How Do The Professional Social Workers Cope with Occupational Stress in A Non-Governmental Sector? : An Analysis at Organisational Level

Anjali Dhengle

Assistant Professor Social Work, Indian Institute of Public Administration, New Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

Background: Human care professionals' deals with humans and their relations, which are multifaceted and so, encompass complications. Their occupation involves dealing with high emotional demand, which puts them in a stress and work conflicts. **Objectives:** To know the occupational stress levels, ways of coping among professional social workers (PSWs) working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and to know the various interventions at the organisational level. **Method and Material:** With these objectives 92, professional social workers (PSWs) were selected randomly from Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India. To know stress levels, ways of coping and organisational interventions occupational stress index (OSI), coping checklist (CCL) and focused group discussions (FGD) were conducted respectively. **Result and Conclusion:** It was evident that PSWs' from NGOs were using more of problem-focused coping along with the high use of seeking social support and distraction positive as their way as to combat their moderate stress levels. However, organisational interventions at four levels i.e. effective job redesign, promotion of constructive work environment, organisational services to balance workplace pressure, and infrastructure and resources were major suggestions which need to be carried out with due participation of professional social workers.

Keywords: Occupational stress, coping, professional social worker, India

INTRODUCTION

Today's lifestyle is changing rapidly with the fast pace of modernization and globalization. There are diverse and rapid changes in every aspect of human life. Even the rapidly advancing technology along with globalized economy is affecting work nature in today's world. Now the jobs or workplaces are more demanding, leading to work stress which pulls out of the new way of coping.[1,2] Due to this transformation of the workplace, employees are exposed to various occupational hazardous leading to high cases of occupational diseases and accidents.[3] Work stress has become a serious problem of growing worry in the present economy. There is increasing complains of lack of job satisfaction, increasing job insecurity, work overload with decreasing control over jobs, leading to adverse effects on the physical and mental health of the employees.[4] Work stress mainly constitutes role stressors leading to conflicts and anxiety in jobs.[5] They recognized that factors like family, finance, and technology in connection to work put a tremendous impact on employee's well-being. To fight work stress along with the individual interventions, an organization can also play a dynamic role. Organization need to build up practical objectives, clear organisational policies and readiness for structural changes in the organization to help employees to combat work stress.

Address for the Correspondence:
Dr. Anjali Dhengle, Assistant Professor Social Work, Indian Institute of Public Administration, Indraprastha Estate, Ring Road, New Delhi-110002
Email: vri22.anjali@gmail.com

Social Work Profession and Occupational Stress

Human care professions are multilayered encompassing complexities of human relationships and emotions. It certainly makes these professions high in emotional demand and put employees in an anxiety and work conflicts.[1,6] It increases when employees are expected to fulfil job responsibilities with resources constraints in relation to this given task. Further, it may lead to high levels of role stress particularly role ambiguity and role conflict.[6] This is an end result of to depression and burnout.[7] The inconsistency in stress pattern of social workers as it is depicted in the literature due to their diversified and multifaceted roles.[6] This entire scenario calls for a systematic and in-depth research on the issue.[8-12]

It is more than seven-decade of Professional Social Work in India before that social services had its initiation in the form of spiritual and religious beliefs. As explained by Gore,[13] in India social services were marked by four major approaches; the religious traditional approach, the liberal reformist approach, the secular missionary approach, the ethical revolutionary approach and the professional social work approach. Professional social work approach can be marked by the starting of professional training in the discipline by Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work in June 1936, currently known as Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) at Mumbai. Later during 1980-85 Government felt the need to address many social issues at grass root level and identified non-governmental organizations (NGOs)/voluntary organizations (VOs) to fulfil this responsibility. It resulted in enormous job opportunities for the trained social workers (having Master in Arts in Social work, Master of Social Work degree), to execute their service at different levels. Now in the present scenario, development, health and many other sectors is majorly managed by NGOs/private sector. Further, today's demanding social scenario expects professional skills of the social worker to be employed on three levels i.e. macro, mezzo and micro level of the society. Macro-level considers society as a whole, mezzo level constitutes working with communities and group and micro level intervention constitute working with individuals. This sort of demand to work on all the three levels put lots of work pressure and demands multifaceted role from social workers. Moreover, NGOs/VOs in India are majorly depended on external agencies for their functioning, leading to high levels of uncertainties. It also results in job stress for PSWs involved in the welfare and various projects.[14]

Occupational Stress

According to Ivancevich and Matteson[15] stress is a reaction to an external/environmental action which is identified as taxing to individual resources to cope or put excessive demands (both physical and psychological) on the individual to manage this individual-environment encounter. Moreover, this equation/encounter is intermediated through individual difference. The process of stress reaction constitute three main components first it is a reaction to an external situation or a demand, secondly, the demand is itself should be of excessive in nature as normal daily hassles are not considered to produce stress. The third main component is the uniqueness of this person-environment situation as it is mediated through individual difference. It means there can be different reactions to same equation as every individual is unique to each other.

Occupational stress can be defined as the situation where demands from the jobs are taxing or leading to an imbalance in the individual-environment equation. It is the situation where an individual perceives the demand for jobs as excessive to his/her resources to cope form this individual-environment equation and leading to adverse physical and mental health.[16] With the above explanation we can easily identify five component of the stress process, first can be the environmental demands (can be termed as stressors) perceived as taxing/excessive by the individual to his/her resources (second component - examples can be social support from family

supervisors, workmate, work autonomy etc.). The third component can be the ways/methods/strategies of coping with this imbalance individual environment equation. The fourth component could be the individual difference (moderating and mediating factors unique in every situation and equation, an example can job type, age, gender etc.), and fifth component can be the stress symptoms (both physical and mental) resulted out of this stressful situation.

Sources of Stress at Workplace

At the workplace, there can be many sources of stress. It can arise from poor workmate relationship, very high or low work pressure, inadequate resources, role stressors.[17-18] The Common can be excessive demands, role conflict and ambiguities, problems related to career advancement, ideological difference and poor or unhealthy physical setting can also be the source of stress at work. For easy comprehension, on the basis of literature reviewed author attempts to present the sources of stress at the workplace under four main categories.[5,15]

1. **Extra-organisational stressors:** Factors outside the job/work context which adversely affect the individuals' work performance directly or indirectly are considered to be extra-organisational stressors. This may include family background, financial status of the individual, community to s/he belongs, residential locality, cultural and technological factors etc.[5,15] As discussed in under introduction, rapid technological advancements along with modernization and globalization are demanding rapid and consistent adjustment on part of individuals in relation to all these extra-organisational factors.

2. **Organisational stressors:** As organization are trying to change as per the changes in the environmental changes (due to globalization, modernization etc.), there is increasing work pressure on the individuals working in these organizations. It includes enormous factors ranging from organisational policies to organization physical infrastructure. These stressors can be classified into administrative policies and strategies, organisational structure and design, organisational processes, and working conditions.[15] Further, if Organisational policies, goals are not well defined or if they are not practically attainable then it may lead to a lot of adverse effects on the smooth functioning of the organization. Moreover, workplace culture and environment like work autonomy to employees, supportive attitude of supervisors, seniors or workmates, proper communication system, well-defined job role etc. has the tremendous influence on dealing with work.[5]

3. **Group stressors:** Group support in the form of senior guidance, freedom to have group discussions on problem issues, opportunities to have group recreational activities help to combat stress at work. An absence of group cohesiveness and of lack of social support can be of tremendous stress at workplace.[5,15]

4. **Individual stressors:** It may include personal life events, factors related to specific individuals. It also encompasses numerous factors; some of them can be the individuals' perception about job satisfaction, how one reacts to life changes. Many of these things may depend on individual personality disposition like whether an individual is more of type- A personality or Type-B, how much psychological hardiness is there, and what is individual's locus of control etc.[5,15]

Statement of the Problem

As per the review of the literature, it is very evident that with rapid changes in all aspects of human life, the workplace is no longer the comfort zone of earning the livelihood for individuals. It has become more challenging and constantly changing entities demand rapid adjustment on the part of employees too. Moreover human care professional are hassled with their highly emotionally demanding and multifaceted nature of jobs. Accordingly, workplace stress intervention or management is the most growing research area keeping in view the prevention of financial and human resource loss due to work stress. Most of time work stress

interventions are individual oriented and there is continued the debate about the efficacy of individual versus organisational directed stress management interventions [19].

With this background, researcher attempt to explore stress levels of professional social workers (PSWs) working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and attempts to explore ways of coping by these PSWs along with the recommendation at the organisational level given by PSWs during focused group discussion (FGDs).

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in the city of Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India. For the sample was done by following a process - the list of professional social workers was prepared from various sources like social work institutes in the area, contacting social work alumni groups etc. This way total 318 PSW were listed working in various NGOs. Out of these, 137 gave their written consent to participate in the study upon contacted. From this sampling frame of 137, 92 were selected randomly.

Social workers who have had formal education/ training (MSW/M.A Social Work/M.Phil./PhD) in social work, or may have any other additional degree after formal training in social work were included in the study. Secondly, the criterion of having for minimum 3 years of work experience in the nongovernmental organization was followed.

To identify stress levels and ways of coping researcher used occupational stress index and coping checklist developed by Srivastava and Singh.[20] and Rao et al.[21] respectively. The semi-structured interview schedule was also used to collect information about socio-demographic details of the respondents. To get recommendations to be carried out at organisational level to combat stress focused group discussions was conducted. Total 9 groups were made (approximately 10 members in each group) and interview guide was used for FGDs.

Occupational Stress Index (OSI): It consists of 46 statements which measures stress on

twelve aspects of job life. Each statement has five options, totally disagree, disagree, undecided, agree and totally agree. The OSI is a valid and reliable tool widely used in the field. It's Cronbach's alpha coefficient was found to be r=.90.[20]

Coping checklist (CCL): It consists of seven subscales, one problem focused scale (problem-solving), five emotion-focused scales (acceptance/redefinition, denial/blame, distraction, positive, distraction negative and religion/faith) and social support seeking which is a combination of problem and emotion-focused coping. It has total 70 items. These are answered in 'yes' or 'no'. Score distribution on subscale is as follows, problem-focused coping (maximum score 10), social support (total score 6) and five subscales of emotion-focused coping known as emotion-focused- distraction positive (maximum score 14), emotion-focused-distraction negative (maximum score 9), emotion-focused- acceptance/redefinition (maximum score 11), emotion-focused-Religion/Faith (maximum score 9), emotion focused-denial/blame (maximum score 11). It has a test-retest reliability of 0.74 and internal consistency for full scale, as measured by the Cronbach's alpha, as 0.84.[21]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-demographic details of the respondents

Sample (total 92) of the study comprised of more younger employees with 66.3 % out of which younger males are more in number (41) as compared to younger females (20) in the age group of 24-35 years of age. The majority of PSWs (50%) had moderate salary ranging from 15001-25000 per month, whereas only 5.4 % had the salary above 25001 rupees per month. Most of them (66.3%) were educated to MSW level only and the majority of them (71.1%) were working on contractual basis in the NGOs.

Their designations were as follows, table 1 shows the various job designations of the respondents working in NGOs. Majority of the respondents are working as programme/

project coordinator (32.6%), Asst. programme/project coordinator (19.6%) and District programme/project coordinator (15.2 %). Rest is working under designation ranging from field supervisor to counsellor in NGOs.

Table1 Job Designation of the Respondents

Job Designation	*f*	%
Field Supervisor	5	5.4
Data Operator and Surveyor	3	3.3
Documentation Officer	4	4.3
Communication Officer	4	4.3
Research Associate	3	3.3
Medical Social Worker	2	2.2
Counsellor	7	7.6
Asst. Programme/ Project Coordinator	18	19.6
Programme/Project Coordinator	30	32.6
District Programme/ Project Coordinator	14	15.2
Manager	2	2.2
Total	92	100.0

f = Frequency % = Percentage

Stress Level and Methods of Coping Used By PSWs

Out of total 92 respondents majority i.e. 60.9% were found to be moderately stressed, very less percentage i.e. 18.5 % of the respondents were found to be severely stressed in their occupation.

As explained in the literature and evidence from the items of the scale, problem-focused coping is understood as the efforts directed by an individual to change the imbalanced person-environment situation. Whereas, when an individual tries to lessen the effects of this imbalance equation then it is referred as emotion-focused coping. [22]

For both the (problem and emotion-focused) ways of handling the stressful situation, an individual seeks social support. So seeking social support as one of the methods of coping is the combination of both types of coping.[21]

As far as coping is concerned 67.3 % of respondents were having a high score on problem-focused coping (score above 5), whereas 73.9 % respondents out of 92 were seeking high social support (score above 6)

to combat stress at workplace. On the aspect of emotion-focused coping, 40.2 % of the respondent was using high distraction positive method (score above 7) to combat stress. Only 17.3 % of the respondents were high on distraction negative method (score above 4). Acceptance of the situation and redefining it, as a method to combat stress was used more (score above 6) by 58.6 % of respondents. Use of religion and faith as a way out of work stress was depicted high (score above 4) in 55.4 % of the respondents. Whereas, emotion-focused denial/blame was used highly (score above 6) by 35.8 % of the respondents.

From the above-mentioned result, it is clearly evident that PSWs in NGOs are moderately stressed in their occupation but they are found to use more of Problem-focused coping along with the high use of seeking social support and distraction positive as their way to combat occupational stress.

Possible Interventions at the Organisational Level to Combat Stress of the Employees

This section is the summarization of suggestions provided by the respondents during the focused group interviews. For easy comprehension, all the recommendations given by respondent are categorised into four major groups as (i) Effective job redesign, (ii) Promotion of constructive work environment, (iii) Organisational services to balance workplace pressure, (iv) Infra-structure and resources. All the recommendations are directed toward organisational strategies to manage stress at the NGOs.

(i) Effective job redesign: As stated by Leka et al.,[23] organizations should confirm the selection of the suitable candidate who should be appropriately matched to requirements of designation on the basis of skills and education posed by them. Moreover, the organization should provide training, supervision and guidance wherever is needed to manage work pressure. Similarly, PSWs expressed the need for the regular capacity building program by the organization to improve workers skills. They

also recommended that for every new project in the NGO, orientation programs, specific skill training and study material or reference should be provided to the staff to have productive engagement with the project. There should be suitable guidance from the organization to the workers for the development of knowledge and skills to update themselves and to be progressive in work.

PSWs expressed the inadequacy in the decision making power allocated to them in regard to the given task. They expressed that lack of autonomy results into ambiguous and conflicting work situations and nonattainment of desired results. Moreover, too many things to do at one time drain them out. As suggested by Stoica and Buicu,[24] organization should set precise and attainable objectives, should distribute job responsibilities to avoid ambiguities and conflicts in the work. Moreover, the organization should ensure decision-making latitude among workers to have productive results from workers.

As per Leka, Griffiths and Cox,[23] it is always beneficial, if key persons involved in the task are clear about their job. It helps employees to understand and to execute the demands of the job allotted. Structure and aim of the job should be made clear to the employee; it can assist employees to have strong efforts to complete the task. PSWs working in NGOs echo that as their work task should be practically attainable based on grass root realities. Their job roles and responsibilities should be well defined to avoid role stress in their jobs. Further, they expressed that this could also help to have recognition as a trained social worker in work team.

There should be supportive interaction and guidance among employees, the organization should ensure quality support from supervisors.[23] PSWs also expressed the wish that administration should be friendly to listen to their problems, should have performance appraisal and should provide job-sharing and flexible timings about work performance. Promotions and other perks are given to employees should

be based on experiences, professional skills posed by the person. It should be regular and fairly implemented.[24] Professional social workers also emphasized the same. There was also very strong appeal/suggestion to have remedies to deal with contractual nature of jobs in NGOs. They insisted on creating permanent job (with regular benefits of permanent jobs) profiles on the basis of education, specialization (expertise in specific social intervention areas) and capabilities of the social work candidate. Even the contractual jobs should have certain benefits/regulation in regard to fixed hours of work; leaves should have adequate salary along with perks/incentives on the basis of performance. They suggested that this would also help them to deal with their feelings of job insecurity.

(ii) Promotion of constructive work environment: Work environment and culture is one of the main factors which help in the management of work stress by identifying and finding the solution to the work problems. It is, therefore, necessary that employees are aware of their work culture and environment. To have positive work culture, employees should be involved in work culture change activities.[23] To have positive work culture organization should confirm constant performance feedback to the employees, should give freedom to employees to utilize their knowledge and skills to the fullest, should design work responsibilities which should be diverse and inspiring in nature. They should provide clear objectives and appropriate decision latitude to employees for their work responsibilities.[24]

Further, they state that work climate should allow free discussion of work problems with supervisors and seniors or among workmates. The organization should ensure methods for performance analysis, counselling techniques to help the employees. Professional social workers also mentioned in an interview about the need to have talks/sessions authorities from the field on issues related with inert-personal relations at work, and on various related topics like personal and professional growth

within the organization, improvement of coordination among all working and non-working staff etc.

There should be adequate social support from the work-mates and from the seniors. Seniors should have the flexible management style, should be able to focus on the needs of both the individual employee and of the group of the employees. They should be a good listener to the employees' problems and should be able to communicate work expectation to the employees very clearly. Errors in the work should be treated as opportunities to learn.[23,24]

In a similar vein, PSWs also expressed the need to have appropriate communication networking among staff, to share their experiences regarding work problems in their daily jobs. Further, they demanded authorities should be more approachable and should provide time bound guidance at the time of crises.

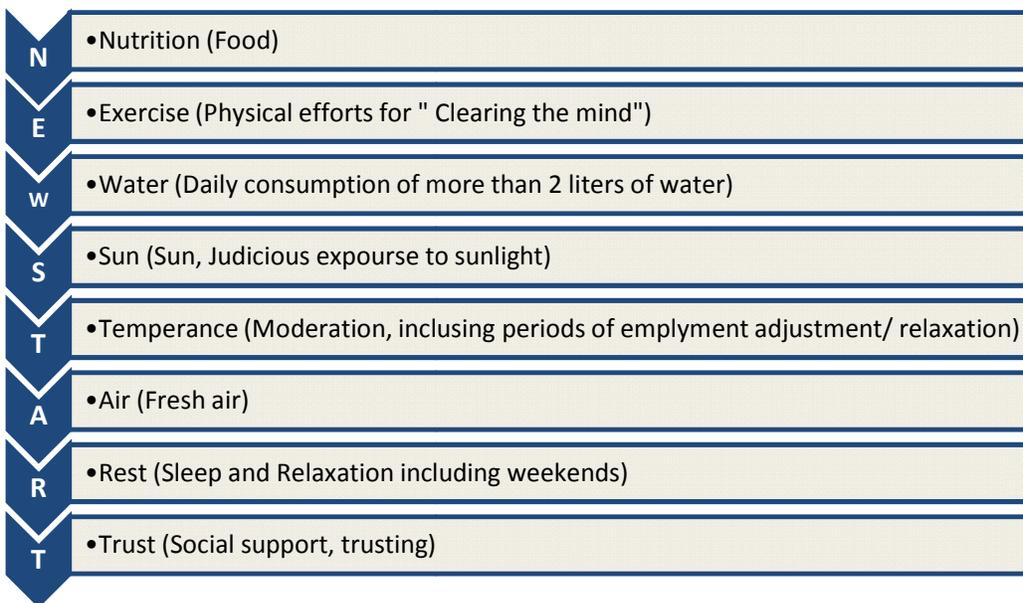Further, they also expressed the need for gender equality and sensitization for women's rights. They recommended of having a more transparent system in regard to policy or crucial decisions concerning with employees' future and work.

(iii) Organisational services to balance workplace pressure: It includes building up of suitable work environment which encompasses services, infrastructure to prevent and to manage work stress. Organizations should guarantee the provision of individual and organisational stress management interventions. Problems of workers should be listed and addressed carefully.

Professional social workers, in discussion with the researcher, expressed their need to have provision for counselling services, arrangements of motivational talks, and mental health awareness programmes. They also expressed the need to have facilities for stress buster programmes like support or recreational clubs, regular meditation and other relaxing occasions should be organized frequently.

Further, Stoica and Buicu,[24] in their research talks about wellness programme adopted by many companies. One of the programmes they discussed is developed by the Weimar Institute of California. It is known as NEW STRAT.

Figure 1 NEW START: Components of Wellness

N • Nutrition (Food)

E • Exercise (Physical efforts for " Clearing the mind")

W • Water (Daily consumption of more than 2 liters of water)

S • Sun (Sun, Judicious expourse to sunlight)

T • Temperance (Moderation, inclusing periods of emplyment adjustment/ relaxation)

A • Air (Fresh air)

R • Rest (Sleep and Relaxation including weekends)

T • Trust (Social support, trusting)

These are basic components of the wellness programme as explains by Stoica and Buicu.[24] Organizations ensuring these components can have wellness programme to help employees to combat stress.

(iv) Infrastructure and resources: In regard to infrastructure and resources, PSWs suggested that organization should confirm regular funding to the projects govern by them to have smooth functioning of the staff involved in the project. It will enhance job security also. They demanded networking with different national/international agencies for regular funds to sustain program and employees. They also expressed to incorporate innovative plans to raise funds.

Moreover, adequate and appropriate resources should be provided to facilitate the work task and to achieve the set goals. It would help employees with productive achievements and self-growth. Further, adequate and appropriate staffing should be done in the organization.

All these recommendations were provided by the social workers working in different NGOs. These recommendations should be considered by social work fraternity and appropriate authority in India to address workplace stress at the organisational level.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study indicate the presence of various factors related to job and organization, leading to stress among the professional social workers. Secondly, the study throws a light that majority of the PSWs are indeed moderately stressed. Hence there remains a great scope for the NGOs to bring out certain services addressing the stress of their employees. Moreover, PSWs working in NGOs found to use more of problem-focused coping along with the high use of seeking social support and distraction positive as their way of coping to combat occupational stress. The respondents of the study, in order to reduce stress, suggested a greater clarity in the description of job roles and responsibilities, better work environments and resources to carry out these roles. PSWs have given detail recommendation for job redesign, for the

promotion of positive work environment and culture, also to have organisational interventions to handle stress, they also suggested better infrastructure to combat work stress. In addition, they also spoke of having grievances handling mechanism and counselling services etc. in place to address issues of employees. The researcher has highlighted the need for attention from appropriate authorities and NGOs, to look at these issues and have policies and programs accordingly.

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