a lot and your mind is overwhelmed. That is how I get. Yah, you find that hey no, it seems like my batteries are drained" (Participant 2).

"Yes, you feel you are exhausted emotionally, because we deal with children in different situations. Neglect on its own without going further deep into how they ended up here, how it happened, can cause you to be emotionally unstable, you see. Now the children are looking up to you because you give them hope; and even if you are hungry, no matter what you want, the child is looking up to you. So, you are required as a Social Worker to make sure that this child is taken care of" (Participant 1).

4.4.2.1 Secondary Trauma

Moreover, four participants felt that burnout among child welfare social workers is caused by secondary trauma. These participants indicated that secondary trauma sets in because of emotional duress that results from hearing firsthand stories of clients. The experience shared is reflected in the following quotes:

"There are some tragic cases that need experience because we are staying in rural areas. The people around these days it is a social grants state and the roads are not….these accidents…. so you have to go and be there to give help and when you come back you are being traumatised you need to debrief. So that is another thing" (Participant 6).

*"My understanding is that burnout is when you have taken in a lot that you have nowhere to offload basically. It sets in when you have listened to all these clients of yours and it sort of builds in you a certain kind of trauma that you have nowhere else to offload, you see" (*Participant 8*).*

In addition to that, one participant felt that as social workers they deal with severe cases that require rapid intervention to help process unpleasant feelings related to the trauma. The following was said:

"…..then that secondary trauma affects us because, as I have said, we are exposed to those cases…brutal killings uh….dysfunctional homes, marital disputes and all those things affect us, but there is no time for us to heal" (Participant 7)

As such, the emotional distress often causes physical, behavioural and psychological symptoms, such as difficulty sleeping, feeling hopelessness, emotional exhaustion, resentment

towards demands put on the worker in the workplace or at home. This is supported by the following response from in-depth interviews:

"Yes, I think so, I think it could be because some of the cases that we deal with they are very sensitive. So…sometimes, especially when I first got here; at least now I am a bit stronger, but when I first got here, when I dealt with a case that is quite stressful or that I saw it really affected the children I would find it difficult to sleep. You would be stressed up with that case…" (Participant 3).

4.4.2.2 Feelings of accomplishment/sense of duty

The intrinsic rewards such as feelings of accomplishment after doing something substantial in their line of work also seemed important for participants. For seven of the participants, burnout is perceived to be a result of reduced personal accomplishment. They explained that they feel overwhelmed and demotivated due to reduced productivity and low morale. One participant shared the following:

"….. You see, you even sometimes get lazy and discouragedto come to work, and usually feel like there is just too much baggage in it. Your body, you see…does not agree" (Participant 2).

For four participants, feeling discouraged and tired makes them dislike their jobs. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

"Uumm, you feel like you do not like your job anymore…." (Participant 1).

"Oh yes, it is discouraging, it is discouraging because you are tired…" (Participant 5).

""So, sometimes we get a little discouraged and then you cannot be productive because we just feel overwhelmed by the work…..Uumm burnout it is a negative thing, so obviously when you are going through that negative experience, they are going to be negative consequences. Stress is obviously going to be high and you feel like you are not being as productive" (Participant 3).

"...do this and do that, you cannot even like finish this work you were doing. So you have to multitask so that you meet everything; that is how it works and then there is the low job satisfaction" (Participant 6).

Two participants expressed feelings of personal and professional incompetence. The sense of accomplishment they feel, as well as being proud of their work, is what helps them feel like they are making progress in their work. This is supported by the following response from in-depth interviews:

"Some social workers work from the passion. So, you do not feel that fulfillment you feel when you help someone successfully. You will fail because of you do not have the working tools. For instance, I have foster care children I was supposed to accommodate in March last year in 2020" (Participant 7).

"Yeah, we do not develop ourselves we are just sitting here, it is like we arrived in our destination, you see. So, I would say I developed laziness; people are discouraged and that thing of getting used to the place…. they are used even to the same treatment that is not so good, but it is what they have known" (Participant 8).

Furthermore, two participants elaborated on this and explained that burnout is a result of feeling frustrated and helpless over ineffectiveness at work. Hence, one may yell at others when feeling disappointed by their decrease in productivity. Also, decreasing performance and a general feeling that one is unable to do the things that they used to do leads to burnout. *The lack* of control makes it difficult for one participant to think independently. They shared the following:

"Then my understanding now about this thing…burnout is when you sometimes yell at someone who is innocent because you are full and you cannot talk" (Participant 7).

"But when you work here you are just like…I do not know if I will say what you are... You are not treated as a professional. No, if they tell you to do this you need to be on your feet and do it. You cannot convince the person who is telling you to do this that no this thing it can be better if we do it in this manner…. you see" (Participant 7).

4.7. Theme 3: Occupational stress

Child welfare social workers experience a great deal of occupational stress due to several reasons. The participants were asked about their opinion of occupational stress and what it involves in reflection of their own subjective experiences of working in rural-based agencies. In response, the participants indicated that the high caseload, lack of direct supervision, as well as inadequate management style, are some of the contributing factors that results in occupational stress in their rural based agencies. First, high caseload was recognised as systematic in child welfare agencies. Seven of participants take the view that occupational stress and high rates of staff turnover are correlated to some extent. Whenever there is a social worker leaving the agency, the amount of work is divided amongst prospective employees. When a new social worker is employed in the agency, once again the caseload shifts. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

> *"You see, I have a lot of child cases; let us say my ratio is 1:24. I will not say that is a high caseload, but it is too much because I am alone, and at the same time I am not responsible for only child cases. I am also looking at how the office is running"* (Participant 1).

Therefore, the participant shared that her caseload is heavy on her because she is also in charge of the office's day-to-day operations: As a single social worker, one participant perceives his caseload as heavy. This is further supported by the following response from in-depth interviews:

> *"And each area presents different problems, for example squatter camps that is where the core business squatter camps and townships that is where the core business of Child Welfare is. Because that is where neglect and all this abuse happens and then we get a lot of cases from those areas you see"* (Participant 2).

As highlighted by two participants, it is difficult to remain unaffected by upsetting cases, especially when they have to deal with them on a daily basis. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

> *"I would say it is high caseload. We have a lot of cases (laughing) especially when it comes to foster care placement"* (Participant 3).

"Eh. There is only one factor that I think we sometimes experience and contribute to occupational stress; that is the workload" (Participant 4).

This makes them feel frustrated as they have no control over it. In one participant's opinion, if the case is not resolved timely, they feel unreliable. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

"So, it is kind of frustrating, there are a lot of cases and that you cannot attend to; you give it your best as much as you can when you are attending this case. There is another one coming in and you have to be there and assist. That is how it is, and you end up failing to attend to the clients you promised to come" (Participant 6).

"Because, there will be a lot of pressure from your supervisor; it says that you have to finish so many cases. SASSA needs this report …. the district office needs this report and all those are upon you. At one point they need this…." (Participant 7).

One participant explained that inconsistent turnover rates make it difficult to handle high caseloads, especially when they have a huge lineup of foster care cases. She shared the following:

"High caseload, yes shame we are under staffed; people are doing foster care services and have too much work…you know, it just becomes foster care as in that a child does not get the services. Foster care services that a child is supposed to get, high caseload, yes…." (Participant 8).

Furthermore, lack of direct supervision was the crucial problem expressed by the majority of the participants within their respective rural based agencies. Six of them indicated that the supervision they receive was inadequate because it lacked consistency. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

"…. lack of direct supervision yes because here we have about three new Social Workers, who are not new… new in a way but they are new at (name of agency supplied), you see. So, they need direct supervision and then there is a high workload…senior Social Workers here are myself and (name of colleague supplied), so everything we have to

guide and the people who… our supervisors they expect the office to function well in spite of the challenges we face, you see" (Participant 2).

"Uumm, especially on this part of inadequate supervision… I believe that if maybe a person is supervised once a quarter it would be better. And that thing of…..as you are working you are still….doing what is necessary. Yes, I know my job description or what is expected from me…" (Participant 1).

Therefore, these participants intimated that supervision important as it grants them with a chance to examine gaps and demands for development, as far as patient care is concerned. Hence supervision would help come up with plans of action in order to tackle issues at hand and to ensure that employees have acquired enough knowledge to be proficient in their position as a social worker. The following quote was shared:

"They got…these responsibilities, then if there were adequate supervision one would know what causes you to feel this and we need that nurture thing; that listening, like, what is it? How can we make it best? What is your challenge at the moment?" (Participant 6)

Moreover, this precipitates from the opinion that the supervisors are inadequately trained. For these six above mentioned participants this results in feelings of frustration, waste of time, as well as disgruntled workers. One participant shared the following:

"Exactly, because those supervisors are just like me…as I am today, tomorrow I can be a supervisor, so how do you expect me to be an adequate supervisor (laughing) when I was supervised by someone who was inadequate?" (Participant 7)

From these excerpts, it seems that the rates of employee retention are affected because employees get the feeling that personal and professional development is lacking within the workplace. As such, they experience negative emotions, such as frustration when they carry out the work. Moreover, for four of the participants, burnout is also caused by inadequate management style. This comprises perceived poor or lack of communication. This is supported by the following response from in-depth interviews:

"I do not know maybe the…..at (name of agency supplied, I will say it is poor management" (Participant 5).

4.8. Theme 4: Nature of the working conditions in rural-based agencies

It emerged from the findings that participants had varied feelings of how they perceive their working conditions. In order to obtain a general perspective, all the participants were asked to describe the working conditions in their respective agencies. Two participants reported that the working conditions are alright and have improved over the years. Hence, lack of resources made it difficult for them to work before, but upon receiving funding they were able to purchase necessary tools to carry out the work. This is supported by the following response from in-depth interviews:

"No, the working conditions are alright they are alright but maybe if we would have enough resources…" (Participant 1).

"They are quite good; they have changed, or maybe what can I say is that they are better now than before, because when I got here, we did not have enough resources to do the work properly…But then we applied for funding, and we were able to buy laptops and desktop computers and a car so that we deliver our services well" (Participant 3).

For three participants, the working conditions are mediocre. It seems like this view is maintained by delayed subsidy payments from the department. The following verbatim quote from one participant exemplifies this:

"Uummm…. what can I say about the working conditions is that sometimes they are fine, sometimes they are not that good because we are an agency that is funded by the department? So, we depend on the department in terms of the funding, with a subsidy and there are periods where we go for four months without funding, without any payment; that is when the working conditions become a bit bad if I may say so" (Participant 4).

Therefore, the participants expressed that their working conditions are affected insufficient logistics from the department, as they go through a dry season for months. Three of the participants were certain that the working conditions are challenging and unsatisfying mainly

because of lack of resources and poor infrastructure. In the following quote one participant express:

"Uumm, my sister, honestly, I will not lie. Because first and foremost (name of the agency supplied) is based in the eastern part of the Eastern Cape, you see. Former Transkei, you see…poverty resides here. Eh, lack of resources and everything resides here, you see" (Participant 2).

In addition, the participants indicated that lack of resources, as well as poor infrastructure, was the main contributing factor in worsening the working conditions in rural based agencies. Thus, the findings have revealed that living and working in rural areas has definite challenges, closely related to isolated and distant areas. All the eight participants shared their experiences with the challenges connected with transportation, the seemingly endless demands for serving the ones in need and lack of resources in order to render those services. One participant shared the following:

"Resources that include finances, you see. I would say no it is all good. We work but somewhere somehow, we do need more resources. For example, we do not have transport, which makes it difficult to travel to other agencies to make the work easier for us, you see. We do not have transport, do not have money to buy the means of transport, you see" (Participant 1).

Therefore, the professional challenges that these participants are compromises their performance, because without suitable transport facilities, the provision of service to clients is seriously compromised, thereby adding stress on them. The following was shared:

"You know, at (name of agency supplied), we ended up sometimes not having petrol for the car. We have to go and negotiate with (name of another agency supplied) ....to do visits, you see. So, it was difficult.... it is still difficult because now this year they are going to experience it and it becomes…in some years it would be easy when we have got a sponsor, you see" (Participant 5).

Another problem highlighted by six participants is the lack of proper infrastructure. These participants stated that they operate in an environment that is not well-established, with no

playrooms, waiting rooms, nor toy rooms as they mostly work with children. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

"So, we are faced with those challenges, and the one of resources. As you can see we are operating from this park home, you see. If you can go to other (name of agency supplied) let us, say, maybe Cradock or PE you will find that they are operating in a well-established environment, they have offices, playrooms, waiting rooms everything, toy rooms and all of that, you see" (Participant 2).

Two of the participant added that as they work with children their offices are not adapted to the needs of the children. This makes it difficult for them to get a child to express emotions and thoughts and practice play therapy. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

"I think, a change in our office environment is needed because you can see that our offices are small. If ever we could get a house with spacious offices…… I usually say this to my colleagues that I do not think they are child friendly. As we work with children they do not have that thing where children see that they are comfortable and they want to stay. So, it becomes difficult to talk to them or try to get them to talk, because we do not have toys, no attractive paintings. So, I think I would buy a house and make it child friendly" (Participant 3).

"In terms of resources…when I am talking about the resources, it starts from the office structures because uh…most of the time our agency does not own offices, most of the time uh…rents…currently this is Public Works store, because then you cannot expand and accommodate the number of staff that are working in here. The resources…. I was talking about the computers, the staff and everything" (Participant 6).

Two of the participants indicated that this ultimately makes it difficult for some clients to open up. They are compelled to share despite the circumstance and as such, privacy and confidentiality is compromised. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

"In terms of resources, maybe more space is needed, because we share offices which sometimes could be a problem to some clients since the clients that we work with have come to understand that our offices are the way they are. I think office space is something that would add very much to the way we work in this office" (Participant 4).

"I am supposed to be a field worker; I should not be like office-based all the time, but structure is a problem because there is no enough space to ensure confidentiality at times because we are sharing offices and there is no infrastructure that is enough for all of us. And even things that need you to go out there to the communities; sometimes the transport is not always there. So, resources are a problem, I would say. From transport to infrastructure…" (Participant 8).

These excepts show that challenges often merge in the workplace and contribute to challenging working conditions, as they limit social workers' ability to perform work. Furthermore, two participants mention that there is lack of resources such as internet, computers, and cell phones, and stationery suppliers in their agencies. The following verbatim quotes are evidence of this:

"No, they are not conducive, as you see. We do not have offices; we are sharing offices and the clients are from rural areas. Then it becomes difficult because you do not have the working tools, you are sitting waiting 5 minutes or 10 minutes looking for the stapler. Five minutes moving around looking for the stamp" (Participant 7).

"…to computers to cell phones because sometimes we do not even have a phone and you need to call a client there is no phone" (Participant 8).

As such, this worsens the working conditions as they struggle to execute work smoothly. For these participants it appears if the conditions they worked under were different and conducive, there would be contentment and satisfaction within them because they love what they do.

4.9. Theme 5: Inadequate support for Agency Child Welfare Social Workers

When participants were asked if there is any support the agency offers to reduce the effects of occupational stress, three participants' replies were in the negative. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

"No, besides going for a leave then have those who stay, other than that we do not have another way we can say maybe we can utilise" (participant 1).

"No, not at all" (Participant 7).

"No, No, there is not" (Participant 8).

However, three participants further shared that they receive support from their immediate supervisor. They described their supervisor as affable, easily accessible and that he is constant in overseeing employees' work. Below illustrates the say from one participant:

"I think supervision helps. With our Chief Social Worker, we feel like that he is the type of a person who is always open for us to come and speak with him on a day-to-day basis and he also checks our work"

In addition, these three participants highlighted that the agency offers a wellness programme in order to refresh, but they state that it took place once and lacks consistency, because it is far from their place of work. In the following quote, one participant express:

"Yes, the agencies do offer the wellness of which the wellness is not even within where we stay, it is at the district level. I think the wellness is needed at this level….at this part" (Participant 6).

Despite the above, an overall impression was that employees found the time to help each other with work-related tasks and offer genuine encouragement, reassurance as well as compassion irrespective of work duties and the pressures they face at work. For six participants, the support they receive from fellow co-workers or peer support constitute to a positive working environment. It conveys a sense that they are a team and a small community moving in the same

direction with a sole purpose, which is community service. The following quotes illustrates the say:

> *"I think the only thing that works for us is the support system, that is what I am highlighting because there are no other that I can think of but the supportive system; the supportive staff in this office is what makes it very easy to deal with different situations yeah"* (Participant 4).

> *"We are close and we use each other as some sort of a support system, as we help each other cope; we manage the situation because after all we will not be able to change it and we might as well just love it"* (Participant 2).

One of the participants ascertained added to say that the emotional and physical support co-workers feel within the workplace is merely generated by the social workers and not at all cheered and monitored by the office. Hence:

> *"Yes, we doing it by ourselves….like that thing of deciding, okay, let us take the morning session and go to this thing…..maybe at a mall and order maybe food and then go back to the office, you see"* (Participant 5).

It is evident that the only form of support made known by the majority of participants was peer support and such closeness even extends outside of the office. The following verbatim quotes support this:

> *"So, we worked very well together as staff members…. A lot…yho! No, we support each other a lot here in this office"* (participant 3).

> *"We are very close we work together; the colleagueship extends even outside the workplace. Over the weekends you will be having me chilling with the colleagues, inviting them over; so it is a good working environment shame, shame, shame…."* (Participant 8).

Another participant expressed that the management in these rural under-resourced agencies do not prioritise the needs of the agencies. Hence, the agency directors are preoccupied with careers pursued elsewhere and personal responsibilities. He shared the following:

"Nothing much my sister, one thing that did not come up that much is the issue of ... management of (name of agency supplied). Because (name of agency supplied) has management both with directors that are there. They can also assist in terms of turning around the organisation, you see, and we have, for instance, a chairperson of the board who has higher Education, you see. So, he has a duty to fulfil in Education so the issue of (name of agency supplied) is just a side thing. Another one is a Social Worker at SAPS, the deputy chairperson, you see. Another one is a Social Worker at Correctional Services, another one is a teacher, and another one is a Businessman, you see. Another one is a Lecturer another one is a Pastor, you see. They have their businesses and jobs elsewhere. Yeah, so now they are not hands on in helping (name of agency supplied) develop. We attend workshops with seniors and everything when we meet as (name of agency supplied), you see. We get a Social Worker there who went to a workshop with a chairperson of the board, they are white" (Participant 2).

One of the participants also mentioned that their management does not clearly define what is expected from them; they lack consistency and they receive things by surprise and lack direction. The participants expressed that this makes it difficult to be productive in their work. She expressed the following:

"They do not structure their requirements properly... this month there is this template that you have to use for a report, next month there is this template that you have to use for a report, and the following month there is this template. So, their things are just haphazard like that" (Participant 7).

In one participants view lack of effective supervision and oversight of an agency's operations as drawbacks, which make working difficult and demotivating. She shared the following:

"At (name of agency supplied) you know what was demotivating? It is the board members, because the board members do not respond. If you have a problem in the office, you stand up for it yourself, you have to call them several times but they do not come. So, that is demotivating" (Participant 5).

4.10. Theme 6: Staff turnover rates in rural under-resourced agencies

The research findings have revealed that participants wish to leave their respective agencies because they want to secure jobs in public agencies or government organisations for stability and security related reasons. One participant shared the following on this:

"What made me want to leave is that I want to work in Government, to have a secured job. Second, each year we apply for one year contract, so we do not know if what the outcome is. So, that makes us stressed you find you do not know what they will say this year, are you funded or not. So, it is not reliable that we will remain here and we are safe you see right" (Participant 1).

The participants were asked to expand on the turnover rates in their rural based agencies. Upon exploration they were further asked to share what contributes to burnout that makes them want to leave their respective agencies. Seven of the participants highlighted burnout as the contributing factor in the rate of turnover in their offices. One of them shared the following:

"Yes, yes, I am so glad you raised that because as we speak, we have a Social Worker who is already gone, who was working here, I was about to say the name (laughing). He will work in England. These are some of the reasons, when you ask that guy why exactly are you going it is not only for money, you know, as it is like usually perceived that you go England for money. That guy is very serious about his work then he is not encouraged when he has to come here and there is no this and that and that" (Participant 8).

They further reported feeling uncertain due insecure employment tenure. Moreover, there is a general sense that for participants in Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), staff turnover is precipitated by high stress, poor working conditions, lack of resources and low salary with no benefits. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

"No, at (name of agency supplied) it was the only thing that made people move away ...the staff turnover is that it is an NGO, and there are no benefits. We always wanted to go to the government department for the benefits…." (Participant 5).

The participants in rural under-resourced agencies appear to have a shared goal. In some sense, they are passionate of helping the poor and disadvantaged population, but eventually stay

in a profession that is characterised by too much work and less pay. They gain personal and professional satisfaction arising from helping clients. However, when the working conditions are difficult this leads to burnout, thus leaving the workers feeling ineffective and less productive in their work. Two of the participants share:

"Yes…umm….It could be part of it. But maybe…mostly in NGOs, most people leave because of lack of finances. Yes… burnout could be part of it, because you are overworked and underpaid. But I think it is mostly because of finances" (Participant 3).

One of the participants added that, the growth of the agency and its development is shattered by high turnover rates in rural under-resourced agencies, because no one wants to stay in a stressful environment. This lessens chances of growth and recognition, consequently leaving the workers demotivated. The following verbatim quote illustrates this point:

"Definitely because there is no one who wants to stay in a stressful environment, you see….So, staff turnover affects the issue of growth in these agencies, because you will find that there will be 3 to 4 Social Workers for 2 to 3 years…or less and then even them they cannot handle the heat, because the situation is just too bad. I want out and then come another 3 and then even them, same thing, same results, you see and that affects growth in terms of development of rural agencies" (Participant 2).

Therefore, quality of work is affected because eventually, employees leave rural under-resourced agencies because they do not want their reputations tarnished. One participant shared the following:

"Yes, it does as a result some of Social Workers are moving to UK. I want to stress that one (laughing) because they do not want to tarnish their names since we do not have the working tools. There is no computer here as an office of a Social Worker" (Participant 7).

Overall, the findings from in-depth interviews pointed out that staff turnover affect growth and development in rural based agencies. The majority of these outcomes seemed to focus on challenging working conditions characterised by high stress, poor working conditions and lack of resources. For these participants, working in rural-based agencies has its functional aspects inclusive of resilience, sacrificial attitude and passion to help the poor. These were however not as much expressed by the participants in comparison with emotional outcomes.

4.11. Theme 7: Coping strategies

All eight participants highlighted that they have different ways of coping when the work becomes difficult. For one participant, working out and taking oneself out works best, as the agency does not have resources to address the issue of coping mechanisms amongst employees. Hence:

"I have to work out and just give myself some time and go somewhere and have fun; that is what I do and I am not sure about other people, you see. Otherwise, the organisation does not have resources to address the issue of coping mechanisms here. The fun you make for yourself here" (Participant 2).

When work becomes difficult, one participant considers a decent working atmosphere with no disagreements among coworkers as a source of strength, while also leveraging her direct supervisor appears to work in her favour. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

"Woooh! (Laughing) In our office, I think I usually say to my colleagues, we have been blessed in a way because with us here in the office we work together very well shame. There is no drama like there are no quarrels among us as colleagues or anything. So, if it gets too hard, I know I can go to my colleagues and ask what I can do with this or go to the Chief Social Worker or whoever is here in the office" (Participant 3).

For one participant, asking for help and staying fit outside of work appear to be effective. Hence:

"When work becomes difficult eh…I am able to say to those around me hey I am struggling with this thing here, what I can do to get out of this, you see. It is very easy here because we are the way we are, more of a family. I go for training because I play soccer, so for 2 hours I forget about what I was dealing with here…" (Participant 4).

One participant believes that when things get tough sharing the workload and delegating are her pillars of strengths. This is supported by the following response from in-depth interviews:

"No, the work Zintle; you do not have to tell yourself that as you are here you see that it is yours alone...you share...you share the work... even if you have that thing of having an Auxiliary...like you are working with ...you share the work" (Participant 5).

Planning ahead and focusing on what works best seem to help her cope better when work becomes difficult. This is supported by the following response from in-depth interviews:

"With me personally I do not wait for (name of agency supplied) uh.... I sit down and work according to what is working for me and when the time comes whereby to report...I know you report your own working strategy; this is my work from Monday to Friday I am going to do this and do this when it comes, I must submit, I must submit" (Participant 6).

Meditation through prayer and self-affirmation gives one participant strength to persevere. She expressed her sentiments as follows:

"I pray number 1. Number 2....it is because I am passionate about the job that I am doing and also, I have that zeal of helping someone. I taught myself that when someone came to my office crying, she must go or he must go out smiling. Even if I did not give him or her all what she wanted, but giving him or her hope. That thing of.....giving....seeing that strength a person has even if they view it as small, but when you dig deep and make them see you give them hope that things can still change" (Participant 7).

For two of the participants isolating and dissociating oneself from triggers of emotional turmoil seem to work because they find it impossible to do so, while remaining concerned or within the workplace. They shared the following:

"I consult. First, I consult to my supervisor maybe you see right, then... yes, I consult sister. Then give myself a break if maybe I can see that it is too much now for me then I take a leave" (Participant 1).

"I withdraw.....just take leave, just go home and be productive even at home; you can find dishes dirty and you would be asking "are you in" and I say to you I will wash them myself today and tomorrow, you know" (Participant 8).

It further emerged from the findings that there was a change in the ways in which these participants cope now than when they first began working in their respective agencies. Seven out of eight participants reported that the change is influenced by the experience they have accumulated over the years. One participant reflects:

"There will be a change because now. I have experience in any child-related stuff, so that experience makes it easier to cope than before when I was still new" (Participant 1).

In agreement with the above, participant five recognizes that drawing inspiration from past experiences helps her cope with work-related challenges:

"(Laughing I do not think it is the same…I do not think it is the same. At least because of the experience …" (Participant 5).

Two participants believe that experiences can be both positive and negative, and that high levels of job-related stress can trigger feelings of emotional numbness. However, accepting the setting in which he works under has aided him throughout the years:

"Yes, I think it is experience now,though this experience can be two way. Sometimes experience can cause you to be….to be numb right. To be used to those people that are crying.I know she is going to cry, I mean she will be alright......" (Participant 7).

"Ummm, no I think now I have accepted the situation. I will say it is more of acceptance than to cope you see accepting that things that you cannot change. I have been here for 7 years and it has always been like this so. Instead of stressing out about this thing now that it has remained in the same place in the next 3 to 4 years you see then why sweat about it? Just accept and move on because we still have a life to live after all you see so I guess it is just acceptance my sister you see" (Participant 2).

In one participant's reflection, she expresses on how it used to be challenging for her to manage cases. The lack of experience in child protection caused her to doubt herself and her abilities:

Yes, (laughing)the problem is when I started, I used to stress a lot about cases and I was not sure whether what I am doing is right. You see…. because I never worked in a Child Protection organization" (Participant 3).

One participant observed that over the years, he had put too much pressure on himself without realizing it. He reflects that now, he recognises failure is an unavoidable, and necessary part of learning. As a professional, recognizing his limitations has helped him to achieve a more mature view of his work:

"I think I do, because when I first began this work I think it is normal when you begin something you want to perfect everything and you end up pushing…..putting …unnecessary pressure on yourself but as years went by I realized that even if I try. I have realized that yes, I can try my best but somewhere somehow there will be moments where I will not do well or maybe I will not do things the way that I should" (Participant 4).

In one participant's viewpoint, therapy allows her to express her thoughts, emotions, and better manage her work. According to her, taking care of one's self and nourishing one's wellness is critical, because this enables her to connect better with clients instead of neglecting her own wellbeing, which the clients can see:

"Yeah, I feel I am coping different because I kind of like have to…with my…with my condition and right now being…because um…I am seeing therapy since 2015 until today. That is helping me a lot either than…because this is me, I have to…I have to boost myself so that I can come and work. So that my clients will not feel that this professional is going through a phase. My client must not see that kind of like yho! she is going through a phase or whatsoever. So, it….it is helping me a lot" (Participant 6).

Furthermore, while participants often expressed change in their coping mechanisms, one participant was however uncertain of whether she copes differently now than when she first started working. She describes:

"Ummm but yho! I do not know (laughing)no man I do not know it just depends you know Sometimes you are just so tired" (Participant 8).

This could be accounted for by the fact that the passion the participant holds is so strong that she blocked any form of negative effects that are as a result of the job.

4.12. Conclusion

The presiding chapter outlined seven emergent themes from one-on-one interviews with eight participants. More focus was drawn on the content of what was said, nevertheless fitting interpretations were included where necessary. The following chapter is a discussion of the themes geared towards an integration of the study findings with reviewed literature.

CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

The study sought to explore the experiences and perception of social workers who work in rural based child welfare. The intended motive was to establish an understanding and gain insight on their experiences for a better practice of retention within rural under-resourced agencies. The research findings have revealed that social workers face several challenges, which range from client-related stress to work-related stress. Work-related challenges include scarcity of resources, poor working conditions, low pay, as well as lack of infrastructure to accommodate rural social workers. They also face such challenges as geographical isolation, poverty, and confidentiality concerns. The research findings have revealed that inadequate emotional support exacerbates these challenges, leading to rapid staff turnover. In this chapter, these findings are examined in relation to related literature and Maslach's Multidimensional Theory of Burnout. The Multidimensional Theory of Burnout, in particular, provides a framework for understanding burnout within the participants' context, and the findings of this study are further analysed in light of their implications.

5.2 Three components of burnout syndrome

The most widely used definition of burnout was given by Christiana Maslach in 1982 as a chronic reaction to constant emotional and interpersonal stress at work. As stated by Maslach when a person suffers from burnout, they experience emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation of their clients, as well as a diminished sense of accomplishment. The following is a discussion of each of these components in light of the findings.

5.2.1 Emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is one of the three components of burnout. According to Ferrelra et al., (2019) evaluation of this construct, emotional exhaustion is the primary source of individual stress in burnout. In addition, in line with this construct, personal work disputes, conflicts, as well as work-overload significantly contribute to the development of emotional exhaustion. Therefore, it is a measurement of a worker's ability to refill their energy when they are tired and

drained. Maslach and Leiter (2016) also adds that lack of energy makes it difficult for employees to look forward to what the next day has in store for them. Other studies emphasised the importance of exhaustion in the context of burnout, describing it as the state of being weary, resulting from undue pressure (Schaufeli, 2017). Thus, it is worth noting that exhaustion implies a condition of great arousal rather than that of reduced arousal. As a result, the conceptual feature of emotional exhaustion contrasts with other conceptualisations, which see burnout as a reaction to boring, monotonous and laborious work.

There are several observations on participants' perceptions of burnout, in terms of emotional exhaustion. Firstly, the participants perceived emotional exhaustion as a central part of burnout. They expressed a general feeling of physical and emotional fatigue, which is a result of depletion, wearing out, as well as debilitation. As such, they have difficulty looking forward to what tomorrow has to offer. In line with these findings, related literature has indicated that emotional exhaustion is one distinctive symptom of burnout, as it is described as a state of being emotionally drained due to prolonged stress (Chemali et al., 2019). Hence, this may have other implications in the workplace, including the development of negative perceptions of colleagues, clients and the agency at large. Alternatively, effects such as depression, impatience, and decrease in the ability to communicate effectively with others may be noticeable (Riethof & Bob, 2021). Thus, the ability for rural child welfare social workers to be productive at work is influenced by psychological, social, and physical effects of burnout.

Secondly, research findings have revealed that the risk of developing burnout amongst child welfare social workers in rural under-resourced agencies is relatively high. This is consistent with the findings from related literature. As a result of emotional exhaustion, wrong assessments may be made which could lead to disastrous consequences, such as displacing children from their safe home environments instead of keeping them in safe ones more suitable for their needs (Gonzalez, 2019). The nature of the work they do and the general environment in which they work, put child welfare social workers working in rural based agencies at risk of burnout, because they are given a task to assess and make life changing decisions (Kesarwani et al., 2020). Hence, social workers whose mental and emotional energy is depleted due to work related stress, as well as being overworked, are more likely to evaluate a family incorrectly,

which has devastating consequences, such as taking a child away from a safe place and placing it in a dangerous one (Knight, 2015).

Thirdly, the research findings have revealed that, attributable to organisational stress, child welfare social workers are depressed, anxious and emotionally exhausted. The high levels of occupational stress within rural under-resourced agencies lead to conflict and rapid turnover, which ultimately result in burnout. This is consistent with the findings from related literature. Burnout affects social workers psychologically, socially, and physically and some of the symptoms include emotional exhaustion, depression, anxiety, detachment, sleep disturbances, and negative attitude (Bryant et al., 2018; Gonzalez, 2019).

Fourthly, the research findings have revealed that participants develop compassion fatigue resulting from being repeatedly exposed to trauma-related narratives for a prolonged period of time. The majority of the participant mentioned that secondary trauma affects them because they are exposed to severe cases like brutally killings, dysfunctional homes, and marital disputes. Listening to different cases on a daily basis has an effect on their well-being yet there is limited time to recover from such trauma. Furthermore, the participants raised concerns with timing; they are not given enough time to ventilate and attend to trauma counselling sessions. This is consistent with the findings from related literature. Hence, exposure to trauma-related narratives affects social workers' ability to feel compassion for their clients as a negative outcome of their work, which in turn leads to loss of productivity in the workplace and an increased risk of burnout (Griffiths et al., 2020; Philips et al., 2020). Moreover, Wagaman, Gelger, Shockley, and Segal (2015) agrees that child welfare agencies in rural areas have relatively high levels of occupational stress, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, as well as compassion fatigue. This is also supported by several studies that claim that occupational stress among rural based child welfare social workers is mostly seen as a result of difficult caseload manageability, insufficient supervision (Gelsler et al., 2019) unclear job expectations, (Broadhurst & Mason, 2020) as well as high conflict workplace disputes.

Fifthly, the research findings have revealed that the participants expressed the need for supportive, available, and empathic supervisors with whom to discuss the cases with. Hence, this

would assist in the management of stressful emotions and feeling nurtured, and would help them gain a better perspective of the cases. This view is in line with the findings of previous research, as well as the findings of burnout and occupational stress among rural child welfare social workers. According to Jones et al (2021), an increase in turnover rates that rises when there is emotional exhaustion. Thus, the participants' perceived occupational stress is the main factor influencing the high turnover rate rather than feelings associated with burnout because the pressure is unbearable. Hence, the pressure from supervisors in terms of deadlines and submission dates is difficult to handle and manage at times. On that account, it comes as no surprise that social workers describe the relationship they have with the agency as negative. As one participant reflects, there is no time for them to ventilate, they are required to render services to clients with limited services that are directed at their well-being as professionals. In this regard, the literature mirrored that the culture of the organization is influenced by the social workers planning to stay as employees at their agencies (Tang & Li, 2021).

5.2.2 Depersonalisation

The second component according to Maslach (1993) is depersonalisation. Hence, depersonalisation is the act of being detached, adverse and suspicious of others. This further leads to a decline of physical reality. This is usually the case where one feels emotionally exhausted and resorts to detachment as an emotional buffer in order to protect and shield the self. According to Brandstätter et al (2016), emotional detachment might signify dissociation or numbing of emotions, which refers to incapacity to make emotional connections with others, as a way to cope with anxiety by bypassing situations that provoke it. In addition to that, it is a form of psychological awareness that enables people to defend personal limitations and inner authenticity when confronted with another person's emotional needs (Brandstätter et al., 2016).

There are several observations on participants' perceptions of burnout with reference to depersonalisation. There was a reoccurring issue from the findings that clinical detachment was frequently more of an unrealistic goal than an achievable practice. Despite their best efforts to isolate and dissociate oneself from triggers of emotional turmoil, social workers found it impossible to do so within the workplace. The research findings have also revealed a downward

shift in social workers' beliefs and attitudes towards their clients over time; in some cases, they developed feelings of dislike for clients.

Rather than the basic concept of clinical detachment, this phenomenon for the participants eventually became the focus of attention. Throughout the interviews, an additional dimension of depersonalisation emerged. The social workers in rural under-resourced agencies expressed their attempts to cope with the emotional strains of their work. Empathy towards clients was moderated by emotional distance or detached caring from them. However, it seems that this technique of shielding themselves from severe emotional reactivity at some point compromises job performance. This is consistent with the findings from related literature. The participants on the other hand, appeared to respond to clients in a disrespectful and harsh manner due to the imbalance of extreme detachment and minimal compassion. As a result, undue distancing or depersonalisation, also served as a hindrance towards productivity, thus compromising their care quality.

For the participants, depersonalisation is a coping mechanism in order to protect themselves. As such, the majority of them resorted to proceeding on vacation leave with the aim of refueling. Alternatively, they created a psychological barrier between themselves and their clients or the work environment, which appeared helpful as they limited their interaction with them. Some of the participants expressed that proceeding on vacation leave seemed to be the most significant way to refresh and recover from the effects of occupational stress. This is again consistent with the findings from related literature. According to Alola et al. (2019), individuals respond in this way in an effort to create an emotional barrier with themselves and the imposed work demand.

The research findings have revealed that participants regard detachment as important to avoid personally absorbing everything that happens at work, due to the limited control they have over their reactions in the workplace. Thus, for them detachment was necessary in order to avoid seeking acceptance to an extent where their own capacity to reason is compromised or undermined. This is in line with related literature which describes burnout as a condition of depersonalisation. Hence, social workers experiencing burnout may be cynical towards their agency or clients they service, and they may feel inefficient in their work, or simply do not care

anymore (Kesarwani et al., 2020; Bayes et al., 2021). A social worker may be cynical and negative towards the clients or colleagues, which may interfere with their ability to be objective when dealing with cases (Simons & An, 2015). Thus, the participants appeared to recognise that self-love and care involve allowing rather than directing, and that detachment is essential.

5.2.3 Reduced personal achievement

Reduced personal accomplishment is the third construct in the multidimensional theory of burnout, and it occurs when employees feel incompetent and inefficient at work. The lack of confidence in ones' abilities contributes to depression and anxiety. In turn, an employee may struggle to cope with pressure from the work, which is exacerbated by the lack of support from the workplace and opportunities for professional development. In addition, employees may feel inept in their capacity to assist clients and may view themselves as failures. This component represents the burnout self-evaluation dimension (Hassan & Ibourk, 2021). According to Ross (2021), reduced personal accomplishment leads to a decrease in how one views their level of competence, as well as professional success.

One of the themes that emerged from the findings was how participants viewed their competence in the profession. They translated emotional distress as either a defeat to be professional, leading themselves, as well as their superiors, to doubt their capability of working in a caring profession. Some among them believed that their education system has had its contribution to this feeling. They believed that their education had not adequately prepared them for the emotional realities that come with their line of work and how this may affect their personal lives. In addition, they perceived burnout to be a result of reduced personal accomplishment, which supposedly gives rise to feelings of inefficacy. The majority of participants declared that their working situations increase these feelings. They perceived themselves as failures who have failed the client in need of services because of limited required tools to accomplish the work.

Most of the participants shared feeling overwhelmed and demotivated, which is reportedly due to low productivity and low staff morale. Furthermore, some participants acknowledged sentiments of personal or professional inadequacy. This contributes to the social

workers' lack of motivation. Hence, it is vital for participants to feel like a professional and to be treated as one. Unfortunately, whenever the agency does not acknowledge that they are capable of making solid and meaningful judgments that benefit their clients, job satisfaction tends to suffer. The participants seemed to realise that their primary goal is to improve their clients' well-being and guide them towards a process that meets all of their demands. When burnout sets in, this aim is however jeopardised, since it was not just an impediment to their purpose, but also to their sense of professional capability. This is again consistent with the findings from related literature. Burnout has been shown to have negative psychological, social, and physical repercussions on child welfare social workers, reducing their ability to function successfully at work (Jones et al., 2021; Gonzalez, 2019).

The research findings have also revealed that social workers have inadequate infrastructure. Participants intimated that they do not have a well-established environment to operate, due to lack of funds. Hence, operating in park home facilities and sharing offices posed a challenge in service rendering. There was no sense of privacy, which made it difficult for some clients to speak freely during consultations. The social workers expressed that they had no control over the circumstances under which they work. Some participants expressed that clients have no option but to succumb to the conditions, as confidentiality is jeopardised. This is in line with what several studies found regarding difficulties social workers face when working in rural under-resourced agencies. As Food and Agriculture Organization (2018) observe, geographical barriers and confidentiality difficulties are some of the challenges that social workers practising in rural under-resourced agencies face, which makes difficult for them to maintain the confidence that they are professionals. According to Ulrich-Schad and Duncan (2018), some of the challenegs that social workers face include scarce resources such as internet connections, limited computer access, as well as professional isolation.

Moreover, some participants mentioned that they are short of computers, cell phones, and office and stationery suppliers, which makes it difficult to execute work smoothly. Hence, working under difficult conditions makes one's job challenging, leading to a general lack of professional self-esteem. This is again consistent with the findings from related literature. As Hursley (2018) observes, welfare social workers work under poor conditions and there is need for social worker retention and refinement of working conditions. Related literature has revealed

that agencies have the potential of reducing burnout and its effects, but this is open to question and scrutiny (Hursley, 2018).

The participants explained that despite having challenges there were gradual changes within their agencies. At a certain agency they were grateful because they were now operating in a better place than before. Although they had no supervisor, a post for the chief social worker was created and this arrangement was helpful for them. In addition, they received external funds from Lotto, which improved service delivery in the organisation. These slight changes seem to give participants hope that its effects would be visible on a larger scale. As McFadden, et al (2019) observe, turnover is the devastating end-result of reduced productivity. This emerged in the research findings as participants expressed that they gain satisfaction with their work, as well as personal fulfillment, each time they help a client. Hence, sometimes work tends to be frustrating; due to one's desire to help clients and seeing positive results. This is what motivates the participants in the helping profession. In times of challenge, they feel obliged to go beyond their stated role. This is again consistent with the findings from related literature. According to Edu-Valsania, et al (2022), organisational stress contributes to work dissatisfaction, which further results in relatively high levels of burnout. This cycle makes social workers susceptible to feelings, such as depression, ineffectiveness, cynicism (Gonzalez, 2019), and emotionally exhaustion (Ferrelra, da Costa Ferreira, Cooper, & Oliveira, 2019).

The research findings have also revealed that participants leave their respective agencies due to stress induced by high workload, poor working conditions and lack of resources. This is consistent with the findings from related literature. Hence, heightened levels of occupational stress in rural under-resourced agencies results in an endless cycle of turnover and burnout as these often co-exist and influence each other (Simons & An, 2015). High turnover does not only affect social workers but the agency at large and the communities being serviced as well. According to Kesarwani, et al (2020), clients eventually suffer the consequences as the rates of turnover are high, budget cutting takes place, and work becomes stagnant because the agencies are unable to hire more social workers. The participants explained that they leave rural agencies because they do not want to stay in an environment that constantly causes them stress. The high rates of burnout and turnover drain resources in rural under-resourced agencies and this eventually that affects growth and development. As Griffiths, Royse, Culver, Piescher, and

Zhang (2017) observe, an increase in turnover rates also increases occupational stress levels in rural under-resourced agencies. In addition, other studies found that the culture of the organisation is influenced by social workers who intend to stay as employees in their respective agencies (Tang & Li, 2021). The participants perceived occupational stress as the main factor influencing high turnover rates rather than feelings associated with burnout. Hence, this is due to an unbearable pressure that they receive from supervisors or the management. The participants reflected that the pressure from supervisors in terms of deadlines and submission dates was too much for them. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that they describe the relationship with the agency as negative.

5.3 Six areas of worklife associated with burnout

Burnout has been linked to various outcomes in research. Besides the discomfort of chronic exhaustion, the syndrome carries health risks such as hypertension, digestive problems, and sleep deprivation (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). According to Leiter (2005), workplace conflict and staff turnover are both associated with burnout. There are also instances of burnout associated with performance issues, based on assessment by service recipients (Leiter, Harvie, & Frizzell, 1998). In addition, the impact of burnout is not confined to the individual experiencing it, but also felt by others at work as well.

Hence, workplace qualities have a major impact on burnout. Leiter and Maslach (2016) suggest that workplace factors causing burnout are divided into six broad categories: managing workload, controlling rewards, fostering a sense of professionalism, promoting fairness, and valuing fellow employees. Hence, several key mismatches by an employee are enough to generate burnout; the employee's situation need not be mismatched in every area of his or her work. The opposite of burnout is engagement at work, which is determined by matches on the six areas of work life. Congruency is an integral part of the areas of life as one mediates the relation between three aspects of burnout and the other work life areas. Thus, having a productive and fulfilling relationship with work depends on energy, involvement, efficiency, and this is with respect to the three dimensions of burnout (Maslach & Schaufeli, 2018). The six areas of work life however interact differently and are further discussed below in relation to the findings.

5.3.1 Work-overload

When the work load exceeds the employees' ability to be productive, then work overload occurs. The literature states that work overload occurs when workers are expected to work with comparatively fewer resources and little time, which causes stress. When workers feel chronically overworked, they tend to find it difficult to rest, recoup, and rebalance their lives. The most direct link between workload and energy is the amount of work to be done. According to Ocampo (2016), mismatched workloads exacerbate exhaustion. When workloads are mismatched, energy is depleted through excessive, unwanted demands, and recovery is impeded because personal time is destroyed, or anxieties persist after the workday has been completed (Leiter & Shaughnessy, 2006). However, managing workloads instead allows for reasonable task pacing and energy maintenance (Leiter & Shaughnessy, 2006).

The majority of participants intimated that burnout is understood as feeling persistently overworked to the point that it is impossible to stop working and rest in order to recuperate, rebuild, and be productive again in their profession, while retaining a balanced perspective and exercising self-care. Burnout occurs when an employee's workload exceeds their ability to create, and this is in line with how some of the participants felt. A tremendous workload which the social workers are dealing with also contributes to a shift in their mood and conduct within the workplace. As a result, motivation and self-care routines suffer. The participants also reflected that working under duress and meeting tight deadlines causes them to experience distress symptoms, such as despair and frustration. They were of the opinion that the inconsistency in work quality was due to this imbalance.

This is consistent with the findings from related literature. Employees that are overworked are most likely to have trouble finding time to relax, rebuild, and recuperate and being productive again at work (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Maslach, 2017). In addition, Engel, and Spjeldnes (2009) indicated that social workers work directly with families and have a vast number of records and legal papers to organise for each case, which can be both exhausting and labour-consuming (Kesarwani et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2021; Gonzalez, 2019). For example, it was observed that rural agency has a large number of foster care cases. As such, employees feel rushed, under pressure, and overwhelmed at work because of the large quantity of work they

have to do and the unrealistic deadlines they face (Pretorius, 2020; Lizano & Mor Barak, 2015). The participants agreed that they have high caseloads in their respective agencies. They indicated that high staff turnover and increased levels of occupational stress contribute to mismanagement of caseload. One participant was the only social worker in her respective agency, and it was difficult for her to manage the caseload. The workload is divided among the social workers still employed in the agency, whenever there is a social worker who leaves the agency. One participant for instance expressed that in their agency they are understaffed, hence their caseload is inconsistent. According to Burns et al (2018), a social worker on average has a caseload that exceeded the recommended ratio and because of that service delivery is compromised.

According to Sciarra (2020), a constant shift together with high caseload has negative effects not only on the agency, but on the professional itself and clients being serviced. The participants also reflected on their experience. They expressed that the process was frustrating because they have many cases with limited time to attend and intervene appropriately to each case. As a result, clients viewed them as unreliable because they could not honour them. In addition, the agencies' reputation is more likely to suffer because clients and the community at large may complain of ineffective, unstable and less caring workers. This is consistent with the findings from related literature. Scholars observed that clients may start feeling undervalued and less cared for each time a social worker does not pitch or a case is allocated to a new social worker (Huxley et al., 2005; (Pharris, et al., 2022). In this study, the participants also expressed feeling pressured, rushed, and frustrated and this potentially affects the quality of work they produce.

According to Thomas, Bakas, Miller, Johnson, and Cooley (2022), the issue of staff turnover and work overload is a challenge in rural-under-resourced agencies because hiring and retaining social workers requires money and time. The supervisors are overworked and challenged with offering extra training to new social workers and give them support (Ferrelra et al., 2019). According to Knight (2015), families and the community are also affected by burnout and staff turnover. In their study they alluded that workload has a direct effect on the turnover rates, and this lessens the amount of time a social worker has on each case as the demand to attend to other cases is excessive. The limited amount of time hampers with the social workers' ability to establish a working relationship with the family, thus creating a barrier between them.

Furthermore, mistakes are likely to happen when the social worker has limited time to assess a family for safety (Jones et al., 2021). The participants also described that another effect of high turnover rates is their response time when investigating child cases related to abuse and neglect. This is because such cases are increasing rapidly as a result of the increasing workload (Blomberg, Kallio, Kroll, & Saarinen, 2015).

5.3.2 Lack of control

When employees believe they are unable to regulate their work, they experience a lack of control. Workers may be unable to think independently as a result of strict workplace laws and norms or intensified supervision. Their inability to solve problems and make well-informed decisions, which they will account for later, is hampered by their lack of control at work (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Reviewed literature suggests that having control over the work life of employees has a pivotal role in the working life (Leiter & Shaughnessy, 2006). Employees can shape their work lives to the extent that they are involved in important decisions and exercise their professional autonomy. When given the right to make consequential decisions, employees would have a say in how much work is done and when it is done. Thus, control has an impact on the other five dimensions of the work environment, either directly or indirectly.

In addition, the literature supports that if they perform well, employees may choose the people with whom they work or the rewards that they receive. This is also supported by several work stress theories like the demand-control theory of work stress (Leiter & Shaughnessy, 2006). With regards to this workplace factor, some participants found it difficult to think independently because of lack of control over their work.

5.3.3 Insufficient reward

Including intrinsic and extrinsic rewards are the third aspect of one's professional life. Insufficient reward refers to a lack of relevant employee remuneration and recognition. The workers are left feeling undervalued in their abilities to work when given insufficient rewards. External rewards, such as benefits and compensation, are the most well-known, but intrinsic rewards, such as a sense of accomplishment after accomplishing something noteworthy at work, are also important. In addition to recognition from others, employees gain satisfaction by

offering services, creating products, or resolving clients' presenting issues. According to Ocampo (2016), being inadequately compensated and receiving benefits influence burnout or engagement at work, which is inclusive of energy, involvement and effectiveness. In addition, they asserted that burnout is indisputably opposed to a satisfying working life, while work engagement implies a work environment that is fulfilling and enjoyable.

The research participants described that lack of recognition and incentives cause burnout. The participants expressed that it makes them feel unappreciated, uninspired, frustrated, and devalued at work. In addition, for some participants, intrinsic rewards such as feelings of achievement after doing something significant in their line of work proved to be as crucially important as external rewards. Thus, external rewards like bonuses, benefits, and salary increase are important. This is consistent with the findings from related literature. According to Furman et al. (2009), lack of motivation affects the quality of work the social workers produce, and tends to contribute to the greatest rates of burnout as well as decreased job satisfaction (Brimhall et al., 2014). Further, as Rollin (2020) observes, social workers remain underpaid despite working in stressful environments. Hence, poor working conditions, low salaries and a lack of accommodation are the main causes of staff turnover. The majority of the participants inferred that, as change agents, they value quality work. However, they lack motivation to perform their work diligently. Moreover, the participants expressed a desire for motivation, whether it came from extrinsic or intrinsic sources. For some of the participants, motivation can also come from personal achievement and personal fulfillment and not necessarily money. They supposedly believe that external rewards are as important as intrinsic rewards. This is consistent with the findings from related literature. Scholars concur that social workers migrate to other countries for better working conditions and better wages.

5.3.4 Breakdown of community

Breakdown of community is when the workplace loses the essence of positive connections among colleagues. It focuses on the range of personal relationships at work with supervisors, co-workers, subordinates, and clients. The organisational culture may sometimes lead workers to isolate themselves from their colleagues (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In addition, unresolved conflicts may further create a disorganised and destructive environment, leading to the development of hatred, frustration and decreased worker welfare. Reviewed literature states

that the ability to establish and maintain an engaging working relationship in a workplace result from social interaction.

The participants had different views on personal relationships within the agency. Some participants shared that they do not receive any support from their supervisors, while others received support. Those who receive support described their supervisors as approachable, available, and constant in monitoring the employees' work. The participants who did not receive support explained that the employee wellness programme established in their agencies is inconsistent in their workplace. It is also difficult to access such services when they need to re-energise. Despite work duties and pressures, employees regularly offer encouragement, comfort, and compassion to one another. The participants expressed that, as a small community and a team, they work towards a common objective, which is community service.

As Adeli and Mbutitia (2020) acknowledge, human relationships are complex, creating opportunities for mismatches. The research findings have revealed that workplace relationships seem to be too close while at the same time they are too distant. It is possible that the participants make each other prone to burnout. This is consistent with the findings from related literature. As Ocampo (2016) ascertain, mentorship in relationships enhances employees' quality of life frequently and greatly. In some cases, work relationships lead to lifelong friendships that can be of great significance. The participants intimated that their relationship was intact and extended outside the office. This is consistent with the findings from related literature. According to Kemp (2014), adequate control from the management reduces occupational stress and creates a working environment that is supportive. However, some social workers are faced with inadequate supervision and lack of agency support, which potentially leads to burnout. According to Chen and Scannapieco (2009), quality supervision occurs when there is demonstration and understanding of what is expected from employees. In addition, a worker is provided with clinical perspectives of the case, and debriefing sessions aimed at addressing the emotional wellbeing of the social worker (Philips, Lizano, He, & Leake, 2020). The results of this study suggest that supervisors were under-trained to fulfill the role of supervising, which was unorganised and inconsistent. As a result, employees felt frustrated, since there is no sense of support and their interaction with supervisors is indirect.

This concurs with Kheswa's (2019) view that lack of supportive or helpful supervision exacerbates feelings of ineffectiveness, helplessness, and burnout among the social workers. The participants perceived a limited communication and indirect interaction between supervisors and social workers. Hence, the management in rural under-resourced agencies does not to prioritise the needs of the agencies. The participants expressed that they are preoccupied with their own careers and personal responsibilities, and neglects agency related issues. The management does not clearly define what is expected from the employees, and lack consistency and direction. This makes it difficult for participants to be productive at work.

Therefore, when the supervisor-worker relationship is not good, relatively high levels of stress, burnout, and poor patient care would result. In addition, the participants acknowledged that supervision is important because it grants one a chance to examine gaps and demands for development, as far as patient care is concerned. It helps one come up with plans of action in order to tackle issues at hand, and improves employees in their proficiency as a social worker. The research findings have revealed that rural child welfare under-resourced agencies practice the Laissez-faire management style. In Leake, Rienks, and Obermann's (2017, p. 499) words, the laissez-fair style "abdicates responsibilities and avoids making decisions". The participants described the management as often static in their approach to leadership as opposed to being active and fully involved in business matters of the agency. Thus, without direction from their superiors, productivity is immensely affected. In addition, some participants develop bitterness as the management fails to contribute towards the agency's success (Ezell, 2019). Therefore, it is not surprising to find that social workers report a negative relationship with the agency.

The participants expressed that a child welfare supervisor should display effective listening abilities, communicate respectfully with supervisees and give praises where necessary especially when a job has been done appropriately and offer emotional support to colleagues (Travis, Lizano, & Mor Borak, 2016). This became apparent as a limited number of participants expressed that they felt supported by their immediate supervisor. They perceived supervision as helpful because the supervisor had an open-door policy, which made it easy for them to approach the supervisor and for their work to be frequently supervised. This concurs with Calitz, Roux, and Strydom's (2014) view that a supportive supervisor is one who continues to show compliance towards employees, who is available, realistic in work expectations, and offers

suggestions that improves employees' performance at work. In this study, some supervisors reflected that they ensure that one-on-one supervision takes place in order to make employees narrate the problems they encounter, and ensure that everyone is in a better space to function in the office. Alternatively, in some agencies employees rely on past experience, intuition, and belief system, as well as their colleagues, for assistance on how to engage in practice-based interventions. Even though agency support was perceived differently by participants, there was a general feeling that the main source of support was peer support.

Most participants intimated that despite their busy schedule and work pressures along with responsibilities, they take time in offering support on an emotional and practical sense. Hence, this works for them as it is the only option they have. The majority of the participants agreed that the support felt among co-workers was exclusively the result of the social workers' efforts and that the agency had no role in facilitating or encouraging it. This is consistent with the findings from related literature. According to Chamni-Malaeb (2022), social workers express concern that rural under-resourced agencies have the capacity to reduce burnout and its consequences on their workers. However, in this study the participants solely felt supported by other fellow-coworkers and did not have any support from the agency. This issue is often seen as a problem within the organisation because agencies can reduce burnout by reducing caseloads, encouraging employees to practice self-care, and use job rotations as ways of assisting people in gaining experience and skills while performing new tasks (Knight, 2015). Thus, work efficacy is preserved, while burnout is minimised.

5.3.5 Absence of presence

Absence of presence is unfairness that results from inequality in workload distribution, favoritism and nepotism in promotion processes. This leaves others with no voice to express their grievances, which later leads to further labelling and unfairness in the workplace (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). As Maslach and Leiter (2016) observe, fairness entails an employee's perception of an organisation, especially in relation to personal decisions. Thus, mistreatment can affect a person's relationship with his or her work. Although all the participants understood that there was a possibility of a mismatch in fairness, they did not view themselves as being treated unequal or without respect. Instead, they acknowledged that misunderstandings do take place. However, their ability to resolve and talk through any dispute is what contributes to a good working

relationship. Reviewed literature has revealed that a mismatch in fairness is linked to cynicism, whereas fair treatment is linked to higher levels of engagement in work and the organisation (Leiter & Maslach, 2016). The zeal and dedication the participants seem to have towards their work appears to be motivated by such treatment. They have created a safe space to work together despite the difficulties they face. This is consistent with the findings from related literature. Scholars concur that when work demands are overwhelming, occupational stress is most likely to develop, more especially in a dysfunctional environment.

6.3.6. Value conflict

Value conflict is when a certain job's demands require the worker to do things that challenge their individual values to the point where they experience a conflict between their values and their work (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In their earlier works, Maslach and Leiter (2017) suggested that an individual may experience burnout, when a mismatch between their values and their work increases. Among all the areas of work life, values seem to have the direct ties to energy, involvement, and efficacy, which are the determinants of burnout and engagement at work (Leiter & Shaughnessy, 2006). The research findings have revealed that some participants found it monotonous to do the same thing every day. They expressed a need to experience other areas and the desire to face new challenges.

Furthermore, the participants were of the opinion that they no longer contribute to the lives of clients as they did previously. Career progression seems to be important for them, as it provides a sense of achievement and feeds their hunger to develop personally and professionally. This is consistent with the findings from related literature. Employees who care about the organisation's primary mission are said to have a values match (Maslach & Leiter, 2017; Leiter & Shaughnessy, 2006). However, when employees are apathetic about the agency's values, a mismatch occurs. In addition, employees can have a functional relationship with their work without establishing an emotional attachment to the mission. They may feel obliged to engage in activities that openly contravene deeply held personal principles in extreme circumstances.

As Ocampo (2016) state, mismatches can be obvious from the start of an employee's association with a company or can evolve over time. Thus, value conflicts arise as a result of a change in individual or organisational values with maturity or through changing circumstances.

Moreover, conflicts may arise when employees perceive that the organisation is not sincere about its values. For example, following a period of employment in rural under-resourced agencies, some of the participants discovered that their agency is primarily focused on financial management rather than employee wellness. When the other five aspects of work life align with personal values, the work environment is likely to be consistent with employees' values. The work environment gives employees sufficient control over their work. Work assignments are reasonable and people are treated fairly and respectfully. There is the possibility for rewarding work with compatible colleagues. The multidimensional theory of burnout recognises that aspects of a work setting are interconnected, and the values mismatch provide an overview of how a work setting fits with employees' expectations and aspirations (Leiter & Shaughnessy, 2006).

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, the main findings of the current study were discussed. The discussion focused on how child welfare social workers experience and perceive their work in rural based under-resourced agencies through the lens of Maslach's (1998) Multidimensional Theory of Burnout. This theory served as a basis for discussing their experiences and challenges in the field. The Maslach's Multidimensional Burnout Theory appears to be useful in establishing the causes of burnout and how those who are susceptible to it can be helped. Nonetheless, the limitations to this model have to be considered when working with people who have different backgrounds and experiences, and more focus should be put on understanding their burnout experiences than the phenomenon, its causes and consequences. Social workers practising in rural poverty face challenges rarely encountered by social workers working in urban settings. The study discussed social workers' perspectives on burnout resulting from emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishments. In addition, the topic of six mismatches associated with burnout was discussed and it has been argued that when an employee experiences several key mismatches, it is enough to contribute to burnout. Workplace factors associated with burnout need not occur in all spheres of the employee's life. Afterwards, the participants' challenges within the child welfare system were discussed, which included the interactional style; an understanding of the causes of such; how they relate and impact one another; the organisational climate and the factors contributing to gradual changes within an

agency. A critical examination of all these experiences was done in comparison with the findings of reviewed literature. The next chapter would discuss conclusions derived from these findings and their implications for future studies.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This final chapter comprised the conclusions of the study, and recommendations based on the research findings, as well as limitations of the study. The main aim of the study was to establish an understanding and gain insight on the experiences and perceptions of social workers in rural based child welfare agencies in the Eastern Cape Province. To be more specific the study objectives were to:

1. To explore social workers' experiences of working in rural child welfare agencies.

2. To understand the challenges experienced social workers and their standpoint of burnout within their agency.

3. To determine if occupational stress, burnout, turnover and challenges faced by child welfare social in rural under-resourced agencies are related.

4. To identify possible recommendations to address these challenges or barriers in order to improve the quality of their working experience.

A summary of the research findings is presented below in accordance with the aims and research questions presented in chapter one.

6.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study adds to the body of limited existing literature on rural social workers and their experience related to job satisfaction, burnout, and organisational commitment in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. the results of this study are important in light of the poor service delivery in South Africa. More so, as social workers can be classified as a vulnerable population due to the nature of their work. However, there was a general consensus that challenges social workers' face vary from client-related stress to work environmental stress, as such the growth of the agency and its development is shattered by high turnover rates in rural under-resourced agencies. The research findings have revealed that social workers' experiences of working in rural child welfare agencies vary. However, there was a general consensus that

lack of resources contribute to a difficult working experience. The participants were certain that their experience of working in a rural based agency was challenging, mainly because of the lack of resources and poor infrastructure. According to them, this view is maintained by delayed subsidy payments from the department.

The social workers employed by the child welfare agency faced rural challenges outlined in reviewed literature. These challenges vary from client-related stress to work environmental stress such as lack of resources, poor working conditions, low salaries and insufficient facilities to accommodate rural social workers, geographical isolation, and poverty, as well as issues related to confidentiality. The effects of stress among child welfare social workers is further aggravated by difficult working conditions like insufficient resources to execute work, as well as isolated locations and limited transportation to access distant areas, coupled with poor infrastructure. Thus, without suitable transport facilities, the provision of service to clients is seriously compromised, thereby adding stress on them. Overall, the findings largely concur with previous research conducted on child welfare social workers' experiences of working in under-resourced agencies in rural areas. This thesis argued that occupational stress increases the rate of turnover. The findings have revealed that participants view that occupational stress and high rate of staff turnover are correlated to some extent. The high turnover rates make it difficult to handle high caseloads. The irregular caseloads result from being short-staffed.

It was also interesting to note that social workers' desire to stay employed with an agency is influenced by the newly created professional culture, which reflects both their personality and the agency's culture. These aspects are helpful for agencies regardless of whether they are located in rural or urban areas, but they are particularly useful when a social worker in a rural area has no other source of support other than their own agency. In these situations, rural under-resourced agencies must be the only ones to offer their social workers the necessary support, encouragement, and guidance that would help them retain their staff. Based on this finding, rural-based agencies looking to improve retention rates should provide regular emotional and clinical support to social workers.

Overall, retention would increase if management gained a better grasp of what specific adjustments are required to promote retention among coworkers and effectively implement them.

Furthermore, it recognised that people know what they need when it comes to making changes within an agency, and that listening to staff is the best way to begin making those changes.

6.4 Recommendations

Rural child welfare agencies can address the effects of burnout and occupational stress in order to increase the retention rates of their social worker. As a result of this study, the field of rural social work in South Africa faces important implications and identifies potential research areas. Therefore, the study suggests the following recommendations: first, the agency should undertake practices in order to prevent burnout and occupational stress and at the same time promote effective employee retention. This would suggest that rural under-resourced agencies wishing to boost retention rates in their agencies should give emotional and clinical support to social workers on a regular basis.

Second, is the agency should uphold the importance of wellness and self-care for social workers. Since social workers work in highly demanding conditions, it is unsurprising that they place a great deal of emphasis on building a productive relationship and restoring one's sense of dignity and purpose. The practice of self-care is an essential survival skill for social workers. By embodying self-care, they can identify and deal with the complexities of everyday life that hardworking professionals face, such as the possibility of burnout and stress or difficulties relating to others. Furthermore, self-care can also include activities and practices that can be done regularly to enhance their short-term and long-term health and maintain good well-being.

The third recommendation is to prioritise brief crisis interventions for rural social workers. These interventions are designed as a means of easing trauma-induced distress following trauma. They may include critical incident stress debriefings, psychosocial debriefings, as well as trauma risk management strategies built upon to trauma-focused debriefing principles. Following traumatic exposure, these commonly used post-trauma interventions are designed to help them vent their feelings usually within two to ten days of the trauma, providing psychosocial support, facilitating storytelling about trauma experience, and providing stress management information. Early interventions can mitigate distress and also

potentially reduce the likelihood of sickness absences among trauma-exposed workers. Also, an organisational early intervention can provide several positive outcomes for leaders and their teams, including providing mutual support for workers, identifying workers and employees who require more clinical assistance, preventing harmful outcomes like substance and alcohol abuse, reducing sick leave and improving performance at work and increasing interpersonal cohesion. An experienced supervisor can conduct the debriefing, or a small group of social workers can work together to guide the group using semi-structured questioning. Typically, a debriefing involves reviewing the event reports, analysing and reflecting on cognitive, emotional, and physical reactions of the employees; talking about typical stress responses and helping to identify useful coping mechanisms; and generating ideas and plans for healing, self-care, and support for each other. Depending on the needs of each participant, further treatment might be recommended.

Fourth, it is also recommended that the agencies focus on an organisational culture that reflects a bottom-up management approach. The social workers would not only provide feedback on practice guidelines for clients and the community, but they would also be a good source of information in making suggestions for the agency's internal operations. For example, social workers would have a say in what kind of agency support they received. The value of this management style was demonstrated in this study as evidenced by the vast majority of social workers who recognised what needed to happen within their agencies to boost retention, but believed their message was being received with deafening silence or ignored. A management style based on the bottom-up approach might feature an organisational culture that encouraged social workers to participate in the development of the of the agency's mission, organisation structure, and ethical standards. This level of social worker involvement provides for a cultural mirroring effect within the organisation by means of the social workers' leadership and the culture they create within the agency. In order for this to take place the agency must give social workers an opportunity to express their thoughts, as well as a secure and supportive environment in which to do so. When possible, decisions should be taken democratically, allowing social workers to have a sense of ownership over the agency and its goal, motivating them to put their practice knowledge, expertise, and passion to be successful in ways that would benefit the whole

agency in the long run. A management that exemplifies a strengths-based approach encourages social workers to look for strengths both inside the agency and among them.

Fifth, there should be additional professional oversight in a form of adequate supervision as well as a shift in terms of managerial style to an approach that is more strengths-based. Overall, the retention rates in these rural under-resourced agencies would improve, if its management was able to make take feedback from social workers on what needed to change within the agency and display willingness and make adjustments and implement effective strategies focusing on the well-being of the employees. Thus, social workers would stay in agencies not because they have no other choice due to high unemployment rates in South Africa, but because they are happy to do so. In order to obtain practices that would promote retention and growth in rural based child welfare agencies, it is further recommended that the management should provide emotional support, adequate supervision as well as quality monitoring, and a managerial approach that starts from the bottom and works its way up. Finally, the above-mentioned recommendations made are part of a bigger goal of giving social workers more value so that they can become valued employees of the agencies. It also acknowledges that people, for the most part, are aware of their needs. Listening to the personnel is the best starting point when an agency wishes to modify something within the organisation.

6.4.1 Recommendations for future studies

The results of the study have revealed a need for further study on burnout, compassion fatigue, job stress, or social workers agency support were not measured in this study. Despite the fact that burnout was investigated in this study, the actual rate of burnout was not determined. Also, in the future, researchers may explore the interaction between rural characteristics and the necessity for effective training, supervision, and caseload distribution to be administered. Included in this would be examining fields in greater depth, the rural characteristics which affect these well-known issues could be clarified. The above could be combined with these recommendations to ensure child welfare social workers in South Africa have a great working experience resulting from addressing these challenges or barriers.

Among the advantages of this study is the way data was collected. In place of the more conventional data gathering instrument, a survey questionnaire, a semi structured interview process was used. Through the interview process, the social workers offered insight into concepts related to emotions such as burnout, occupational stress, and agency support. As a result, in order to follow-up, the researcher asked more questions. Through this process, the researcher was able to gather more information about participants' perceptions than a questionnaire format would have allowed. Furthermore, this format provided a means for more detailed recommendations about how social workers themselves would handle retention within their own agencies, if they had the chance.

However, more research is needed in this area to improve retention as well as the quality of services provided by social workers. Future retention studies could generate more themes relevant to burnout, occupational stress, and agency support that were not found in this study using a larger sample of social workers. Furthermore, an expanded sample size could include social workers from neighbouring rural municipalities. Furthermore, they suggest that future research on retention focus on larger samples of social workers, eliciting social workers who live in neighboring rural counties. A larger sample might also come up with more themes related to burnout, occupational stress, and agency support, which were not dealt with in this study. Moreover, it is necessary to compare rural retention methods to those used by urban counties in order to determine how these differences arise.

Despite making no distinction between social workers' years of experience and what they have accomplished in these years, after reviewing the data the researchers found a noticeable difference in the knowledge and understanding of different concepts and the application of those concepts and feelings by different social workers, based on their level of experience and their position within the organisation. Clinical supervision consistently came up as an issue of importance with those with more years of experience, whereas case management was discussed by those with fewer years of experience. While this was common to all social workers, those with less experience did not have the same style of linguistic expression and were not aware of how having a great clinical supervisor contributed to their success. In future studies, participants should be categorised according to their level of experience and role within the agency. This would help enable continuity between participants and guide future research.

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APPENDIX A: GATEKEEPERS PERMISSION LETTER

Address of the agency:

Date:

Dear Sir/Madam

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I am a Master of Arts (Clinical Psychology) student in the School of Applied Human Sciences at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. As part of my studies I am required to conduct a piece of research and I hereby kindly request to conduct research at your agency, and I am in the process of obtaining ethical clearance from the university.

The title of my research project is:

"A qualitative exploration of child welfare social workers' experience of working in rural based agencies in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa"

I am writing to ask if it would be possible to recruit participants for this study from your organization. I have prepared a description of the study and what is involved in it for potential participants, and have attached a copy for you to read.

This study could possibly give insight about what services or support provided at the agency level are most effective at alleviating the effects of occupational stress. It is hoped that, rural agencies could provide those services and support to their social workers to avoid turnover, thus increasing overall effectiveness.

I hope you find the attached project of interest and will be interested in working with me on it. Please feel free to contact me if you have any queries.

Many thanks for taking the time to read this and I hope to hear from you soon.
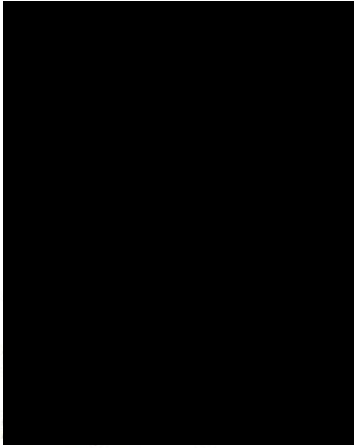
APPENDIX B: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

CHILD WELFARE
SOUTH AFRICA

Att: Ms Zintle Dyoda
University of Kwazulu Natal
Kwazulu Natal

06/11/2020

Dear Ms Dyoda

RE:CONFIRMATION LETTER

This communique serves to confirm that Child Welfare-SA ⬛ agrees to host you and participate in your study. We therefore give you permision and authority to begin your work as outlined in your request and we commit ourselves to assist you in any way possible.

Chief Social worker)

06 NOV 2020

P O. BO

NPO Reg no: 005-503

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DATE: 11 NOVEMBER 2020
ENQUIRIES:

Att: Miss Zintle . Dyoda
University of KwaZulu-Natal

SIR/MADAM

SUBJECT: CONFIRMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

This letter serves to confirm ⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛ will
participate in the research investigation that will be conducted by Miss. Z Dyoda.

⬛⬛⬛ is a Non-Profit Making Organization that render Therapeutic Services to
children in need of care and protection, the children are from Mnquma and Mbhashe Areas
mainly rural areas.

We, therefore willing to participate in the study as we have 1 Residential Social worker

Hope that this letter will be highly considered.

anager)

Province of the
EASTERN CAPE
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

DATE: 11/11/2020

To whom it may concern

RE: Permission for Zintle dyoda to conduct a research in our Department.

Sir/Madam

This letter serves to confirm and permit the above mentioned to conduct her research for the stipulated period in our office at _____. The social workers will be availed for the researcher as research subjects for the project.

We hope that the office assist in achieving the desired outcome.

You_____

_____upervisor

2020 -11- 1 1

Section 176 order

Building a Caring Society. Together.

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APPENDIX C: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

EXPLORING CHILD WELFARE SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES OF WORKING IN RURAL BASED AGENCIES IN THE EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

We kindly invite you to participate in a research study by participating in a one-on one interview. Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the interview at any time. The interviews will be audio recorded with your consent and will be safely stored in a password secure folder. The audios will only be used by the researcher and her supervisor for analysis. We will keep all your personal information anonymous when reporting the findings. The research findings will be represented in a mini-dissertation format. Should you be interested in reading the dissertation once complete, a copy of the document will be sent to you. The results of this research may be used in articles or publications. Confidentiality will be maintained at all times.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The child welfare system is a rewarding field, however extremely complicated, as social workers support children through the strengthening of the family system. Regrettably, rural based child welfare is consistently tormented by increased levels of occupational stress, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue. This research is intended to investigate and produce awareness of the experiences of child welfare social workers working in rural based agencies.

AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this research is to understand the experiences of child welfare social workers in rural based settings. Should you wish to participate in this research, you will be contributing to the understanding and awareness of the experiences of child welfare workers in under-resourced agencies. This study could possibly give insight about what services or support provided at the agency level are most effective at alleviating the effects of occupational stress. It is hoped that, rural agencies could provide those services and support to their social workers to avoid turnover, thus increasing overall effectiveness.

ETHICS

The study will be conducted applying the framework suggested by Wassenaar and Mamotte (2012), and guided by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at UKZN. The researcher is in the process of obtaining approval from UKZN research ethics committee, and may be contacted at (031) 260 4557 should there be any concerns regarding the conduct of the study or any complaint.

VOLUNTEER TO PARTICIPATE

Should you be interested in participate in this research, please kindly contact Zintle Dyoda (the researcher). Your time is valued and highly appreciated.

Contact information:

✉ dyodazintle@gmail.com
📱 084 552 6104
📘 **Zintle Dyoda**
📷 **Zintle_Dyoda**

APPENDIX D: ETHICAL APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF
KWAZULU-NATAL ™
INYUVESI
YAKWAZULU-NATALI

18 June 2021

Miss Zintle Dyoda (218064746)
School Of Applied Human Sc
Howard College

Dear Miss Dyoda,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00002886/2021
Project title: Exploring child welfare social workers' experiences and perception of working in rural based agencies in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa
Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 18 May 2021 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 18 June 2022.
To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,
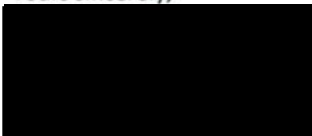
Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa
Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 **Email:** hssrec@ukzn.ac.za **Website:** http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics

Founding Campuses: ▪ Edgewood ▪ Howard College ▪ Medical School ▪ Pietermaritzburg ▪ Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT FORM SHEET

INFORMED CONSENT

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: _____

Dear Participant,

My name is Zintle Dyoda , from UKZN Howard College, currently completing my Master's Degree in Clinical Psychology.

You are invited to consider participating in a study that involves research. The aim and purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of social workers in rural based child welfare agencies. The study is expected to enroll approximately 6 to 8 child welfare social workers in the Eastern Cape Province. It will involve answering questions in the form of an interview. The duration of your participation should you choose to participate in the study is expected to be approximately 45 minutes to an hour.

If the research potentially causes any risks or discomfort, please approach the researcher for more information. We hope that the study will become a possible source of information for future researchers and students. All information obtained will remain confidential. The information from the interview schedule will be used for research purposes only. Participants' identities will not be revealed, and will remain anonymous in any papers resulting from this project.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number _____). In the event of any problems or concerns/questions, you may make further contact with the researcher at

218064746@stu.ukzn.ac.za/dyodazintle@gmail.com or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

CONSENT

- I have been informed about the study being conducted by Zintle Dyoda.
- I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.
- I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.
- I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without any consequences.
- I understand that all information obtained will be stored safely and securely.
- I give full permission for the interview to be electronically-recorded, and understand that verbatim transcripts will be made from the tapes.
- If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher.
- If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000 KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.zaa

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____

Signature of Witness   Date

(Where applicable)

APPENDIX F: AUDIO-RECORDING CONSENT FORM

Audio-Recording Consent Form

This study involves the audio recording of your interview with the researcher, Dyoda Zintle. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audiorecording or the transcript. Only the researcher and her research supervisor will have access to the audio recordings and transcripts. Each interview will be password-protected and stored safely on a USB. The transcripts of your interview may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in the written products that result from this study. You may have access to the audiorecordings and transcriptions if you wish; and you may request this data to be withdrawn at any point.

By signing this form, I am allowing this researcher to audio-record me during the interview as part of this research. I understand that the data from the audio-recording will be transcribed; after which, it will be stored away safely.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE TERMS AND PROVIDE MY PERMISSION TO BE AUDIO-RECORDED FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS STUDY.

YES ☐

NO ☐

Signed:_____ on the:_____

APPENDIX G: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SHEET

UNIVERSITY OF
KWAZULU-NATAL ™
INYUVESI
YAKWAZULU-NATALI

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Demographic Information

Dear Participant,

Please fill in the form below in order to document your demographic information accurately.

Participant name: _____

Age: _____

Gender: Male ☐ Female ☐ Other ☐

Race: White ☐ African ☐ Colored ☐

Indian ☐ Other ☐ (Specify :_____)

Home language: _____

Marital Status: _____

Highest Qualification: _____

Occupation: _____

Location of your office: _____

Years of Experience: _____

No of years working in a rural-based setting: _____

APPENDIX H: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Dear Participant,

Thank you very much for your participation in this research on child welfare experiences in working in rural based agencies. Your gift of time and expertise to this study is greatly appreciated.

As a reminder, participants must be child welfare workers currently working on a regular basis in an agency-based setting or community based care organization in the Eastern Cape Province for the minimum of two years.

Your responses will be kept confidential by assigning a code number and deleting any identifiers.

Educational Background

1. Please tell me more about yourself?
2. How would you describe your educational background?
3. How many years of working experience do you have as a Social Work?
4. How long have you been working in child welfare as a Social Worker?
5. Where is your office in the Mnquma Local Municipality located?

Personal Experience

6. Please share your experience of when you started working in this agency

   o Where there any changes you have encountered over your career? If so, please describe them.

7. Do you have any childhood related experience that may have prompted and encouraged you to pursue working with families and children particularly in rural areas?

Working Conditions

8. How would you describe the conditions under which you work in this agency?

9. How would you describe the concept of burnout?

   o Based on your personal observations do you feel Social Workers in your office are affected by burnout?

   o Do you think the effects of high stress, lowered job satisfaction, and emotional exhaustion can be used to characterize social workers who are experiencing burnout?

10. In your observation, do you see burnout in your office as the overall factor that affects turnover rates?

   o If that is the case, what do you see as the common problem and the main reason why burnout is largely dominant and why people choose to leave the agency?

   o If that is the case, what could be the possible reasons for this cause?

11. According to your view, what occupational stress that may include secondary trauma, high caseloads, high conflict working environment, and/or inadequate supervision are there in your office, if any possible?

12. Using your own judgment, how do you feel the effects and impact of occupational stress such as anxiety, sleep, depression, personal relationship or secondary trauma have affected employees in your office?

13. In your opinion, are there any methods that are put in place by the agency as means of helping employees deal with the effects of occupational stress, methods such as crisis control when and after situations erupted, and/or intense effects of supervision, a conducive work environments, flexibility and/or offered counselling?

   o What methods are being put in order to offer effective assistance and support to workers?

   o What other possible ways have you explored in order to intensify the level of support offered to the employees by the agency?

14. If you were to compare the turnover rate in your office with that of other Municipalities, what would be your observation?

15. In your opinion, if any, what would you say are contributing factors that exhibit the differences in turnover rates between these municipalities?

16. If you were given an opportunity to change the situation in your workplace, what would be your primary point of focus as means of retaining stability and unity amongst workers?

17. Are there any underlying issues relating to these topics that you wish to elaborate more on?

Coping

18. During the intense moments in the work place, how do you manage the pressure and remain focused?

19. When work feels strenuous, is your coping mechanism different from when you started working?

20. If so how have you changed?

21. What emotional feelings do you experience?

22. How do you deal with and overcome these feelings?

Support Structure

23. Do you have, if possible any support structure that is there for you personally or professionally? How does these system help you?

24. In your work place, what changes would you suggest as means of coping with stress and trauma as a result of the job?

25. Is there anything related that you would like to add or share?

26. What made you choose to be part of this research?

27. How would you say this interview was for you? Has it helped in any way?

APPENDIX I: DEBRIEF FORM

Debrief Form

Date:

Title: Exploring child welfare social workers' experiences and perception of working in rural based agencies in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa.

Researcher: Zintle Dyoda

The research in which you have participated is aimed at exploring and understanding your experiences in working in rural based child welfare agency. I would like to emphasize that all information provided by yourself will be treated with strict confidentiality and under no circumstances will your name or any identifying details be included in any subsequent reports or publications.

If you have any further questions about this study I would be more than happy to assist and can be contacted via e-mail on 218064746@stu.ukzn.ac.za/dyodazintle@gmail.com

Thank you for your participation

APPENDIX J: LETTER FOR PARTICIPANTS REGARDING RESULTS

Letter for Participants Regarding Results

Dear Participant,

Some time ago, as part of my dissertation research, I interviewed you regarding your experience in working in a rural based child welfare agency as part of my Master's degree in Clinical Psychology at UKZN. Thank you again for your willingness to participate. As you may recall, as part of your participation in my study "Exploring child welfare social workers' experiences and perception of working in rural based agencies in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa "you have the option to provide feedback on the results.

Attached, you will find a copy of the Results and Discussion sections of my dissertation. This has been sent so that you may comment on the degree to which the collective results match your individual experience(s). It is also sent to assure you that your confidentiality has been maintained. If you have comments or feel that your confidentiality has not been protected, please respond to this email and let me know which portions of the write-up need to be altered. I would be grateful for your response by [two weeks from date of email]. If I do not hear from you, I will assume that you have no additional feedback.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. Alternatively, you may contact my supervisor, Mr. Luvuyo Makhaba. Thank you again for your participation.

Appreciatively,

Zintle Dyoda Honours.

Masters Candidate

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Lower Ground B18

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