Barriers to Postgraduate Qualifications among Social Workers

Pontsho James Mmadi
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8736-6413
University of Limpopo, South Africa
mmadijames@gmail.com

Sello Levy Sithole
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9990-8868
University of Limpopo, South Africa
sello.sithole@ul.ac.za

Abstract

This article describes factors that militate against social workers' endeavours to undertake postgraduate studies. The study adopted a qualitative research paradigm, where a sample of 10 participants was interviewed at Driekop in the Limpopo province of South Africa. The Maintaining Professional Competence model guided the study. A content thematic analysis was used to make sense of the findings. The findings demonstrate that social workers' aspirations to further their studies beyond their bachelor's degrees are constrained by impediments, such as a lack of motivation, the poor image of the profession, heavy workloads, family commitments, financial constraints, and poor scholarly habits. Recommendations are suggested to deal with the barriers that surfaced.

Keywords: barriers; continuing professional development; postgraduate qualifications; social workers

Introduction and Background

Undeniably, the core mission of social work in the world is to serve humanity. Therefore, to meet the ever-changing needs of humanity as service consumers and to fulfil inter-professional collaboration (Ambrose-Miller and Ashcroft 2016), social workers have to continuously update their knowledge and expertise for effective knowledge and practice. Simply put, social workers need to improve their professional repertoire to make more profound interventions and changes to the circumstances of their clients.

The authors of this article observed (in the region where they practice) that most social workers in the South African public sector tend to practise for a lengthy period before contemplating enrolling for postgraduate degrees and thus improving their knowledge beyond that acquired through bachelor's degrees (Sikhitha 2018). In addition, social workers seldom consider furthering studies in their core profession of social work

(Mavimbela 2015). At times, social workers never study beyond undergraduate degrees at all, and this is a concern (Mavimbela 2015; Public Sector Education and Training Authority 2012) which also motivated this research. In Mavimbela's (2015) study for example, one participant held that it is difficult to study and work at the same time.

Overall, South African students' participation in postgraduate education is insufficient and on a downward trajectory (Department of Higher Education and Training 2015). South African literature on social workers' pursuit of further studies is few and far between (Mavimbela 2015). Thus, literature on this issue is virtually unavailable, hence this study.

The study set out to explore and describe barriers to the aspirations of social workers to undertake postgraduate studies. This was a case study involving social workers in the employ of the Department of Social Development (DSD) in the Driekop area, Burgersfort, Limpopo province. Based on this study aim, the study pursued the following objectives: (a) to explore and describe core factors (barriers) that undermine social workers' attempts at furthering their studies; and (b) to provide recommendations that will assist in dealing with social workers' reluctance to further their studies.

Maintaining Professional Competence Model

The authors selected the Maintaining Professional Competence (MPC) model by Chan and Auster (2003) to guide the study. The MPC model leans on theories of motivation, in particular Hertzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman's Hygiene and Motivation Theory (1959). The MPC model is defined as the process by which professionals keep abreast of contemporary knowledge, skills and abilities needed to function effectively in their profession. The model stipulates, that in order to maintain competence, professionals must participate in updating activities, inter alia, continuous professional development (CPD) or beyond. Participation in updating activities is influenced by two aspects, individual characteristics and organisational factors.

Individual characteristics include motivation, age, barriers to participation, and professional commitment. Organisational factors encompass climate and managerial support. Both factors contribute to social workers' success or lack of it in pursuit of postgraduate studies in their profession.

Review of Literature

A review of postgraduate literature on the barriers that social workers grapple with in their pursuit of postgraduate studies generated various findings, which are summarised below.

Personal Reasons and Motivation for Postgraduate Studies

Pursuit of further studies is tied to a number of complex factors. Mullen (2010) reports that, on a simplistic level, there must be personal interest or willingness on the part of social workers when deciding to improve their qualifications. Thus, it is important that social workers need to be personally and professionally motivated in their aspirations to undertake postgraduate studies if they are to succeed (Afzal et al. 2010; DePorres and Livingston 2016; Hoskins and Goldberg 2005; McCarthy 2015; Santicola 2013). Often, social workers have to decide what to prioritise between marriage and postgraduate studies. Our casual observation is that more often than not, social workers choose marriage over postgraduate studies.

Family Commitments

When decisions are to be made about undertaking further studies, social workers' family commitments may not be ignored, since children, parents and significant others have to be attended to. Thus, family commitment has a positive or negative influence on the aspirations of social workers to their further studies. Research shows that family commitments are common barriers to an individual's quest to improve their qualifications (Baharudin, Murad, and Mat 2013; Cobbing et al. 2017; Habib 2011; Ronnie and Wakelin 2015). Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) reason that balancing postgraduate studies with family and work commitments is a challenge, in particular, for postgraduate students across disciplines.

Sociocultural Barriers

Yeba (2015) found that in Cameroon the majority of women in pursuit of doctoral or postgraduate studies are deterred by sociocultural barriers. In her study, a number of women perceived early marriage or marriage in general to be an obstacle to their disposition to undertake postgraduate education. This was largely due to the monotonous role of caring for the needs of husbands who are heads of families and often have the last say in times of family conflicts; a view which one may consider misogynous. Noteworthy is the fact that social work is a female-dominated profession in South Africa (Khunou, Pillay, and Nethenonda 2012; Sithole 2010), hence this specific discussion about women (although this study focuses on both men and women). Yeba (2015), for example, observed that in the case where postgraduate studies were enrolled for, dropping out was likely to occur due to heavy household responsibilities among women.

Pregnancy and Childcare Responsibilities

Pregnancy during studies also represents another potential barrier. It is posited that, psychologically and physiologically, a pregnant woman needs some time to rest because it becomes difficult to endure high academic demands while pregnant (Mushi 1998; Yeba 2015). In Tanzania, Mushi (1998) found that the length of time taken to complete postgraduate studies was from one to eleven years, while, on average, five

years was the norm. Interestingly, Bhalalusesa (1998) maintains that, albeit the fact that the husband may be supportive of the family (during studies), it is axiomatic that he cannot perform the (reproductive and) caring roles of the wife. In Cameroon, Yeba (2015) found that women also first sent their children to school before they undertook postgraduate education, which they believed was costly (despite the fact that they had an income). The implication here is that women postponed postgraduate studies until their children had completed their schooling.

Women's Subjugated Role and Status

Yeba (2015, 197) emphasised that "women's low decision-making power, particularly in developing countries, is more pronounced at household level. If women cannot take decisions … husbands can decide whether or not their wives should go to school." She further opines that married women predominantly depend on their husbands for money. Even if the wife is the breadwinner, patriarchy dictates that husbands should take control (Bhalalusesa 1998; Yeba 2015). Furthermore, the husband may still deny his wife an opportunity to further her studies, as this would place the woman in a higher (personal and social) status, cause loss of status for the man, cause the man to be socially ridiculed and belittled, and cause sociocultural disruption. Additionally, some men harbour the fear that educated women would not hesitate to file for a divorce.

Financial Constraints

Social workers who wish to improve their qualifications may need extra money. Absence of money may scupper intentions to further studies. Brandsma-Dieters (2013) highlighted the fact that one of the often-indicated reasons for withdrawal from postgraduate studies includes financial burden. In the UK, the top two reasons for not enrolling for a postgraduate course were the cost and lack of funding. Literature confirms therefore that funding is a significant obstacle to the pursuit of higher qualifications (Britton and Crawford 2015; Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2015; Mullen 2010; Pitchforth et al. 2012; Rathgeber 2013; Tamilenthi and Junior 2011; Yeba 2015).

Professional and Work-related Responsibilities

Social workers go to the workplace and discharge challenging and arduous duties daily, leaving little time for personal interests like attending to their studies.

Work-Family Balance

In a study of potential postgraduate students, the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2015) found that 49 per cent of individuals reported having difficulty in enrolling for postgraduate studies due to existing work commitments; while 38 per cent showed concern about committing to a number of years to postgraduate study. Certain persons felt that doing postgraduate studies would require them to delay

accepting an attractive job opportunity (Marks and Edgington 2006). In the United States, Wasburn-Moses (2008) surveyed 619 students across 78 doctoral programmes and found that doctoral students felt least satisfied with their ability to balance work and family against their overall workload.

Professional Remuneration

Social work has historically been a low-paid profession (Dlamini and Sewpaul 2015; Patel 2007; Sheafor, Horejsi, and Horejsi 2000; Sikhitha 2018; Sithole 2010). Research supports the notion that social workers earn a meagre income, and as a result, have limited opportunities for social mobility and improved economic opportunities (Earle 2008; McPhail 2004; Nhedzi and Makofane 2015; Sithole 2010). It is therefore imperative that social workers earn enough to be able to provide for the costs of studies, which are often high. Costs may demotivate financially constrained social workers to undertake further studies.

Work Incentives

Incentives in the workplace are often provided to motivate employees to work hard, and stay in the profession. However, such incentives need to be aligned or competitive with other employers or fellow professionals, so as to bring work satisfaction and fulfilment among social workers. Work incentives easily influence the decision to enrol for further studies. The decision to improve one's education may be of concern to social workers. In South Africa, the introduction of the Occupation Specific Dispensation (OSD) wage agreement adopted by the DSD in 2009, also contributed to the delay in social workers improving their qualifications. While the OSD is focused particularly on an employee's experience, it disregards postgraduate qualifications, such as PhDs and master's degrees in social work (Mavimbela 2015). In his study, Mavimbela (2015) sees the OSD as demotivating for social workers, discouraging them from improving their qualifications because such postgraduate qualifications would not be recognised for OSD grade progression and salary grading. In addition, Mavimbela argues that higher qualifications are mostly recognised for employees at the universities.

The Public Health and Social Development Sectoral Bargaining Council (PHSDSBC) (2009) supports Mavimbela's (2015) argument. The PHSDSBC document states that while hardworking social workers with experience may qualify for promotion, postgraduate qualifications are not considered necessary for upward mobility. That notwithstanding, Sikhitha (2018) found that the OSD was not properly implemented and, as a result, led to anger and frustration among social workers. Thus Sikhitha (2018) reports that most of her respondents with 6–15 years of work experience at the DSD remained stagnant at their entry level rank. This is contrary to Resolution 1 of 2009 of the PHSDSBC, which states that social workers with more than four years of experience qualify for grade progression or promotion; therefore, postgraduate qualifications are not considered for upward mobility.

Methodology

Research Approach and Design

A qualitative research approach was selected to guide the study. According to Myers (2013), qualitative research helps researchers to gain a better understanding of a phenomenon through first-hand experience, truthful reporting, and quotations of actual conversations. This approach was complemented by a case study design.

Population

The study was conducted among social workers employed by DSD in the Driekop area, Burgersfort, Limpopo province. The Driekop area was selected for convenience sake.

Sampling

Non-probability sampling was selected for this study (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2016). Hence, a purposive sample of 20 social workers was targeted. The inclusion criteria for the sample were that only social workers with a bachelor's degree who had been employed for more than five years after graduating, and had never endeavoured to improve their qualifications, or had attempted and dropped out of postgraduate education. The exclusion criteria sidelined social workers who had retired from the profession and those possessing advanced degrees, such as master's and doctorates. Moreover, social workers who had registered for postgraduate degrees at institutions and resumed their studies, and those who were employed in other settings but are not practising social workers, were excluded from the study. So were social workers from non-profit organisations excluded because such organisations are scarce in the Driekop area. The resultant sample is described in Table 1.

Table 1: Description of the sample

Gender		Marital status		Age distribution		Work experience in years	
Male	**Female**	**Single**	**Married**	**Range**	**Number**	**Range**	**Number**
2	8	8	2	25–30	2	5–10	8
				31–35	6	11–15	2
				36–40	1		
				41–45	1		
10		**10**			**10**		**10**

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview is a common data collection method in qualitative research (Fylan 2005). The researchers had initially targeted 20 participants; however, after the researchers had interviewed 10 participants, data saturation was reached since no new themes and sub-themes were forthcoming (Babbie 2013). The participants

took part in the study out of their own free will (Strydom 2011) and had complete discretion to withdraw at any point during the interview process, which lasted almost 45 minutes. An audio recorder was used to capture the conversation after consent for this was granted by each participant. Note-taking also occurred during the interview.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed by the researchers. The researchers collected data with the objectives and theoretical framework of the study in mind. Member checking (Thomas 2017) was by making transcripts available to the participants for confirmation to ensure trustworthiness of the interview. Thereafter, the researchers immersed themselves in the data and began coding in search of themes which were of interest and pertinent. Having coded the data, codes were collated to form new themes, which were also exposed to refinement, so as to remain with the most interesting and salient themes. Thereafter, new themes emerged for reporting (or as findings of the study).

Ethics Considerations

The authors adhered to the ethical guidelines for the study as set out in Table 2.

Table 2: Ethics considerations

Permission to conduct study	Ethical clearance to conduct this study was provided by the Turfloop Research and Ethics Committee of the University of Limpopo. Permission was also granted by the DSD to carry out the study.
Voluntary participation	The researchers explained the purpose of the study to the interview candidates. Thereafter, the participants partook in the study voluntarily.
Informed consent	Social research, according to Babbie (2013), represents an intrusion into people's lives. The participants were thus all informed of the study's purpose and significance. The participants were requested to complete consent forms indicating their voluntary participation in the study. They were also informed of their right to decline or withdraw from participation in the study at any time.
Confidentiality and anonymity	The researchers assured all participants of the confidentiality and anonymity of their participation, both verbally and in the informed consent letters completed by participants. In keeping with this, the identities of the participants were not disclosed in any way in the study. This ensures that the data remain confidential and anonymous.

Protection from harm	The researchers ensured that the participants were not harmed in any way throughout the interviews (De Vos et al. 2011).
Compensation	There was no compensation or any pecuniary benefit paid to the participants for taking part in the study.

Findings of the Study

Six themes represent the findings generated through analysis (see Table 3) and are discussed below.

Table 3: Themes linked to the MPC model

Theme	MPC Model Characteristics and factors
Lack of motivation	Individual characteristics
Family commitments	Individual characteristics
Poor reading habits	Individual characteristics
Poor professional prestige due to lack of recognition of postgraduate qualifications by the employer	Organisational factors
Heavy workloads	Organisational factors
Financial constraints due to poor social work salary	Organisational factors

Theme 1: Lack of Motivation

Expressing frustration and discontentment, Participant A said: "most of us regard furthering studies as useless in social work." This further provides evidence that the participants' frustrations and discontent are linked to their lack of motivation, hence they are demotivated to study further in the profession. Participant B stated that "social workers must go back to school and start a new career."

The MPC model (Chan and Auster 2003) holds that participation in furthering education is by individual characteristics. Individual characteristics include motivation, age, barriers to participation, and professional commitment. With respect to this theme, it was reported that the employer does not reward postgraduate qualifications. This is because the entry requirement in the public service is a degree or diploma (PHSDSBC 2014). Owing to this, the participants felt disinclined to pursue further studies in the profession of social work. Consequently, they were demotivated to enrol for postgraduate studies.

Nyambegera and Gicheru (2016) made it clear that, when motivation is poor, the drive to undertake new initiatives such as furthering education decreases. Hoskins and Goldberg (2005), and DePorres and Livingston (2016) maintain that candidates who are both personally and professionally motivated are more likely to persist with their postgraduate studies. The MPC model also reinforces the idea that individual motivation plays a pivotal role among librarians, and the same pertains to the decisions social workers make to pursue postgraduate studies.

Theme 2: Family Commitments

This barrier was presented as follows:

> I have a small child … I don't think I will be able to juggle the two … family commitments become a barrier when I want to further my studies. (Participant J)

> The main obstacle always lies in family commitments when I want to further my studies. (Participant J)

Some participants reported that their overwhelming family commitments made it difficult for them to enter postgraduate education. Postgraduate studies are very demanding in nature and participating in these would hamper family obligations. The MPC model (Chan and Auster 2003) identifies family commitments and obligations as barriers to updating and improving education levels.

Hart (2012) argues that postgraduate studies could have an impact on family commitments and responsibilities, in view of the sometime or often onerous academic and research tasks and deadlines. In addition, Al Horany and Hassan (2011) also confirm that postgraduate studies may inadvertently cause conflict or arguments if not appropriately managed. Cobbing et al. (2017) assert that the overwhelming number of females often has the most responsibility of caring for children and elderly parents which often undermine their attempts at adding to their undergraduate degrees. The fact that social work is a female-dominated profession is beyond dispute (Khunou, Pillay, and Nethenonda 2012; Sithole 2010). For this reason, more women than men in patriarchal societies (such as South Africa) have to deal with the challenges of raising children and taking care of other people in the family (Yeba 2015).

Theme 3: Poor Reading Habits

Comments about reading newspapers were as follows:

> I just browse the newspaper … newspaper is time consuming … I just check the front page … I read newspaper twice a week. (Participant I)

> I don't read a newspaper for about six months, I don't buy it. (Participant D)

> I don't buy newspaper … I only rely on my phone for news … I only read headlines on the newspaper … I buy newspaper on Sundays to view vacancies. (Participant A)

> I read newspaper once a week … the main reason is to look for posts. (Participant F)

This study found that the participants' efforts to stay abreast with news and to engage with literature in general were almost absent. This finding supports the Health and Welfare Sector Education and Training Authority's (HWSETA) (2015) observation that professionals spend less than two hours a week reading newspapers. This implies that on days when newspapers are not read, some opportunities that promote further studies are likely to be missed. Therefore, poor reading or scholarly habits become a barrier to finding study opportunities such as scholarships.

Literature indicates that reading habits of social workers are worrying (Cigno and Bourn 2017; Horder 2007; Marsh and Triseliotis 1996; Sheldon and Chilvers 2000). From the above narratives, it is clear that the participants had not formed habits to read newspapers daily or regularly. However, this does not simply imply that other available modes of information dissemination are not accessed, for example, online news, and journal articles.

In supporting the aforementioned, Participant D mentioned that "reading is not my thing … I only read when necessary". According to Beddoe and Duke (2013), social workers were observed to have developed poor scholarly activities and research abilities; a barrier not only to undertaking postgraduate studies, but also keeping on top of the latest professional developments.

Owing to poor reading habits, the participants did not know much about HWSETA, the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS), as well as the National Research Foundation (NRF) sponsorships for postgraduate studies (in social sciences) in South Africa. Thus, it is evident that social workers' "exposure to information is poor". This is a disturbing state of affairs, given the fact that learners, at times, rely on social workers for career guidance and information in relation to tertiary funding. The researchers are of the opinion that information about undergraduate and postgraduate funding is not that far apart from each other, at least to such an extent that social workers may know about one and miss the other almost completely. Hence social workers' exposure to information and reading remain questionable and can be seen as a hindrance to pursuing further studies.

With regard to awareness of the HWSETA, the NIHSS and the NRF as mentioned earlier, the participants responded:

> I have never heard anything about HWSETA. I know nothing about HWSETA, I know SEDA. (Participant I)

> Never heard of NIHSS. (Participant D)

NIHSS … this one I don't know. (Participant A)

NRF … never heard of it. (Participant E)

From the above narratives, it is clear that the participants had limited knowledge about what was available to them in terms of financial support to pursue further studies. Blaming social workers (alone) for their limited exposure to reading may not be fair. This is so often the observation, that the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) regularly updates social workers about developments in the profession by distributing the SACSSP Bulletins. Though this is a commendable feat, enforcement of the CPD system is somewhat on the back burner. For example, the researchers, being in the social work profession themselves, observed that it has been over half a decade since the council (SACSSP) last demanded CPD evidence (from social workers) for continued accredited practice. This has a negative impact on the development of the social work profession. Therefore, it can be argued that if the SACSSP seriously demands CPD evidence for continued accredited practice annually, then social workers would be "compelled" to engage in scholarly activities and research on a yearly basis. Thus, social workers would likely undertake postgraduate studies. The council would then allocate a certain number of CPD points for practitioners who are undertaking further studies, for example, master's and doctoral degrees. Although there might be some correlation between social workers' poor reading habits and the SACSSP's neglect of CPD submissions, it remains incumbent upon social workers, as befitting professionals, to keep themselves updated.

Theme 4: Poor Professional Prestige due to Lack of Recognition of Postgraduate Qualifications by the Employer

Some of the responses of the participants were as follows:

It's just the same, others with master's degrees are working with us … they are not managers. (Participant C)

In other departments, if you pass a master's degree the salary level increases but in social work if you pass your master's one gets the same salary. (Participant D)

This theme aligns with organisational factors which encompass climate and managerial support as factors that hinder or support an individual's motivation towards self-improvement. In this study it was found that being viewed as having the lowest professional status in the work setting was a matter of great concern among some participants in the study. This would activate thoughts of improving one's education as a means of aspiring for upward mobility. However, monetary disincentives by the employer and marginalisation from their own profession (Earle 2008; Sithole 2010, 2017) seem to undermine contemplation of furthering studies by social workers. The participants associated postgraduate qualifications with pecuniary benefits, and an absence of those had a negative influence on their decisions to pursue

postgraduate studies in social work. The participants, in their contemplation to earn postgraduate qualifications, loathed being on the lowest rung of the ladder, stated simply, being junior social workers to their colleagues who had only undergraduate degrees. In other words, the participants aspired to access senior positions once they have earned postgraduate qualifications.

The lack of recognition of postgraduate qualifications in the DSD is a crystal-clear disincentive. The researchers compared this situation to the situation where a hard-working fisherman continuously throws a fishing net into the river without catching any fish upon the return of the fishing net. The fisherman then later heads back home empty-handed and hungry (meaning one has studied hard to improve skills but no upward mobility or incentives are visible at the DSD). Enaigbe (2009) indicates that professionals are more likely to be motivated when incentivised for doing something additional at work. This points to extrinsic motivation (see first theme).

Opinions of some of the participants (A, C and D) given in earlier quotations, indicate a poor view of the profession, which is exacerbated by the lack of recognition of postgraduate qualifications by DSD. Moreover, Participant C noted that, in social work,

> there is never a post requiring master's degree … if you go to the district or provincial office and ask to see the head, you will be surprised to see the lower qualification that person has … sometimes not even related to social work.

This narrative reflects the disheartening situation which Sithole (2017, 302) observed as "analogous to a former good tennis player who is deployed to coach a soccer team, despite never having kicked a soccer ball". Sikhitha (2018) observed that a postgraduate qualification (such as a master's or doctorate degree) in social work was never a prerequisite for upward mobility in the public service because an undergraduate bachelor's degree remains an entry requirement into the profession.

Theme 5: Heavy Workloads

Two participants had the following to say about heavy workloads:

> The work pressure and poor working conditions affect you as a human being … I am always tired. (Participant F)

> I have so much things to do at work … I cannot cope with postgraduate studies. (Participant H)

The participants regarded high caseloads at the workplace as a factor contributing to their reluctance to undertake postgraduate studies. High caseloads could be considered an organisational constraint that militates against the personal development of employees, according to the MPC model. When both heavy workloads and family

commitments are experienced simultaneously, aspirations of social workers to undertake postgraduate studies decline.

Studies found that high pressure at work resulted in little or no time for undertaking postgraduate studies (Naidoo 2004; Sheldon and Chilvers 2000; Wasburn-Moses 2008). Chan and Auster (2003) also noted that work or organisational factors may create a barrier to participation in further studies. Some authors have further cautioned that the aforesaid may lead to burnout (Calitz, Roux, and Strydom 2014).

Theme 6: Financial Constraints due to Poor Social Work Salary

Finances are a sore point, and the following expressions confirm that:

> Because in social work we don't get more … we are not left with anything to register for postgraduate studies. (Participant A)

> We are being paid little with more responsibilities, I'd rather pay for my child school fees … I am always postponing due to financial issues. I once applied, more than twice. I am unable to register due to financial constraints. (Participant A)

This theme juxtaposes the poor salary of social workers and the unaffordable study costs. All the participants maintained that the social workers' salary is meagre, not concomitant with their qualifications, professional status, and levels of responsibilities; therefore, they cannot afford study costs, which they deemed exorbitant.

Albeit that certain participants wished to enrol for postgraduate studies, they were often discouraged from doing so by the lack of financial resources and support. The participants reported that they were (financially) just keeping their heads above water. Such a position is supported by research (Alpaslan and Schenck 2012; Dlamini and Sewpaul 2015; Sithole 2010). For this reason, the participants, when contemplating whether to improve their qualifications, were stifled by study fees, deemed unaffordable because of poor remuneration.

The meagre social work salary (Sithole 2010) may often be earmarked for children's school fees and other household expenses (as part of the family commitments discussed earlier), with very little money left over for other items which may be viewed as a luxury or frivolous. Hence, further studies may be hampered by a dearth of funds. Compounding this, patriarchy often dictates that husbands dominate money matters and decision-making (Sultana 2011; Yeba 2015). Therefore, the husband may still deny his wife an opportunity to further her studies; further oppressed by the patriarchal view that some men have that women should be less educated than themselves.

Conclusion

The findings of this study, albeit from a small sample, are a cause for grave concern, and may be indicative of a problem that has started decimating the social work profession in South Africa. Issues raised in this article are not in any way new. South African social work literature is replete with complaints from social workers about poor working conditions and marginalisation of the profession.

A CPD policy which should ignite social workers' interest and pursuit for further studies is in place. Unfortunately, the study found that this policy is not enforced. This non-interfering approach to professional matters can only leave social workers to their own devices, with a resultant drop in professional standards; a situation likely to aggravate the poor image and status of the profession.

Evidently, most social workers appear to be overwhelmed by their operational context to such an extent that the innate drive for personal growth and development is seemingly inert. The consequences of this lethargy for the clients of social workers are difficult to fathom.

Improving the image and status of the profession requires a concerted effort from universities, employers, social workers, the SACSSP and trade unions, as well as from professional associations. Each of these sectors has a significant contribution and role to play in the advancement and continued respect of the profession.

The MPC model identifies both personal and organisational factors as a context for professional development. Social workers need to take their professional development seriously in order to bring about changes at both personal and organisational level.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, it is recommended that

- social workers make a concerted effort to improve their exposure to information about their self-development;
- social workers' heavy workloads (as structural barriers) be dealt with accordingly to ensure self-development and access to opportunities;
- postgraduate qualifications in the public service be incentivised to encourage life-long learning;
- social work salaries be improved to be commensurate with qualifications;
- more competitive incentives be provided; and
- the CPD policy be seriously enforced by the SACSSP to promote improvement of studies or continuous learning.

For purposes of further research, the authors recommend that

- this study be replicated in other provinces to establish if a similar outcome will be obtained;
- a larger study be conducted that focuses on the reading (or academic) habits of social workers; and
- satisfaction surveys among social workers' clients be carried out as further education and qualification have an impact on the quality of service.

Acknowledgements

References

Afzal, H., Ali I. Khan, M.A., and K. Hamid. 2010. "A Study of University Students' Motivation and its Relationship with their Academic Performance." *International Journal of Business and Management* 5 (4): 80–88. https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v5n4p80.

Al Horany, A., and S. A. Hassan. 2011. "Marital Adjustment among Postgraduate Students at Universities in Malaysia." *Elixir Psychology* 37 (2011): 3773–5.

Alpaslan, A. H., and C. J. Schenck. 2012. "Challenges Related to the Working Conditions Experienced by Social Workers Practicing in Rural Areas." *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 48 (4): 367–86. https://doi.org/10.15270/48-4-24.

Ambrose-Miller, W., and R. Ashcroft. 2016. "Challenges Faced by Social Workers as Members of Inter-Professional Collaborative Health Care Teams." *Health and Social Work* 41 (2): 101–9. https://doi.org/10.1093/hsw/hlw006.

Babbie, E. 2013. *The Practice of Social Research.* 13th ed. Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

Baharudin, S. N. A., M. Murad, and N. H. H. Mat. 2013. "Challenges of Adult Learners: A Case Study of Full-Time Postgraduate Students." *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences* 90 (2013): 772–81. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.07.151.

Beddoe, L., and J. Duke. 2013. "Continuing Professional Development of Registered Social Workers in New Zealand." *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work* 25 (3): 35–49. https://doi.org/10.11157/anzswj-vol25iss3id72.

Bhalalusesa, E. P. 1998. "Women's Career and Professional Development: Experiences and Challenges." *Gender and Education Journal* 10 (1): 21–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540259821078.

Brandsma-Dieters, A. 2013. "Factors Influencing Student Delay in Higher Education." Master's thesis, University of Twente.

Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Britton, J., and C. Crawford. 2015. "Estimating the Cost to Government of Providing Undergraduate and Postgraduate Education." Institute for Fiscal Studies. http://hdl.handle.net/10419/141975.

Calitz, T., A. Roux, and H. Strydom. 2014. "Factors that Affect Social Workers' Job Satisfaction, Stress and Burnout." *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 50 (2): 153–69. https://doi.org/10.15270/50-2-393.

Chan, D. C., and E. Auster. 2003. "Factors Contributing to the Professional Development of Reference Librarians." *Library and Information Science Research* 25 (2003): 265–86. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0740-8188(03)00030-6.

Cigno, K., and D. Bourn. 2017. *Cognitive-Behavioural Social Work in Practice*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315259994.

Cobbing, S., S. Maddocks, S. Govender, S. Khan, M. Mbhele, K. Naidoo, S. Tootla, and C. Weston. 2017. "Physiotherapy Postgraduate Studies in South Africa: Facilitators and Barriers." *South African Journal of Physiotherapy* 73 (1): 2–6. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajp.v73i1.335.

De Vos, A. S., H. Strydom, C. B. Fouche, and C. S. L. Delport. 2011. *Research at Grassroots: For Social Science and Human Service Professionals*. 4th ed. Pretoria: Van Schaik.

Department for Business Innovation and Skills. 2015. "*Consultation on Support for Postgraduate Study*. BIS/15/185. London.

Department of Higher Education and Training. 2015. "Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa." Pretoria: DHET.

DePorres, D., and R. E. Livingston. 2016. "Launching New Doctoral Students: Embracing the Hero's Journey." *Development in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning* 43 (2016): 121–8.

Dlamini, T., and V. Sewpaul. 2015. "Rhetoric versus Reality in Social Work Practice: Political, Neoliberal and new Managerial Influences." *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 51 (4): 469–73. https://doi.org/10.15270/51-4-461.

Earle, N. 2008. "Social Work in Social Change: The Profession and Education of Social Workers in South Africa." Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Enaigbe, A. P. 2009. "Strategies for Improving Supervisory Skills for Effective Primary Education in Nigeria." *Edo Journal of Counselling* 2 (2): 235–44. https://doi.org/10.4314/ejc.v2i2.60864.

Etikan, I., S. A. Musa, and R. S. Alkassim. 2016. "Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling." *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics* 5 (1): 1–4. https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11.

Fylan, F. 2005. "Semi-Structured Interviewing." In *A Handbook of Research Methods for Clinical and Health Psychology*, edited by J. Miles and P. Gilbert, 65–78. Oxford: OUP.

Habib, A. 2011. "Challenges facing SA Higher Education." Accessed 8 February 2017. http://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/524/67940.html.

Hart, C. 2012. "Marriage and Participation in Postgraduate Study: Exploring the Motivations and Experiences of Married Female Psychology Masters Students." Master's thesis, University of the Witwatersrand.

Health and Welfare Sector Education and Training Authority. 2015. "Baseline Study on Students' Perceptions and Attitudes towards the HWSETA Postgraduate Research Bursary Programme." Johannesburg: HWSETA.

Hertzberg, F., B. Mausner, and B. B. Snyderman. 1959. *The Motivation to Work.* New York: John Wiley.

Horder, W. 2007. "Reading in Professional Practice: How Social Work Practice Assessors Access Knowledge and Information." *British Journal of Social Work* 37 (2007): 1079–94. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcl080.

Hoskins, C. M., and A. D. Goldberg. 2005. "Doctoral Students' Persistence in Counselor Education Programs: Student-Program Match." *Counselor Education and Supervision* 44 (3): 175–88. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6978.2005.tb01745.x.

Khunou, G., R. Pillay, and A. Nethenonda. 2012. "Social Work is Women's Work: An Analysis of Social Work Student's Perceptions of Gender as a Career Choice Determinant." *Social Work Practitioner-Research* 24 (1): 123–32.

Marks, J., and R. Edgington. 2006. "Motivations and Barriers for Women in the Pursuit of an MBA Degree." Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC), Research Reports.

Marsh, P., and J. Triseliotis. 1996. *Ready to Practice.* Aldershot: Avebury.

Mavimbela, J. 2015. "Social Work as a Scarce Skill: Exploring the Views of Social Workers regarding the Retention Strategies used by the Human Resource Managers to Retain Social Workers within the Department of Social Development." Master's thesis, University of the Witwatersrand.

McCarthy, G. 2015. "Motivating and Enabling Adult Learners to Develop Research Skills." *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 55 (2): 310–30.

McPhail, B. A. 2004. "Setting the Record Straight: Social Work is not a Female-Dominated Profession." *Social Work* 49 (2): 323–6. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/49.2.323.

Mullen, F. 2010. "Barriers to Widening Access to Higher Education." *Information Centre* 10 (7): 7–10.

Mushi, V. A. 1998. "Challenges Experienced by Women in Learning at Postgraduate Level: A Case of the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania." Accessed 20 November 2019. https://www.academia.edu/2536234/Challenges_Experienced_by_Women_in_Learning_at _Postgraduate_Level_A_Case_of_the_University_of_Dar_es_Salaam_in_Tanzania.

Myers, M. D. 2013. "Qualitative Research in Business and Management." 2nd ed. London: Sage.

Naidoo, S. 2004. "The Social Work Profession in South Africa: Quo Vadis?" PhD thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Nhedzi, F., and M. Makofane. 2015. "The Experiences of Social Workers in the Provision of Family Preservation Services." *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 51 (3): 354–78. https://doi.org/10.15270/51-3-453.

Nyambegera, S. M., and C. N. Gicheru. 2016. "Extrinsic and Intrinsic Factors Influencing Employee Motivation: Lessons from AMREF Health Africa in Kenya." *International Journal of Business and Social Research* 6 (09): 20–23. https://doi.org/10.18533/ijbsr.v6i9.985.

Patel, L. 2007. *Social Welfare and Social Development in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Pitchforth, J., S. Beames, A. Thomas, M. Falk, C. Farr, S. Gasson, S. A. Thamrin, and K. Mengersen. 2012. "Factors Affecting Timely Completion of a PhD: A Complex Systems Approach." *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 12 (4): 125–31.

PHSDSBC (Public Health and Social Development Sectoral Bargaining Council). 2009. *Resolution 1 of 2009: Agreement on Implementation of an Occupational Specific Dispensation (OSD) for Social Services Professions and Occupations*. Pretoria: PHSDSBC.

PHSDSBC (Public Health and Social Development Sectoral Bargaining Council). 2014. *OSD for Social Services Professions and Occupations*. Pretoria: PHSDSBC.

Public Sector Education and Training Authority. 2012. *Scarce Skills in the Public Services Sector*. Pretoria.

Rathgeber, E. M. 2013. "Gender Barriers faced by African Women in Graduate Programmes and Research in the Social Sciences." AfricaPortal. Accessed 28 November 2019. https://www.africaportal.org/publications/gender-barriers-faced-by-african-women-in-graduate-programmes-and-research-in-the-social-sciences/.

Ronnie, L., and P. Wakelin. 2015. "Motivations and Challenges: The South African Master's in Business Administration (MBA) Experience." *International Journal of Teaching and Education* 3 (1): 52–59. https://doi.org/10.20472/TE.2015.3.1.004.

Santicola, L. 2013. "Pressing on: Persistence through a Doctoral Cohort Program in Education." *Contemporary Issues in Education Research* 6 (2): 253–64. https://doi.org/10.19030/cier.v6i2.7736.

Sheafor, B. W., C. R. Horejsi, and G. A. Horejsi. 2000. "Techniques and Guidelines for Social Work Practice." 5th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Sheldon, B., and R. Chilvers. 2000. *Evidence Based Practice: A Study of Prospects and Problems*. Lyme Regis: Russell House.

Sikhitha, T. M. 2018. "Supervision Expectations of Social Workers in Vhembe District of Limpopo Province." PhD thesis, University of Limpopo.

Sithole, S. L. 2010. "Marginalisation of Social Workers in South Africa: Some Reflections from a Feminist Perspective." *Social Work Practitioner-Researcher* 22 (1): 6–18.

Sithole, S. L. 2017. "Revitalizing Social Work Practice: The Community Development Conundrum." *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 53 (3): 301–14. https://doi.org/10.15270/53-3-571.

Spaulding, L. S., and A. J. Rockinson-Szapkiw. 2012. "Hearing their Voices: Factors Doctoral Candidates Attribute to their Persistence." *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 7 (2012): 201–15. https://doi.org/10.28945/1589.

Strydom, H. 2011. "Ethical Aspects of Research in the Social Sciences and Human Services Profession." In *Research at Grassroots for the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions*, edited by A. S. de Vos, H. Strydom, C. B. Fouché, and C. S. L. Delport. 4th ed. Pretoria: Van Schaik.

Sultana, A. M. 2011. "Factors that Effect on Women Autonomy and Decision-Making Power within the Household in Rural Communities." *Journal of Applied Sciences Research* 7 (1): 18–22.

Tamilenthi, S., and L. Junior. 2011. "The Barriers of Higher Education in the African Countries of Zambia and Tanzania." *Archives of Applied Science Research* 3 (4): 170172.

Thomas, D. R. 2017. "Feedback from Research Participants: Are Member Checks Useful in Qualitative Research?" *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 14 (1): 23–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2016.1219435.

Wasburn-Moses, L. 2008. "Satisfaction among current Doctoral Students in Special Education." *Remedial and Special Education* 29 (5): 260–7. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932507312014.

Yeba, J. S. 2015. "Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting Gender Inequality in Higher Education: The Case of Doctorate Students in some Cameroonian Universities." *Journal of Educational Research in Africa* 7 (2015): 178–200.