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**SW4202B - 2021S1 Social Work Honours Project**

Honours Project Report

**Occupational stress factors affecting direct  
service providers in Day Activities Centre (DAC)  
and the coping strategies of the service  
providers**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The social welfare sector has always been committed to improving the well-being of the people, but it is less concerned with the mental health of workers in a mental health setting, therefore, this research project would represent the result of a small-scale qualitative study which to examining the source of work stress in their workplace as well as in the DAC setting.

A qualitative method was adopted in this research by interviewing eight staff who have working experience in DAC settings in non-governmental organizations. They are from different positions and each informant's interview was audio recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes. Four analytic themes emerged from analysis of the data: 1) Expectation management; 2) Administrative and Supervisory Styles; 3) Collaboration with colleagues; 4) Characteristics of service users and 5) Coping strategies. It is expected that this research is able to highlight the impact of the source of work stress and the level of work stress in the DAC setting and the coping skills for the direct service providers. Also, this research helps to fulfill the research gap of mental health status in the DAC setting of the social welfare industry.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### **Rational for this study**

From daily observations, it is known that there is a shortage of manpower in the Day Activities Centre (DAC), and some positions have been vacant for a long time. There are no specific requirements to recruit for those positions. As we all know, engagement with people with mentally disabilities requires relationship building and requires staff to be familiar with their uniqueness and habits. Staff only have peer support and peer guidance or for staff without formal training, these situations may result in staff failing to master caring skills and prone to diversification. This not only makes it difficult for service users to learn and master, but also affects the long-term development of the centre and also staff with occupational stress from work which affects our service users in the long run.

### **Background Information**

In Hong Kong today, our rehabilitation services are mainly composed of vocational rehabilitation services, residential services, community support services and special education services. In September 2020, there was a common tragedy in Hong Kong where mothers strangled children with mental disabilities. Since some people with mental disabilities have more emotional and behavioral problems, caregivers often face caregiving pressures. In the past, more discussions in society were about how to deal with community resources to reduce caregivers' pressure. One of the propositions is to ease the pressure on family members to take care of them by using institutional service. However, the waiting time for dormitory services in rehabilitation services is very long, and for those with severe physical disabilities, the waiting time is one of the longest in many years. Although the waiting time in 2019/20 has been reduced from 168 months in 2018/19 to 123.6 months, it still has to wait for more than 10 years. As for hostel services for the severely and moderately mentally handicapped, there are still waiting for 160.5 months and 144.3 months respectively. That said, if parents are under pressure to take care of them, due to the long waiting time, waiting hostel services will not be able to help immediately.

As mentioned above, they need a long waiting time, and their daily habits (such as eating habits, interests) and personal behavior problems (if any) have been deeply formed. If after ten to twenty years, they are required to re-adapt to a new life, this may cause them to have a negative impact. What I need to point out is that people with intellectual disabilities have limited abilities, short learning continuity, poor memory, low application skills, weak learning motivation, and weak understanding; some mentally handicapped people have behavior problems (such as losing their temper to attract others' attention). If we regard the process of residential care as the final solution to the pressure of parents' care, we will undoubtedly transfer the pressure to the staff working in nursing homes and centres for the disabled. In Hong Kong, relevant resources will be allocated to DAC cum Hostel. In this paper, we are just focusing on occupational stress for staff in the DAC.

### **Problem formulation**

Occupational stress factors affecting direct service providers in Day Activities Centre (DAC) and the coping strategies of the service providers?

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will be answered in this study:

1. What are the occupational stress factors affecting direct service providers in Day Activities Centre (DAC)?
2. What are the coping strategies used by the service providers?

### **Research Objectives**

The following research objectives will be achieved in this study:

- To outline the impact of occupational stress in DAC.
- To identify the stressors for direct service providers from theoretical and empirical studies.
- To recommend any practices that can help to mitigate work-related stress in this setting.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The established literature acknowledges the short-comings of traditional Human Resource Management (HRM) practices, as they mainly focus on improving organizational efficiency, ignoring the long-term well-being of the employees. However, in western, scholars found that many health and social service professionals required close contact with service users. This kind of professional interaction often causes strong emotional feelings and creates pressure on employees. In common practice, organizations always focus on the emotions of service users but the service providers are always absent. By surveying the literature, it is easier to find the occupation stress related research in hospital or mental health settings, however, there is nothing related to DAC setting, a one which is a specific setting in Hong Kong.

#### **The definition of stress**

The definition of stress generally includes two parts: pressure factor and pressure response. Stress factor can be said to be a source of stress. Simply put, it is one or a series of events that cause stress. All aspects of life have been profoundly affected. These effects can be short-term or long-term. At the same time, it will also cause some physical and psychological reactions that require us to deal with it. Therefore, all events in life can be a stress factor. The stress response is that only after a life event occurs, it will have many internal effects on the individual, such as his thoughts about the event (is it stressful, can he handle it, etc.), emotional changes (anxiety, Melancholy, anger, fear, etc.), physiological responses (heartbeat, breathing, endocrine, etc.) and behavioral responses (seeking resources, roaring, escape, etc.), etc., these can all be called stress responses, but among them The most studied and most thorough is the physiological response, because it is related to many physical diseases. Studies have found that under many critical events, in order to be able to save our lives, our body will quickly trigger a series of physiological changes to respond quickly, and most of these changes point in the same direction. Consume the energy of the body to convert it into muscle strength. Therefore, the physiological response to stress is generally called the “fight-or-flight” response. So the definition of stress is the interaction and combination of stress factors and stress responses.



### **The definition of occupational stress**

There is a western literature finding about the sources of stress and satisfaction in employees' work identified by day-care and hostel staff in mental health settings and they are role overload, lack of client progress, role ambiguity and violence which are classified as stressors. Other than that, staff satisfaction is affected by client progress, team membership, salary or working hours. (E Moore, RA Ball and L Kuipers, 1992) Although we don't need to find the independent or dependent variable in qualitative research, the above literature research may be a hint to prepare the interview guide.

Occupational pressure is derived from pressure, which means that when people face work-related incidents, the reaction that is triggered generally includes all life and work matters in the scope of work pressure. In response to work pressure, there are subjective and perceptually positive and negative response states in the requirements, restrictions, and opportunities for the individual to cooperate with the environment (Martin & Schermerhorn, 1983). Regardless of positive or negative stress events, the resulting stress response can be beneficial or harmful. Therefore, the relevant literature is used to discuss the different effects of the positive and negative sides of work pressure, which are summarized as follows: (1) The positive impact of work pressure: Moderate pressure will make people challenge stimuli, stimulate fighting spirit, and treat conflicts and setbacks as tests. Without such pressure, individuals will lack motivation and no positive creativity. Huber pointed out in 1981 that when work pressure increases, its work performance will also increase, but after reaching a certain level, if it continues to increase, work performance will decrease on the contrary.

(2) Negative effects of work pressure: Robbins proposed in 2001 that work pressure can affect physical, psychological, and behavioral symptoms, among which physical symptoms include headaches, high blood pressure, stomach acid and heart disease and other uncomfortable symptoms; psychological symptoms include anxiety, Depression, low self-esteem, and reduced job satisfaction; behavioral symptoms include productivity changes, absenteeism, and turnover, and the resulting attitudes are increased absenteeism, high turnover, reduced output, reduced quality, and interpersonal relationships bad, frequent work safety accidents, etc. Therefore, work

pressure may not only cause physical harm, but also have various negative effects on organizations and members (Xie & Johns, 1995). It not only causes discomfort for employees, but also reduces job satisfaction, and even affects organizational commitment, resulting in an increase in turnover intention and turnover rate.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Interpretive paradigm adopted in this qualitative study, which aims at understanding the impact of the occupational stress factors affecting direct service providers in Day Activities Centre (DAC) and their coping strategies of the service providers.

Interpretive paradigm is able to understand the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience, it also seeks explanation within the realm of individual consciousness and subjectivity (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). At the same time, qualitative interview is adopted by this qualitative study. We can gain insights into or understand opinions, attitudes, experiences, processes, behaviors, or predictions (Rowley, 2012). Through the interview, we can see the proposed work pressure is the subjective and environmental of the staff involves different ideas, which are based on different external factors (such as organizational culture, structure and policies) and internal factors (such as the ability of the staff to cope). The interaction of these factors can be studied and analyzed.

#### **Recruitment:**

The researcher invited direct care givers in the DAC setting. Researcher defined direct service providers in DAC are Centre-in-charge, social workers, nurse, welfare workers, front-line care workers and personal care workers.

#### **Informants**

Interviews were conducted in Hong Kong and took place at the informants' offices or places they prefer. In view of the epidemic situation, researchers conducted telephone interviews as necessary. Researcher applied typical case sampling and purposive sampling in this research which recruited those direct service providers in this interview in DAC setting. Their responsibilities are administration, nursing, caring for the handicapped, and providing training for the handicapped.

#### **Measurement Tool**

The study employed semi-structured qualitative interviews to discover the relationship between work stress and coping stress of those 8 staff. Some division of responsibilities needs to be explained here. For example, the center-in-charge (IC) is

responsible for the day-to-day administration of the center, while the social worker assists IC, provides counseling service, monitors the service and supervises subordinates. Nurses handle the nursing work at the center. Welfare workers provide training services to upgrade the skills of the handicapped. Frontline workers are assistants to welfare workers and are required to support the work of welfare workers. Personal care workers assist nurses in caring for people with disabilities. The interview questionnaire is on Appendix B. The semi-structured interview session lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Respondents were asked to express their stress levels using a numerical score, a widely used measure. Respondents chose numbers that reflected their opinion or intensity of stress. In addition, although the pre-set question content could not be found in the literature, the researcher designed the existing question content with reference to the conclusion.

### **Procedures**

In this study, a face to face semi-structured qualitative interview is adopted to gather the data from those 8 informants. Because of the epidemic, interview sessions were conducted by phone to ensure the confidentiality of informants were completely protected. 8 interview sessions were conducted by the researcher during March and it lasted approximately from 20-30 minutes. One of the considerations for the researcher is that it would decrease the willingness of the informants if the time is too long. Those qualitative interview sessions were held respectively in order to protect the privacy of those informants. The researcher stated that the content of this conversation would be recorded and the interviewee is asked if they agree (by phone). After getting their consent, the researcher started to record. All dialogues were recorded by audio recorders for further analysis purposes. The interview aims at discovering the sources of the occupational stress as well as the coping skills with that. There is no fixed assumption of the subject because it is expected to fill the gap of relevant research and point out the importance of this issue. As a result, the study should be able to explore how they deal with their occupational stress from a DAC setting.

### **Analysis**

The interview dialogues were transcribed before data analysis. Thematic analysis is adopted by this study for data analysis. Scholar Lapadat (2010) point out that, the thematic analysis is a system approach for the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning; coding and classifying data, usually textual, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by finding commonalities, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles.

**Ethical Issues and Confidentiality:**

The researcher would ensure confidentiality and that written informed consent is obtained from the informants or asked for consent before starting a record. The informants can withdraw at any time during the interview process. An information sheet was designed so that the informants knew exactly what they had consented to. They had a choice of the venue for the interview. Ethics approval was sought from the University's Ethics Committee.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

This study adopted typical case sampling and purposive sampling, which recruited informants with certain conditions, there are the details: 1) Centre-in-charge (social work background), 2) Enrolled nurse, 3) Welfare worker, 4) Front-line workers and 5) Personal Care Workers. Their average seniority is more than ten years. The researcher used 0 as the lowest score and 5 as the highest score to understand the stress index of the informants. Their average stress score was 3.75. Scholars designed a stress at work model which is more specific in identifying five major categories of occupational stress and lack of organizational support in the workplace and those categories are: (1) pressures intrinsic to the job; (2) the employee's role in the organization; (3) interpersonal relationships at work; (4) limitations in career development; and (5) organizational structure and climate. (Cooper & Marshall, 1976; Marshall & Cooper, 1979) The following are the sources of occupational stress from this interview.

**The following table(s) is to present the characteristics and score of each informant**

Informant	Code	Position	Stress Score
1	C1	Enrolled Nurse	5
2	C2	Personal Care Worker	3
3	C3	Frontline Worker	4
4	C4	Centre-in-charge	4
5	C5	Welfare worker	3
6	C6	Welfare worker	4
7	C7	Welfare worker	4
8	C8	Personal Care Worker	3

## **Findings 1: Sources of Work Stress - Expectation management**

### **4.1 Expectation for self**

Everyone has expectations, and these expectations can originate from individuals, families, organizations, societies, and even laws. Informants have expectations for the training they provide, and they expect service users to improve their abilities through their planned training. From the interview, it is not difficult for us to find relevant claims. Informants C2 and C5 shared the similar circumstances:

“I think the most challenging job is to educate them (service users). Because we have standards in training, the goal is to want them to learn one thing or skill. Sometimes we think they can do it or grasp it, but that’s not the case, so sometimes we have to adjust ourselves. It’s a source of stress.” (2, C2)

Due to the gap between reality and expectations, some employees thought about it after the time passed and lowered their expectations.

“I believe that I provide training to trainees, and my best hope is to succeed. And through training to improve their skills or change their behavior or some of their vices. However, the expectations I set seemed to be too high, and I sometimes asked myself, “Is it realistic?” If the results fell short of expectations, I would be under pressure.”(18, C5)

From the above dialogue, it is not difficult to find that there is a gap between the training provided by the staff and the actual results. When workers have high expectations for work practices, but the results are not as expected, this may be related to the ability of the client and the degradation they face. This was an unexpected situation and created stress for the staff. Other than that, some staff with supervisory responsibilities also face the same situation when providing training to their subordinates which is related to the quality of service, if they can’t meet the standard, it will create indirect pressure. Informants C1 reported that:

“One of my pressures comes from providing training. Because I am the only one in charge of nursing work in the center, I need to provide nursing training to all my colleagues. The pressure is that everyone has different learning abilities, and it takes a lot of time to teach. If I teach poorly or they fail to meet the standards, it will affect the people we serve in disguise. So I think this aspect is more difficult.” (3, C1)

From what they shared, the researcher found that there is no official training for the new staff. C6 joined the team 6 months ago as a welfare worker but she didn't have any training which related to understanding the clients, handling their behavior problems, administrative work and so on. It causes a source of stress for some people due to the lack of personal coping, which leads to the need for other colleagues to help deal with it together. Informant C6 point out that:

“I will give 4 marks to represent my stress level, and I am worried that the students will have emotional ups and downs because of my mishandling. What I feel very sorry for is that if I am not able to deal with clients' emotional problems, when their emotional problems arise, other colleagues need to be responsible for helping me to deal with it. For sure, all of them need to help me, so it's a lot of pressure.” (9, C6)

This shows that when workers are faced with different expectations and unexpected results, they all experience stress. These expectations may arise from workers themselves, their colleagues, service users, and work outcomes.

## **Findings 2: Sources of Work Stress - Administrative and Supervisory Styles**

### **4.2.1 Inter-departmental coordination**

Everyone faces difficulties at work, and when these difficulties arise, administrative measures and supervisory measures can often be used to alleviate problems or mediate. If not addressed, it will make the staff become negative. In the known literature, “administrative work” increases the pressure on staff. But in this study, the “administrative management and supervisory style” that informants were referring to was precisely the failure to deal with existing pressures. Informants believed that, according to the current situation, the center and the dormitory were two different



departments. Two differences in-charge are responsible for different management. Inter-departmental coordination, job ambiguity, and even departmental shirks of responsibility are stressing staff. In addition, whether the supervisor can provide appropriate supervision to relieve the pressure and emotions of the staff, and identify the source of the problem also becomes a pressure and challenge for the staff.

When a subordinate faces a problem, if the supervisor chooses to avoid or passively accept the problem, it will affect morale. In terms of inter-departmental collaboration, there is considerable responsibility for coordination with the department supervisor. C1 stressed that:

“I think the deep-rooted grievances between the dormitory and the center are precisely the fact that the senior management did not face up to the problems accumulated by the two departments. Coupled with the ambiguity of the positioning of the two units and the jobs they are responsible for, there will be cases of shirk responsibility in disguise. I usually have to deal with it. Dorm colleagues often shirk their work to the center. I think the high-level executives should declare the status of the two units. Are we a DAC Cum hostel or just a pair up unit? The reason why I feel that we can't solve it is precisely because my bosses feel that the current problems cannot be solved. Based on this, other colleagues feel that it is ineffective to report to the IC. I think the two directors should define the relationship and positioning of the two departments. To have clear guidelines for each person, each position, and each responsibility, can reduce the pressure and conflict between everyone.”  
(16, C1)

#### **4.2.2 Expectation for supervision**

In addition, a new finding of this study is that informants have certain expectations for supervisors to supervise. When they encounter a problem, they often expect their boss to help solve it. However, according to their answers, the center does not have constant supervision, and the superiors only meet with colleagues through the annual report. C3 has encountered conflicts at work, and the following is her sharing:

“I once encountered a situation, when I reported to the social worker, I hoped she could help solve the problem. However, she failed to help me in the end. I think some colleagues are very unreasonable. The social worker has helped me, but I don’t think she can handle it. So at that time, I found the director of the center. I’ve reached a tipping point, and if it doesn’t work out, I need to see a psychiatrist. Because it really bothers me. If the director of the center could not solve it at that time, I would really find another way by myself. Conversely, if I am incapable of dealing with service users, I will quit my job. Or if I fail to meet the requirements of my boss, I will give up. But now it’s not my ability, it’s just that my colleagues have made me emotional, so there is no other way.” (22, C3)

In these types of units, the administrative and supervisory style becomes a key factor in that the social worker has greater authority to manage the operation of the organization. The following dialogue can prove the importance for the instruction by the person with a supervisory position.

“Maybe my position must follow the supervisor’s instructions. That is, social workers or nurses, they will be more familiar with the operation, and if they think it is good, we will follow.” (13, C2)

“I think the most important thing in the operation of an organization is the distribution of work, which is an important link. If everyone is of the same rank, of course, there is no need to divide labor carefully. But at least not too much deviation. If the division is too large, the balance cannot be achieved. I would wonder why we do the same labor but you do less work and I do more than you. In our service, we have divided light, medium and high service users, it is best for everyone to share. Everyone will be comfortable. And those jobs are appointed by the social worker and nurse.” (24, C3)

In the above sentence, it can prove that if the administration is chaotic and the staff with supervisory responsibilities fails to perform their functions, the subordinates will not be able to relieve the pressure caused by the work.

### **Findings 3: Sources of Work Stress - Collaboration with colleagues**

#### **4.3.1 Bad Communication with colleagues**

In a work environment, we often need to collaborate with different colleagues. However, if there is a problem with cooperation, it often hinders the progress of the work and creates pressure. In the work environment, even if you are willing to communicate, your colleagues may not be willing to communicate with you. But if you don't communicate, there are often after-effects at work. Therefore, informants choose to communicate. C2 shared that:

“I think people's opinions and perspectives diverge a lot. For example, colleagues will have different ideas, maybe I think this will be better, but other colleagues will think another method will be better. So there will be pressure, and I understand that everyone's starting point is for the good of service users. But everyone needs to communicate, so I will have this pressure. On the contrary, when it comes to caring, I will not be under pressure, because I have been doing it for 20 years and have mastered caring skills very well.” (11, C2)

#### **4.3.2 Bad collaboration with colleagues**

If the situation is more serious, it may cause the employees to have negative emotions. C1 and C3 stated something related to their emotion.

“I think in addition to training colleagues, the biggest pressure is to cooperate with dormitory colleagues. Because when everyone faces conflict, they only do it for themselves. When everyone's ideas are different, everyone's starting point for work is different. So disputes often arise. You will get more and more frustrated.” (11-12, C1)

“In addition to the students, the stress at work will be the co-workers getting along with them instead. While everyone is different, I feel like I'm under pressure in this area. For example, when you go to work, the work assigned by your boss is actually really easy. The most difficult part is getting along with or collaborating with colleagues. Some colleagues at the same level who are always senior are unreasonable. I've worked for six years, but it's the same situation where the wild system is the most stressful. I think at work, it is

enough to mainly serve our service users. Our main thing is to take care of the students to ensure safety, and it is enough to complete the task of the boss so that it will not cause me stress. There must be a lot of pressure between colleagues. To be honest, I was really happy when I did it before. I used to suffer from insomnia, but later the agency intervened, so that I could return with peace of mind. Other than that, the other side has improved. Decisive time has really thought about whether I need to go to a psychiatrist. The relationship with colleagues can really make me feel so emotional.” (14, C3)

#### **Finding 4: Sources of Work Stress - Characteristics of service users**

##### **4.4.1 No language ability**

As most service users do not have the ability to speak, staff may need to spend more time understanding their habits and expressions, C6 shared their difficulties:

“Another challenge is the way of getting along with students, because different students have different personalities, and it takes a little time and a deeper understanding of them. This is a challenge, and it is necessary to run in with the burial. Find a way of getting along that works for everyone.” (4, C6)

“Because some users are disabled and do not have the ability to express themselves, we often have to take them to the washroom or provide PE training. Meanwhile, we need to pay more attention to them, so they will have a certain burden in taking care of them. Sometimes we’re too busy, and it takes double the time. For example, I provide training, but some of them are on the other side who want to go to the washroom. I would ask a colleague to accompany them to the toilet. If they are unwilling to drink water or eat. In disguise, I have to spend more time understanding what they will do.” (15, C6)

##### **4.4.2 Abilities diversity**

In the care of the mentally handicapped, due to their limited self-care ability, many workers need to improve their skills through providing training. Some service users may experience stress on their caregivers due to their aging, their physical decline and their levels of disability vary widely. Facing this situation, staff need to spend much more time for planning. C8 shared their difficulties:

“For example, when I cook, I have to subdivide each step according to their different abilities. It is expected that through the division of labor, the students will be able to make successful products. Sometimes one person has to take care of more than a dozen students, assigning them to different ministries according to their abilities. We also need to take into account the safety of equipment. There will be pressure in the process, because we have to check whether there will be any danger in the process.” (4, C8)

### **Finding 5: Coping strategies**

#### **4.5.1 Seek help / advice from supervisor**

This is very different from the known literature. It is known from the previous literature that when the employee’s stress index is high, it will be accompanied by a series of negative conditions. This includes: leaving, absenteeism, loss of motivation for work, etc. Some informants believed that the intervention of superiors was still one of the useful ways to relieve stress when faced with stress and this is a more positive response.

“Of course, we will find the senior management of the organization. If something unpleasant happens to us, we will contact the social worker immediately and report it to him. Tell the social worker how he can help me. After so many years, social workers actually helped.” (19, C3)

“As my boss said, it is very important to build a positive working relationship with students. So I try my best to have a good relationship with my service users.” (11, C6)

#### **4.5.2 Make good use of other resources of the organization**

In addition to the help of superiors, informants consider other resources in the organization to be equally important. Informants understand that the intervention of social workers and nurses alone cannot change the status quo, and they agree that they need to seek assistance from other professionals in the institution.

“For example, in muscle training, our trainees are getting older, and we often consult with physical therapists to discuss ways to improve muscle performance or prevent falls. There are many therapists of different occupations in the organization to help our welfare workers and to help our students together. Hope to use different professions or different methods to improve their abilities in this aspect. Because I have frequent contact with physical therapists, I have a better grasp of how to help students improve muscle performance. Besides, they all have different specialties and will teach us the knowledge. They will also help them to find interesting electronic equipment to enhance their interest in sports. Usually, students will have so many different choices that they are not the same as the bicycles left in the past.” (4-6, C7)

#### **4.5.3 Discuss with colleagues in a positive manner**

In terms of collaboration, the informants believe that it is necessary to establish a good communication model.

“I think the explanation is helpful. First of all, my colleagues will understand what I need to do, and they are willing to try it. I myself will tell my colleagues what I expect, and when I see my colleagues, they will follow my request.” (17, C5)

“I spent a lot of time with my colleagues to let them know my view. At the same time, I want to know their opinion and enhance our communication. Because it will be worse if there is no communication in the team.” (14, C7)

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

In the constructed literature, whether in Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W. B., & Leiter, M. P. (2001) study, work stress and burnout have been found to be related. This can lead to a cascade of negative impacts, including resignation. In Moore & Cooper's research, scholars use "big three" to describe the source of occupational stress of mental health setting, which are interaction with work, family and individuals. Those stressors in mental health settings were about their work hours (included work shift), interrupt family times, time pressure, practice administrative work, the patient-staff ratio, job attitude, relations with staff and so on. Since the DAC unit is an independent unit, its opening hours are 0830-1700, and staff only need to go to work according to the opening hours of this center every day. These fixed working hours have not affected the daily private life of the staff, therefore, there is no such pressure as the shift system, working hours, family, and administrative work as pointed out in the literature in this research. According to the findings, we can only see "big two" rather than "big three" and they are work and individuals.

However, from this study, it was found that some of the stressors were consistent with the literature, especially in "expectation for self and other parties" and "relationships with colleagues". According to the research from a scholar Shinn et al. (1984), 34% reported that the professional helping role should be one of the sources of work stress. This referred to primarily to feeling inadequate relative to one's own expectations, feeling stress to cure clients. In this study, the informants' job is mainly to provide training for the service users, so as to improve their self-care ability or even physical fitness. However, among the people they serve, nearly 70% of the service users are over 50 years old and they are from moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. People with intellectual disabilities are known to degenerate faster than others. They have greater difficulties in learning language, knowledge and skills, and require special teaching and training methods. In terms of personality, they are generally more innocent and straightforward, but some people are emotionally unstable and will vent their emotions through some kind of rude behavior, such as yelling, pushing and

hitting things, etc. (Wai Ji Christian Service, 2021) This also affects situations where professional roles fail to deliver results.

### **Discussion 1 : Expectation management & Characteristics of service users**

From the interviews, we learned that the center only relies on peer sharing and guidance. Apart from the work of nurses, it does not provide appropriate training to enable frontline staff to understand the characteristics, needs and challenges of service users. These misunderstandings often lead to misjudgment by employees and a gap with reality. If the center can have a complete training system and provide regular supervision, it may be able to effectively help employees adjust their expectations and deepen their understanding of service users. Supervision includes some interrelated functions and responsibilities to make sure the service outcome, competent and ethical service in social welfare setting. Service providers can evaluate and adjust which can respond to the change of the service users. They are especially facing the service user degradation problem. Regular supervision sessions can effectively deal with staff misunderstandings in real time because it can provide three angles which are educational support, administrative support and supportive to the staff which can decrease stress to encourage self-efficacy, a platform to focus on professional concerns and relates to some special cases and more focus on the functioning on the job and work assignment. For what social worker registration board recommended are as follows: 1) The functioning of administrative support is a management function, which includes setting service goals and their priorities, clarifying roles, planning and assignment of work, work reviews and assessments, and worksheets for the supervisor's current commitment and accountability. 2) The educational function implements professional values, imparting knowledge and training practical skills, all of which are Social work is essential for the implementation of effective professional practice. Educational functions also include strengthening social workers' self-discipline, energy saving and sensitivity. Therefore, supervision with educational function should be affirmed as the professional development of social work core elements. 3) The support function enhances the supervisor's ability to deal with work-related matters while developing attitudes and emotions that help optimize job performance. In addition, it can sustain employee morale, and make supervisors aware of professional self-worth and opportunities for hiring institutions and professions create a sense of belonging.



## **Discussion 2 : Administrative and Supervisory Styles**

One of the findings from this research is that informants' stressors come from "administrative management and supervisory style". This is significantly different from the existing literature. In the past, scholars have identified that "excessive administrative work or paperwork" would increase staff stress, but in this study, the informants believe that they expect to handle the source of stress through administrative measures and supervisory intervention. Although a different leadership approach has different implications on the interaction between leaders and followers, scholar Glinow & McShane (2017) pointed out that a leader is responsible to assist the subordinates by influencing, motivating, and enabling others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations. Administrative matters have always been closely related to those in power, and this extends to the style of supervision. In a social welfare setting, a social worker is responsible for providing direct supervision to their subordinates with applying social work theory, skills, knowledge and applicable ethical content in the fieldwork. Both the supervisor and supervisee are responsible to carry out the role in the collaborative process. That said, social worker cannot escape the responsibilities.

However, it is worth noting that when staff are faced with difficulties and problems, their superiors often appear later or do not intervene. And when some misunderstandings or problems arise, if it can't deal with properly, the situation is often aggravated. Especially when the coordination between departments is not smooth, if the supervisors feel that this is a foregone conclusion and cannot be solved, it will affect the morale.

## **Discussion 3: Collaboration with colleagues**

According to the interviewees, there were conflicts with senior colleagues due to division of labor, which required the intervention of superiors. Conflict is a process in which one party perceives that his or her interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party. It always occurs when there is competition or mutual interference among people. Scholars (McGrath, 1984; Kabanoff, 1985) found that even if most of the groups, group members agreed with the individual or group's goals, they would still have conflict. They also found that it is very hard to work together effectively for the human being even if they had common goals. These

conflicts are based on how they try to cooperate or coordinate their efforts. Meanwhile, failure to communicate, co-workers' value, work approach or even their personality are also the factors which affect the conflict.

In such units, social workers can actually play an early role in arranging work and assisting in the management of day-to-day processes to prevent conflict. According to the interviewees, interviews with social workers are only available every year when the appraisal is signed, and there is no regular supervision period. When misunderstandings arise or staff would like to voice out their opinions, they do not seem to be effectively resolved in a timely manner. The sources of conflict for institutions have been briefly explained above.

#### **Discussion 4 : Coping strategies**

Scholars Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (2011) pointed out that the coping skills can be divided as problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Avoidance was a common behavior in the formed research, they would process cognitive, or emotional activity directed away from a threat and even denial or resign. Bruce Compas developed the Responses to Stress model which pointed out three dimensions for coping strategies and they are voluntary coping, responses of engagement and primary control coping strategies. In fact, humans are ready to deal with stress but the reaction to stress can also represent a vulnerability. Stress can overwhelm us and damage people. Informants responded positively to stress at work. For example, when faced with conflicts between colleagues, they tend to seek the intervention of social workers and IC to resolve them. When the division of labor is uneven, they will express their opinions to let the social workers know their subordinates' thoughts or clarify misunderstandings. When faced with difficulties beyond their control (such as service user degradation), they will seek other professional assistance. These positive response differ from the literature. Furthermore, the average seniority of the informants was 10 years or more, and the researchers did not find them to deal with problems or work in a negative way during the process. However, when they encounter a problem, they expect to seek a solution in a legitimate, normal and positive way. It is worth considering that if the center staff treat stress with a negative attitude, the impact on service users will be unimaginable.

### **Contribution for study and Implication to social work practice**

The importance of occupational stress for staff working in mental health setting has always been underestimated in the workplace of the social welfare sector. As organizational management speaks, employees are internal customers, and service users are external customers. If they are not satisfied, how can they provide good service to our service users? That means, both have different needs and we cannot ignore them. Hence, the following recommendations are the contribution and implication to our social work practice which we should stay alert.

#### a) Strengthen the administrative role of the center

Administration is a problem-solving process and a process that enables individuals and groups to function more effectively. It can both focus on the future of the institution and create rather than routinely use knowledge and skills. From the above interviewees' conversations, management's role is rarely seen, or only management is seen at a later time when the problem occurred. This may be the key to the worsening of the problem. Regular staff meetings are held to keep colleagues informed of the center's dynamics. In particular, colleagues need to be informed about the coping strategies of their service users which can be one of the expectation management for the staff. In addition, administrative roles include external coordination. In the regular work, the staff of the center will interact with the dormitory. If colleagues can cooperate without hindrance, of course, this role does not need to be too strong. However, some interviewees reported that conflicts between departments were caused by the work practices or attitudes of colleagues. To this end, the two departments should have clear guidelines setting out their responsibilities and powers.

#### b) Establish a regular supervision system

In view of the above situation, the researcher suggested that both the center and the dormitory should establish a sound supervision system. Regularly monitor the workload and practical situation of the supervisees, review and discuss service results, express opinions, and discuss the working relationship with other co-workers in the organization. Due to the above-mentioned work environment, the main source of stress comes from the deterioration of the ability of service users, resulting in failure of training results and communication and conflicts among colleagues. If supervisory work is effective, it should be able to respond to the demands of informants. Since

there are only 2 social workers and 1 nurse in the center, they can share part of the supervision work according to the nature of their work. Through regular meetings with colleagues, early identification of employees' work situation, difficulties in implementation, and risk management (with regard to colleagues' stress and potential conflicts) facilitates early intervention.

c) Establish an inter-departmental collaboration system

In addition to a clear division of labor, coordination between units is equally important. They need to establish a good communication and collaboration platform to negotiate on day-to-day operations.

d) To promote mental health

In response to the government's "SHALL WE TALK" promotion. Implement the "Talk with Me" co-worker support program in the center. Let each colleague have a person to talk to. When encountering pressure, dissatisfaction or even happy things in daily or work, they can have a person to talk to. In addition, social workers can regularly strengthen the promotion of mindfulness or organize related activities to help colleagues develop a positive attitude.

e) Team building

Regular staff team days are held to allow co-workers to unite and unite through games, sharing and regular gatherings to increase everyone's understanding.

**Limitation of this study**

There are some limitations of this research project. First of all, the sample size is relatively small and those informants in this research project cannot reflect the majority situation in the DAC setting of the social welfare industry in Hong Kong. Although eight informants kindly provided a lot of information to express their experience and feelings, the small sample size limited the diversities of content as well as the representativeness.

Secondly, due to the outbreak of the epidemic in the institution, most of the informants need to be interviewed in the office during the rest time by phone, which may affect the informants' openness to answer questions.

### **Improvement**

Since the researcher planned to ask the informants respondents to fill out a depression scale to understand their depression and stress situation before the visit, but the outbreak of the epidemic in the center affected the schedule and process of the informants, the researcher could send it electronically in advance.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **REFLECTION**

Everyone faces professional stress, and everyone copes differently when they experience stress. Some people will deal with it head-on, some people will choose to avoid it, and some people will accept it leniently. What we cannot deny is that when the pressure is not resolved, we will face a series of negative situations. In people-oriented service work, in addition to caring about the mental health of service users, we cannot underestimate the mental health of service providers. Since this will affect the implementation of the service, which is not good for the service user. The researcher also has the responsibilities of a supervisory role in their day-to-day work. In this study, the researchers realized the importance of supervision, and reminded themselves that they need to do a good job of supervision, identify the work pressure of colleagues through related work, and intervene as soon as possible.

*(7527words)*

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## Appendix A –Cover Letter to Informants

宏恩基督教學院  
社會工作學院

研究題目：影響展能中心直接服務提供者的職業壓力因素及其應對策略  
參與研究同意書

本人 \_\_\_\_\_ 備悉上述研究計劃目的在 (研究目的)。本人亦知悉此研究負責人來自宏恩基督教學院之社會工作學士學位課程學生關長輝。本人知悉所提供的資料將根據香港法例第 486 章《個人資料(私隱)條例》加以保護。而此研究所得的資料將會被錄音及可能被用作日後的研究及發表, 但該研究及發表中亦不會包含能夠識別本人身份的細節。本人的私隱權利會得以保留, 本人的個人資料不會被公開。研究人員已向本人清楚解釋列在所附研究程序上的資料, 本人明瞭當中涉及的利益及風險; 本人自願參與研究項目, 並同意參與提供個人意見。本人知悉本人有權就程序的任何部分提出疑問, 並有權隨時退出而不受任何懲處。

參與者簽署：

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家長或監護人 (如適用) 姓名：

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## Appendix B – Interviewing Guide

1. 請描述一下現時你擔任崗位的職責。
2. 在你剛描述的工作中，你認為哪項是最具挑戰性的工作？
3. 你如何應對這些挑戰？
4. 在你剛描述的工作中，哪項是最易掌握的工作？
5. 承上題，為什麼？
6. 綜合上述情況，如果用0-5去反映自己的工作壓力指數(0為最低分，5為最高分)，你會給予什麼分數？
7. 你給予上述評分的原因是？
8. 面對工作壓力時，你認為需要什麼支援？/ 你現在有什麼支援支持你？
9. 這些最具挑戰性的工作，有沒有因為服務對象(服務設定)而加重負擔？
10. 面對上述所講的情況，你認為什麼方法 / 支持能有助自己處理這些情況？