Article

Coping Strategies of Social Workers Working with Nyaope Substance Users in South Africa

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Abstract

Social workers in South Africa experience significant stress when working with clients who misuse nyaope, a highly addictive street drug prevalent in impoverished communities. Ongoing exposure to substance-related challenges can lead to burnout, and, in some cases, social workers leaving the profession. This study explored the coping strategies of these social workers. A qualitative research approach was used. Nineteen social workers from the Department of Social Development in the Waterberg district in Limpopo province were selected for semi-structured interviews. The data was analysed using thematic analysis. The study found that social workers face many challenges when working with nyaope users, such as the emotional toll of witnessing clients suffering. It also identified positive thinking, self-compassion, job satisfaction, helping clients and collegial support as key coping mechanisms.

Keywords: challenges; coping strategies; social workers; substance use; users of nyaope

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Introduction

The social work profession has experienced sustained work-related stress for decades, with heavy workloads and limited resources significantly affecting practitioners' well-being. Inadequate resources often include the basic tools needed to perform their jobs, such as transportation, telephones and computers. Social work is also recognised for its demanding and complex cases, which can negatively impact mental well-being (Astvik, Melin and Allvin 2014). Research has identified multiple contributors to high stress levels operating at individual, organisational and client-related levels (Gomez-Garcia et al. 2019; Beer et al. 2020). Frequent exposure to traumatic and distressing situations can result in short and long-term mental and physical health effects compounded by factors such as poor organisational support, unmanageable workloads and time constraints (Choi 2017). In South Africa, the emergence of nyaope has intensified work-related stress among social workers.

Treating nyaope users exposes social workers to emotional, psychological and stressful situations. The intense, continuous, in-depth engagement and therapeutic encounters with nyaope users lead to burnout, psychological distress and emotional instability among social workers (Masombuka 2013). In South Africa, social workers face numerous challenges when working with nyaope users, including a high workload, stressful cases, inadequate working tools, substandard working conditions and a lack of supervision and management support (Baloyi 2018). A shortage of social workers leads to excessive workloads. A social worker's ability to respond and adjust to emotionally stressful situations and working conditions depends heavily on their ability to deploy coping strategies. Adversities require practitioners to recover and function effectively after exposure to stressful cases (Gil and Weinberg 2015; Earle 2008).

Social workers deal with the complexities of individuals, groups, families and communities, which can put pressure on their own lives (Boss 2016). Those who work with nyaope users deal with many challenges and experience significant adversities. Over the past decades, the use of nyaope has attracted interest from social workers and helping professionals (Baloyi 2018). The concept of resilience is closely associated with the coping mechanisms of social workers. Social workers deliver preventive, educational and rehabilitation interventions to substance users within communities, as well as in inpatient and outpatient settings. Despite the rising rates of substance abuse, social workers continue to deliver psycho-educative programmes to communities to mitigate its effects (Baloyi 2018). They also advocate for substance users and provide rehabilitation programmes (Stuurman 2014), helping to reduce harm and educate communities about substance abuse (Baloyi 2018).

Despite the increasing prevalence of nyaope use in South African townships, there is limited empirical research on how social workers manage the emotional and professional challenges of working with these users. In South Africa, social workers face unique difficulties, including emotional burnout, insufficient resources and a lack of support systems. This study examined the coping strategies used by social workers

and aimed to inform the development of support mechanisms to enhance their resilience. The study had two objectives: to explore the coping strategies used by social workers working with nyaope users in South Africa and to examine how these coping strategies contribute to social workers' resilience and professional well-being. The primary research question was: What coping strategies do social workers employ when working with nyaope users?

The study distinguishes between substance use, abuse and dependence. Substance use refers to the consumption of legal or illegal substances without necessarily implying harm or addiction. Substance abuse, by contrast, involves a problematic pattern of use that leads to significant impairment or distress. Substance dependence, often equated with addiction, refers to a reliance on substances that includes both physiological and psychological components. Understanding these distinctions is essential for accurately identifying patterns of substance involvement. This study focuses primarily on substance dependence as nyaope users often exhibit clear signs of addiction and withdrawal.

Contextualisation of Nyaope

Nyaope is the fifth most used substance in South Africa after cannabis, alcohol, heroin and methcathinone. It contributes 8% of substances used and forms part of the group of illicit drugs (Tetarwal, Yengopal, Munshi and Meel 2019). Nyaope contributes 17% to 21% of illicit drugs in Africa. It is estimated that 45% of nyaope users are infected with HIV/Aids as a result of sharing needles (Mathebula 2015). Police statistics indicate that 60% of crimes in South Africa are due to or related to substance abuse. Nyaope users comprise a critical number of people using substances and committing crimes (Bala 2017). The use of cannabis has been identified as a gateway to more harmful illicit drugs, such as whoonga or nyaope (Ngcobo 2019).

Nyaope use is increasingly becoming a public health challenge and threatening the lives of young people. It harms both the user's health and the environment (Khine, Mokwena, Huma and Fernandes 2015). Nyaope comprises heroin, antiretroviral and cannabis products (Khine and Mokwena 2016). It contains low grades of heroin, cleaning detergents, cannabis, rat poison and chlorine. It is cheap and readily available (Tau 2013). The substance is primarily consumed by young people from low socio-economic communities (Maseko 2015). The ingredients used to make nyaope vary by location and depend on the availability of materials and the preferences of users (Khine, Mokwena, Huma and Fernandes 2015). Initially, users mixed the drug and inhaled it; however, there has been an increase in dissolving the mixture in water and injecting it intravenously (Baloyi 2018). Nyaope is consumed either by injection or by smoking, often mixed with cannabis and rolled into a cigarette. Those who inject it dissolve the powder in a spoon with heat to transform it into a liquid (Masombuka 2013). Despite being illegal in South Africa, nyaope has become a national crisis and a significant burden on the healthcare system (Maseko 2015). Socio-economic and psychosocial

factors such as poverty, unemployment, school dropout, limited family support and peer pressure contribute to the abuse of nyaope (Maseko 2015).

Nyaope is a highly addictive drug, with withdrawal symptoms that include severe stomach pain, which users describe as feeling like an explosion (Ephrain 2014). Users of nyaope become entirely dependent on the drug, often to the detriment of their education, employment and relationships (Venter 2014). Inadequate mental health services exacerbate the challenges faced by nyaope users (Morebudi and Mukhari 2014). The lack of accessible rehabilitation and detoxification programmes poses significant difficulties, particularly for users who are poor and unemployed (Stuurman 2014). Although some users wish to quit, the highly addictive nature of the drug often prevents them from doing so (Fernandes and Mokwena 2020; Groenewald 2018). The emergence of nyaope has increased the rate of petty crimes, such as theft (Mokwena and Morojele 2014). It contributes to the continuous increase in poverty, unemployment and inequality (Bala 2017). Furthermore, users often engage in criminal activities, stealing items to obtain money for their next fix (Mokwena 2016). The effects of nyaope use include depression, social withdrawal and anxiety (Mathebula 2015). Users may also experience suicidal thoughts, which are exacerbated by inadequate mental health and rehabilitation services that could support recovery and reintegration.

Theoretical Perspectives

The study applied Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (1979), which posits that human behaviour and development are influenced by multiple levels of environmental influence, from immediate interpersonal interactions to broader societal structures. The theory was used to examine how social workers' coping strategies are affected by these different levels (Teater 2020). At the microsystem level, the focus is on the immediate work environment, including direct interactions between social workers, nyaope users and colleagues. The mesosystem encompasses the interactions between work and personal life, highlighting how social workers' professional and personal environments, such as family support influence their coping strategies (Miley, O'Melia and DuBois 2017). The theory also includes the exosystem, which encompasses the broader community influences surrounding the individual, and the macrosystem, which refers to societal attitudes and substance abuse policies. Additionally, the chronosystem, which reflects changes over time, was considered in the study, including evolving social work practices and the rising prevalence of nyaope use (Teater 2020).

The study used the ecological systems theory to understand the coping strategies of social workers. Furthermore, the theory was used to explore the impact of environmental contributors on the behaviours of nyaope users. Resilience refers to the ability to bounce back from difficulties and adversity, maintaining the well-being of individuals in the face of stress (McFadden et al. 2014). In the social work profession, resilience is understood not only as a personal trait but also as a professional necessity, especially when dealing with challenging and high-risk groups and populations, such as

individuals who use nyaope. This study employs resilience as a conceptual framework to explore how coping strategies enable social workers to maintain their effectiveness.

Research Methodology

The study applied the qualitative research approach. This approach was suitable for the study to gain an in-depth understanding of the coping strategies employed by social workers in dealing with nyaope substance users in South Africa (Kumatongo and Muzata 2021). It aimed to gather the participants' feelings, attitudes and behaviours in natural settings and environments. The qualitative research approach was relevant in this study because the researcher gathered insights into the phenomenon and comprehensively explored it (Babbie and Mouton 2017). The study employed an exploratory research design to provide a meaningful framework for the research (David and Sutton 2014; Blanche, Durreim and Painter 2021). The exploratory design was used to explore coping strategies of social workers who render services to nyaope substance users and to gain insight into the coping strategies of social workers who are dealing with nyaope substance users (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen and Snelgrove 2016). It discovered insightful information about the phenomenon, and more relevant data was established (Creswell and Poth 2018).

Participants were required to meet the following criteria to be included in the study: they had to be registered with the South African Council for Social Services Profession, have at least five years of experience working with nyaope users, and be proficient in English as the semi-structured face-to-face interview guide was only available in English. Additionally, participants needed to be employed by the Limpopo Department of Social Development within the substance abuse unit, as departmental social workers are typically the first point of contact for nyaope users in the Waterberg district of Limpopo province in South Africa. Social workers not dealing with nyaope users, social workers employed in NGOs and private practice and retired social workers were excluded from participating in the study.

Waterberg was selected as the location for the study because of the prevalence of the use and abuse of nyaope. The study used face-to-face semi-structured interviews to gather data. Nineteen participants were interviewed, and the data collection was stopped at the point of saturation (Babbie and Mouton 2017; Liamputtong and Ezzy 2019). The interview duration varied from participant to participant, with an average of 30 to 50 minutes, and all interviews were conducted in English. The study employed thematic content analysis, following Creswell's steps for data analysis (Creswell and Poth 2018). First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the researcher repeatedly re-read the transcripts to become familiar with the data. Next, initial codes were generated through recurring patterns related to coping strategies. In the third step, these codes were organised into categories and grouped into potential themes. The fourth step involved refining and reviewing the themes to ensure alignment with the research objectives. In the fifth step, these were clearly named and defined to capture their core meaning.

Finally, the themes were integrated into a coherent narrative, supported by direct quotations (Creswell 2014).

The population consisted of 216 social workers employed by the department. Non-probability sampling was employed because it was not feasible to select all social workers to participate (Kumatongo and Muzata 2021). Non-probability sampling is a method of sampling that aligns with the qualitative research approach. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample for the study (Creswell 2014). The researcher considered participants who had five years of experience working with nyaope abuse. The researcher had prior professional familiarity with the social work practice context in the Waterberg district. Clear inclusion criteria were established to select participants and minimise bias. These included years of experience and registration with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (Babbie and Mouton 2017). Peer debriefing was employed through an independent coder to validate the themes and minimise researcher bias. Maintaining a clear, scientific and consistent process ensured dependability. The researcher documented all stages of data collection and the development of themes. Field notes were used to track analytical decisions and reduce bias (Pilot and Beck 2014).

The study adhered to various ethical principles to ensure compliance with the universal ethical standards and principles. The researcher informed the participants about the study, the benefits and the risks. Participants consented to the interviews and audio recording of the interviews. The researcher ensured that written consent was obtained from all participants (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2019). To ensure confidentiality, the researcher restricted access to the recorded interviews and stored the audio recordings in a locked cabinet. The personal identifying details were not used to ensure participants' anonymity (Morse and Richard 2013).

The researcher conducted a risk assessment to identify and evaluate potential risks associated with the study with the aim of preventing harm to participants. This assessment also considered the sensitivity of the research questions to minimise the likelihood of emotional distress (Matthews and Ross 2018). Debriefing services were provided to participants who experienced emotional triggers ensuring their psychological well-being. An agreement was established with a psychologist to provide professional debriefing to any participant who required it (Picardi and Masick 2014). Ethical approval for the study was obtained from both the University of South Africa (2020-SWREC-69719675) and the Limpopo Provincial Government (REC-111513-038).

Findings

Rendering services to nyaope users presents a complex and demanding challenge, requiring social workers to display resilience in navigating social, emotional and systemic pressure. The social workers who participated in the study identified numerous

difficulties including high caseloads, emotional exhaustion, the psychosocial toll of engaging the clients experiencing severe addiction, lack of supervision and management support, resistance to rehabilitation and inadequate resources. Coping strategies included consulting with colleagues, having a family support system and using satisfaction and help from the client as a source of strength, as well as practising self-compassion, positive thinking and appreciation and leveraging knowledge, experience and skills.

Table 1: Themes

Themes
Theme 1: Talking and consulting with colleagues
Theme 2: Self-compassion, built/born with and writing down feelings
Theme 3: Satisfaction and helping clients as a source of strength
Theme 4: Knowledge, experience and skills as a coping mechanism
Theme 5: Family support system
Theme 6: Positive thinking and appreciation

Talking and Consulting with Colleagues

The study found that engaging with colleagues is a key coping mechanism for social workers assisting nyaope users. Interpersonal relationships provide both practical guidance and emotional support, helping social workers navigate the complexities of working with substance-dependent youth and fostering resilience. The following extracts from participants' responses illustrate the importance of collegial support.

> I have been dealing with this challenge of working with stressful nyaope users in different ways, sometimes by consulting with some of my colleagues so that they can assist me with a way forward, and what they think I can do if I have a challenge with a case (P 1).

> Regarding the experience I have acquired over the years, I know if we are ever talking about people who are having challenges with nyaope, I can say that I am no longer the person I used to be. I cannot cry easily because I've become accustomed to it now. I see myself as a saviour to other people. You need to be very strong; you must treat each case as unique to help each person properly. I do not know if I am making sense (P 3).

The use of interpersonal skills through collaboration with colleagues is vital. This assertion was supported by McGowan, Auerbach and Strolin-Goltzman (2009; Groenewald, 2018). They illustrate that reliance on colleagues' and supervisors' support is effective in helping social workers cope with adversity. Colleagues provide immediate form for workplace challenges and are therefore critical for social workers stressed by working with nyaope users. Anderson (2000) supports this view, noting that colleagues unconsciously comfort and problem-solve to help one another.

Self-Compassion, Built/Born with and Writing Down Feelings

Social workers have the internal abilities to manage emotional, physical and difficult situations. Additionally, some social workers demonstrate innate abilities to effectively resolve the problems they encounter (Newman 2016). Compassion is a technique for managing stress and workload that can affect normal functioning. Social workers retrieve a list of solutions to address the challenges they experience (Cherry 2020). Compassion and expressing feelings by writing them down are effective ways to cope with challenges. These techniques help social workers cope when dealing with challenging nyaope-dependent youth.

> Ok, the coping mechanism that I have, err, it is just, let me say, a built-in, a born-with kind of mechanism. Being exposed to various life situations also helped me see things from different perspectives. I have completed a series of therapeutic programmes that have helped me see things from a different perspective. If it has to do with trauma, then it has to do with this form of counselling. I do not need to consult with a counsellor; I must internalise what I have acquired to say, 'no, this is how life is.' Life has its challenges and its share of difficulties. I do not need also to seek therapy to enable myself to cope with that (P 7).

Writing down feelings is important and is explained in the extract below:

> There is so much that I have learnt through writing; when I think about something, I put it down, put my feelings down, and relax about how my day has been or your week or weekend. Then it gives you your inner peace at the end of the day, even though the next person may not be able to read what I have written, as most of the information is confidential client data. I write and then burn the paper (P 8).

Cherry (2020) agrees with the study's findings and suggests that social workers who develop self-compassion will gain confidence in solving problems and addressing the stresses that affect them. They employ internal conflict resolution skills to address difficulties in their work life. Expressing or writing down feelings is crucial for distressed social workers to help them manage their stress. Newman (2016) notes that some individuals have internal coping mechanisms they deploy when faced with adversity.

Satisfaction and Helping Clients as a Source of Strength

The study found that social workers maintain professionalism and report high levels of job satisfaction. Despite facing challenges such as burnout, heavy workloads, a large number of child abuse and neglect cases and a lack of resources, they continue to derive satisfaction from their work. Provide comprehensive support to nyaope-dependent youth gives social workers a sense of satisfaction, which serves as an important source of strength and resilience (Nodick 2002). This sense of fulfilment motivates them to continue with their work. Helping those in need provides a sense of peace (McFadden, Campbell and Taylor 2014). Aclaro-Lapidario (2007) and Newman (2016) claim that

social workers enjoy empowering people. Below is what participants said about satisfaction derived from helping others:

> Yes, it is very important. It is very relieving knowing you were able to assist someone who is struggling, especially an addict who is deep into nyaope. In the end, you find that you were able to play a role in that person's life and assisted them but then referred them to a rehabilitation centre. When that person returns, they are happy and back to their normal life. It also satisfies me, encouraging me to continue offering the service to other clients with the same challenges (P 1).

> Ya, definitely, yes. I am a social worker because I love my job, which keeps me motivated daily. Yes, it is one of the things that helps me cope – knowing that although I am not helping every individual here in South Africa, the little I am doing, I know I am making a significant impact, and that helps me cope too. Yes, I do get the satisfaction in that (P 3).

Nodick (2002) notes that helping a few individuals encourages social workers to improve and help the community address its social issues. Most social workers regard social work as a profession that requires dedication and commitment. They believe that social workers who have a calling are satisfied by helping many people in the community. Social workers rely on the pleasure of helping clients and the satisfaction of serving their communities. McFadden, Campbell and Taylor (2014) argue that when service users are satisfied with the services provided, social workers are also satisfied and use them as a coping mechanism.

Knowledge, Experience and Skills as a Coping Mechanism

Social workers rely on their professional knowledge, accumulated experience and problem-solving skills to manage stress and navigate complex cases, especially when experiencing challenges like those they have previously handled. Aclaro-Lapidario (2007) claims that the proper use of problem-solving skills and proper expression of emotions are coping mechanisms. Problem-solving skills are also a critical tool for dealing with pressure.

> Yeah, the skills that I have acquired are very important in dealing with the challenges that we are having, but they are not as helpful as the experience itself because you can have the skills that you have learnt from school, but when it comes to practical, it is more different from the theoretical view of the profession in itself. When you face real cases, you feel that sometimes they are even real people. These ones have families. They are like you, live like you, and think like you. Then, today, with those cases, you need experience, but not necessarily the skills you learnt in school. You also need experience (P 1).

> Let us say, for example, you are dealing with a case of a nyaope addict. If it is your first case, dealing with that type of person can be challenging. They are not cooperative, and the family might not also be cooperative at the same time, so you need to learn how to approach them, and you need to learn how to approach the family, you need to learn

> how to communicate with the family and the addict to come together and acquire that support from the family for the addict to be taken to the rehabilitation centre. Hence, it is not easy when you are coming from school (P 6).

McGowan, Auerbach and Strolin-Goltzman (2009) state that people with a pool of solutions to problems fare much better and respond well to matters affecting their functioning. This assertion supports the participants' views regarding using experience as a coping mechanism when faced with difficulties. Experience helps social workers grow and understand how to handle certain situations and is an important tool. Aclaro-Lapidario (2007) suggests that the experience of working with others' problems helps social workers debrief and manage stress better. They use their skills and knowledge to address the challenges they encounter.

Family Support System

A supportive family is fundamental to coping for social work professionals. Truter, Theron and Fouche (2014) state that positive relationships with family and friends provide an important coping mechanism. The family support system brings stability, comfort and dependability to the lives of distressed workers. Crowder and Sears (2017) argue that a positive family support system fosters happiness and helps workers remain resilient in the face of challenges. Social workers dealing with nyaope-dependent youth rely and depend heavily on the family support system. This is expressed in the response below:

> Family contributes a lot because they understand that social work on its own is a very stressful profession. They need to be there for me when I am stressed and challenged with some cases, and they understand. They even keep motivating me not to stop doing what I am doing. I am helping people, which is very important because it is good for assisting those who are struggling, especially with nyaope addicts (P 1).

> Err, my family has, my family has, it is loud in nature. No matter how stressed you are when you arrive, once you reach the gate, you become unstressed because of their presence. They live a simple life; one filled with much joy. There are a few pains here and there, but there is much laughing and talking, and when you get there, you wear a mask of home and do not work. When you arrive, there is also so much work to do at home that you will not even think about the work you left in your office. Yes, there is a lot to do at home, and much laughter and noise, which you may never have thought of. Those two things can make you forget that you must go to work tomorrow (P 4).

Crowder and Sears (2017) emphasise the importance of a supportive family system. Participants also indicated that they rely on the family support system to cope with their work challenges. Positive family relationships were crucial in fostering resilience and coping with stress. Truter, Theron and Fouche (2014) concur that families serve as a support system during times of adversity. Social workers often share difficult cases with their families to relieve their own stress. Positive families create a joyful environment that helps alleviate the stress of social workers who work with nyaope users.

Positive Thinking and Appreciation

Positive thinking helps social workers cope with daily challenges. Ruzek (2005) argues that positive thinking reduces anxiety, stress and stressors and helps social workers cope with the challenges they face. Workers with positive minds and thinking can deal with challenges because social workers develop passion and fulfilment when they are appreciated for their work.

> I motivate myself daily. That is where I draw my strength from, but one or two cases that are successful also boast in terms of their strengths. Yes, the other is when you rely on positive cases. When someone comes forward to give testimony about what transpired, they are ultimately changed individuals. And then they are contributing positively to their families, which is encouraging (P 13).

Positive thinking was found to be the primary coping strategy that helps social workers maintain stability and professional encouragement. McFadden, Campbell and Taylor (2014) suggest that positive thinking is a tool used by social workers to manage work-related challenges. Positive thinking helps social workers navigate adverse situations. Social workers employ a strengths-based approach and remain positive in the face of any difficulties they encounter. Ruzek (2005) argues that positive thinking reduces anxiety and distress in workers. It enables social workers to think critically before acting and deploy strategies that yield positive results. Positive thinking motivates social workers to think about solutions amid their challenges.

Discussion

The study findings highlighted the significant use of a variety of sources for social workers to cope with distressing working environments, including working with nyaope users. The study provided avenues for social workers experiencing stress to develop resilience and cope with adversity. Consultation with colleagues emerged as a key strategy for navigating emotionally taxing cases (McGowan, Auerbach and Strolin-Goltzman 2009). Engagement with colleagues about distressing cases helps social workers understand how to address the case more effectively to prevent stress. Case discussions among colleagues help in debriefing by providing solutions that alleviate the pressure on social workers. Consultation with colleagues serves as a support system that fosters resilience (McFadden, Campbell and Taylor 2014). Social workers often find comfort in practising self-compassion and writing down their feelings to cope with stress. Some social workers suggested that they were born with the ability to deal with stressors. The study revealed that social workers benefit from the employment of an inner ability to deal with the stress associated with work (Newman 2016). The deployment of internal coping abilities was found to be shared among social workers to ensure that they can perform their functions competently. The extension of compassion to oneself was found to be a fundamental coping technique (Cherry 2020).

Satisfaction after helping clients successfully was found to play a crucial role in enabling social workers to cope. The study found that social workers have the highest level of satisfaction when helping a client successfully (McFadden, Campbell and Taylor 2014). This is despite burnout, excessive workloads and the many challenges associated with the profession. Social workers indicated that nyaope is a highly addictive drug and that any successful intervention brings a sense of fulfilment. Helping users quit is satisfying because it reduces the social problems associated with nyaope use (Aclaro-Lapidario 2007). The study found that social workers draw on their experiences of working with various devastating social problems as a source of strength. They refer to similar cases they have previously handled and use them as coping mechanisms. Social workers apply the problem-solving skills acquired through formal education to manage personal stress and professional challenges. This helps individuals remain resilient (Crowder and Sears 2017).

The family support system was pointed out as one of the coping strategies that social workers use when experiencing stress at work. Supportive family systems are used as a debriefing source. Informal family conversations and discussions about work challenges provide support. Positive families and friends play an essential role in building the capacity to cope and be resilient. The study revealed that social workers from positive, supportive families and friends have stability and can use their families as coping strategies (Truter, Theron and Fouche 2014). The study also found that positive thinking is crucial for social workers. It plays a significant role in building resilience despite difficulties experienced at work. The study further showed that positive thinking helps social workers adjust, reduces anxiety and provides motivation for them to do more. The findings highlight that appreciation from clients, supervisors and management helps social workers cope with the difficulties they face. When they are appreciated, they are motivated and want to do more.

The study's findings align with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and its various levels of intervention. Collegial support is situated within the microsystem, as it involves direct, face-to-face interactions with colleagues and nyaope users, providing immediate support that shapes coping strategies and day-to-day professional functioning. The mesosystem is reflected in the interaction between family support systems and the work environment, highlighting how personal and professional contexts intersect to influence social workers' resilience.

Study Limitations

The study had several notable limitations. COVID-19 restrictions made it difficult to maintain scheduled appointments with participants. In addition, the study explored emotionally sensitive aspects of social workers' experiences, which posed a risk of emotional triggering during interviews. Participants' emotional responses to work-related challenges may have caused delays or interruptions due to the sensitive nature of the study. Although all participants understood English, linguistic diversity among

participants remained a limitation, as it may have affected the depth and nuance of data collected.

Conclusion

Social workers, like other helping professionals, experience devastating consequences from work-related stress, which can negatively affect their overall well-being. The findings of this study highlighted six core coping strategies used by social workers working with nyaope users: collegial support, self-compassion, satisfaction from helping clients, professional experience and skills, family support and positive thinking. These strategies serve as important sources of strength and resilience in high-stress, limited-resource environments. In the context of South Africa's ongoing nyaope crisis, social workers are confronted with emotionally demanding cases and systemic barriers, including limited rehabilitation infrastructure and resources and high caseloads. Through the implementation of peer support systems, workload management strategies designed with the realities of substance abuse intervention, organisations such as the Department of Social Development can benefit from this study. Future researchers may compare coping strategies across different substances or regions.

Conflicts of Interest Statement

The researcher declares no conflicts of interest or any potential conflicts of interest. This is with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this paper. The researcher does not have funding for this article.

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