Volunteer Service as a Coping Strategy for Social Workers Against Professional Burnout

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VOLUNTEER SERVICE AS A COPING STRATEGY
FOR SOCIAL WORKERS AGAINST PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work
in the
School of Social Work

by
Jessy Jean Salloum
Francesca Maria Augusta Twohy-Haines
June 2019
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ABSTRACT

Burnout is a prominent issue among the social work profession. Methods to mitigate the effects of burnout have received considerable attention in social work research. This study focuses on a potential method of coping with burnout; volunteerism. While literature is scarce regarding the effects of volunteerism on burnout rates among social workers, studies in related fields such as nursing, public-sector public administrators, and nonprofit workers indicate that volunteerism has potential benefits against burnout. This study’s purpose is to determine whether involvement in volunteer service is related to lower rates of burnout among social workers. This quantitative study uses data from a non-random purposive sample of 442 social workers who completed a survey posted on the social work board of an online forum, Reddit and the networking site, LinkedIn. Survey questions captured participants’ demographic, volunteerism, and burnout rates using the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS). Analysis of the data led to findings which do not support the original hypothesis of this study or the available literature. A plausible explanation is, that for social workers, the volunteer work is so like their profession that engaging in volunteerism does not provide the respite necessary for recovery from the effects of burnout.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge our families and friends who have supported us throughout our MSW journey. We would also like to acknowledge our professors and other faculty for their support and guidance, especially Dr. Lizano, our amazing research advisor.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Formulation

Social workers are often expected to take on many professional roles such as providing mental health services for members of a variety of vulnerable populations, policy advocacy, and management of human service organizations, to name a few. The demanding nature of the field also heightens social workers’ risk of professional burnout (Calitz, Roux, & Strydom, 2014; Kim & Stoner, 2008; Newell & MacNiel, 2010). Professional burnout refers to the exhaustion experienced by workers which stem from long-term contact with vulnerable populations and various work-stressors (Kim, Ji, & Kao 2009; Maslach & Jackson, 1982; Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Social workers are commonly subjected to work-related stressors such as high caseloads, excessive paperwork, staff shortages, safety concerns, infrequent and poor quality of supervision, and inadequate compensation, leading to burnout (Calitz et al., 2014; Kim, et al. 2009; Kim & Stoner, 2008).

While professional burnout has been a significant concern in a wide range of professions, those in helping professions, like social workers, are believed to experience burnout more often (Heaslip, 2013; Maslach & Jackson, 1982; Ray, Wong, White & Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). Social workers who are experiencing professional burnout may have increased anxiety, compassion fatigue, conflicts in relationships, and even vicarious traumatization (Ray et al.,
Furthermore, professional burnout can be detrimental to not only the social worker, but also to the quality of services for clients (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). These effects are further exacerbated when coupled with the lack of effective coping skills to endure the daily emotional and psychological toll that comes with the social work profession (Kim, et al., 2009; Newell & MacNeil, 2010).

Social workers are also at risk of adopting maladaptive coping skills such as suppressing emotions and detaching themselves from their work (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Professional burnout impacts practice at both the micro and macro levels of social work practice. High levels of professional burnout among social workers also correlate with higher rates of staff turnover, which leaves agencies working frequently to fill positions and possibly disrupt client services (Calitz et al., 2014; McFadden, Campbell & Taylor, 2014).

Self-care and utilization of personalized coping strategies have consistently been cited as effective tools to combat stress and professional burnout (Calitz et al., 2014; Kim et. al, 2009, Newell and MacNeil, 2010; Ray et al., 2013). Coping strategies act as buffers between social workers and professional burnout. Common coping strategies are individual hobbies such as drawing or reading, or even actions such as taking breaks and participating in social activities (Maslach & Jackson, 1982; Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Even though coping strategies and self-care are, in theory, vastly encouraged within the social work field, they are often not practiced (Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Ray...
et al., 2013; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). While, agencies can also take a proactive role in preventing professional burnout by adopting policies supporting self-care or by maintaining a supportive work environment, social workers are often ultimately left with discovering their own personalized coping strategies (Kim & Stoner, 2008; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). The need for evidence-based coping strategies is apparent in the social work field, and this study focused on one proposed method—volunteering.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to determine whether engaging in volunteerism affects professional burnout among social workers. Like other helping fields, social work is demanding, putting professional social workers at a high risk of professional burnout (Calitz, et al., 2014; Kim & Stoner, 2008; Newell & MacNiel, 2010). Social workers often face adverse work conditions; large caseloads, limitless paperwork, etc., with insufficient resources, support, and access to meaningful supervision to manage the consequential stress and burnout (Calitz et al., 2014; Kim, et al. 2009; Kim & Stoner, 2008). Professional burnout can also have effects on clients as well due to higher turnover rates, inadequate levels of care for the client, and even a complete discontinuation of treatment in general (Calitz et al., 2014; McFadden et al., 2014). This study expands on current research of burnout prevention and coping mechanisms in other related fields.
As a descriptive study, the research method follows a quantitative design. The sample size of the study includes n=442 participants, comprising of both social workers who currently engage in volunteerism along with a comparison group of those who do not. The survey to determine levels of burnout is a modified version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS). The MBI-HSS includes three dimensions, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment of social work professionals. In addition to the MBI-HSS, there are questions on the type of volunteerism (religious, mentorship, nonprofit, etc), as well as frequency and length of volunteering. This research design was chosen because it is the most effective way to collect a large sample at one time. A quantitative approach allows the necessary data to be collected in an efficient manner as a study of this magnitude would have been more difficult to complete in the given allotted time in any other way.

Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

Research is often concerned with the factors which contribute to professional burnout. Given the necessity for more types of coping strategies against burnout, this study instead focuses on a possible method of coping with the effects of professional burnout; participation in volunteer service. Furthermore, findings from this study impact social work practice by determining whether volunteering can be a possible coping method against professional
burnout. Service to others is a value inherent to the social work profession as outlined in the National Association of Social Workers 2018 Code of Ethics (Gibelmal & Sweifach, 2008; NASW, 2018).

Evidence exists which suggests that altruistic activities can be considered a pro-social form of self-care, and thus mitigate the side effects of burnout (Gibelman & Sweifach, 2008; Newell & MacNeil, 2010). From this, it was hypothesized that engagement with volunteer service may benefit social workers by fostering connections and providing an opportunity to take on a new role in the community. Volunteering also allows the social worker to use their unique set of skills in a more relaxed atmosphere with a flexible schedule (Gerber, 2016). Through volunteerism, the social worker is practicing their skills, cultivating supportive relationships, and engaging in a positive and enriching activity (Gerber, 2016; Ramos et al., 2015).

The research question for this project was presented as: does involvement in volunteer service promote better coping with professional burnout among social workers? The original hypothesis of the study was that social workers’ involvement in volunteering benefits coping with professional burnout.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview on research related to burnout in the social work profession including discussion on the factors which lead to burnout, and current evidence-based prevention and prevention strategies. Research on the work-related impacts of volunteerism across social work, and related professions, will also be explored. Lastly, the theories guiding this study’s conceptualization; the Maslach Burnout Inventory and Job Demands-Resources model will be discussed.

Studies on Burnout

Maslach and Jackson (1981) define burnout as a symptom of emotional exhaustion and cynical attitudes which occurs in fields that center around “people-work.” Burnout can be assessed in three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization/cynicism, and diminished personal accomplishment, which are incorporated in the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Human Services Survey (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Additional research has also supported common factors which lead to burnout.

Factors Which Lead to Burnout

In 1997, Maslach and Leiter identified six areas which contribute to burnout: workload, control, rewards, community, fairness, and values (as cited in
Ray, Wong, White, & Heaslip, 2013). Workload is defined as the job requirements of an employee within a set amount of time and resources. Control is the ability of the worker to make their own important decisions and have a sense of professional autonomy, including the opportunity to acquire the needed resources to perform their jobs efficiently. Rewards can be financial, social, or internal recognitions of the worker's contributions. Community reflects on the quality of relationships between supervisors, colleagues, and subordinates. Fairness highlights the level of receptiveness and acceptance within the organization and overall decision-making process. Lastly, values examine the similarity of priorities and values between the organization and the worker (as cited in Ray et al., 2013).

These six main areas of factors of burnout are found at the individual, organizational, and client-level (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). At the individual level, tumultuous relationships with coworkers, difficulty engaging with clients, and personality/coping styles can lead to dissatisfaction within the worker's job and eventually to burnout (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). In the organizational level, factors such as high caseloads, lack of control over policies and procedures, inadequate supervisory support, low compensation, staff shortages, and lack of training can all also lead to professional burnout (Calitz, Roux, & Strydom, 2014; Newell & MacNeil, 2010).
Current Forms of Coping and Preventive Measures

Preventive measures are essential for individuals working in a field that can be mentally taxing. Agency supervisors and administrators play a vital role in preventing professional burnout and turnover rates by cultivating a supportive environment and organizational cohesiveness (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). For instance, implementation of agency training and continuing education opportunities on the topics of burnout and stress can be vital in the worker being able to identify and self-correct early warning signs (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Agencies can also promote self-care, which can prevent burnout, through organizational policies which support engagement in wellness activities (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2008).

Professional self-care is defined as a practice in which workers utilize skills and strategies to manage personal and emotional needs to effectively assist with the needs of their clients (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Forms of self-care include setting realistic goals, taking breaks, receiving sufficient rest, and keeping up with positive relationships outside of the professional workspace as an example of social support (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Other coping strategies include utilizing positive forms of expression such as creative projects, cooking, or outdoor activities (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Many workers also find it beneficial to maintain spiritual connections through church and philanthropic activities, such as volunteering (Newell & MacNeil, 2010).
Social Work and Volunteerism

Volunteerism is regarded as a professional value in the field of social work. Under the National Association of Social Workers’ (NASW) *Code of Ethics* (2017), *service* is named as the first ethical principle of the profession. Furthermore, the NASW recommends that social workers volunteer a portion of their time and skills as pro bono services (NASW, 2017).

Despite the professional emphasis of volunteerism and service, there is little literature social worker as volunteers. This may be due to the lack of social workers who take part in volunteerism, as found in Gibelman and Sweifach’s (2008) exploratory study on social workers’ volunteer participation. The authors’ results indicated that social workers often have volunteered prior to becoming professionals but believe that they give enough time through their jobs. These findings are further corroborated in a study by Lord and Iudice (2011) who sought to determine the habits of social workers in private practice. The authors found that only 37% of these private practitioners reported to participate in volunteer service as part of their ‘social-justice pursuits’ (Lord & Iudice, 2011). Lord and Iudice (2011) further state that these findings may also suggest an overall decline of social worker engagement in volunteerism.

**Studies in Other Professions**

The potential benefits of volunteerism have been a focus of research in other professions such as nursing, public-sector public administrators, and
nonprofit workers. Within these fields, volunteerism attracts workers who have a high motivation to further contribute to society, strengthen their professional skills, develop social support networks, and uphold personal altruistic values (Gerber, 2016; Lee, 2012; Rotolo & Wilson, 2006). Rotolo and Wilson (2006), found that nonprofit and public-sector workers are most likely to volunteer compared to their private-sector counterparts. Similar to Social Work, the nursing profession also encourages volunteer service (Gerber, 2016). Nurses often participate with volunteer opportunities which utilize their professional skills including mentoring, volunteering as patient advocates, or with nonprofit health organizations and nursing associations (Gerber, 2016).

Studies of Volunteerism and Burnout

Research on volunteerism and burnout among social workers is limited; however, a small body of literature related to general workplace health and burnout does exist. Volunteer service, or volunteerism, is an altruistic action during which time, talents, and services are contributed to benefit communities or organizations, without monetary compensation (Gibelman & Sweifach, 2008; Lee, 2012). A study by Rodell (2013) indicated that volunteerism was found to be linked to higher job meaningfulness, and those with initially low job meaningfulness were more likely to seek out volunteer experiences. These findings are further supported Mojza et al.‘s (2010) study, which also found that meaningful volunteer experiences contribute to overall stress recovery from work.
The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) published a list of organizational-level recommendations to improve worksite health, which included supporting employees to volunteer outside the workplace.

Volunteerism has also been attributed to other work-related benefits which can prevent burnout. Ramos et al. (2015) hypothesized that volunteerism can become a psychosocial resource that promotes work-life balance and workers’ overall health. Results of this study indicated that people in the general workforce who volunteer have a greater sense of work-life balance, positive mental health, and less burnout (Ramos et al., 2015). While the authors recommend further research to establish a causational relationship, the findings from Ramos et al. (2015) did demonstrate a link between volunteerism and workplace health and burnout. Given the broad nature of the existing studies, research which targets social workers is necessary to determine whether volunteerism could have similar benefits in preventing burnout among the profession.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

The theories used to address and conceptualize the ideas in this study are the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the Job Demands-Resource Model.

Maslach Burnout Inventory

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981) for use in human service occupations. A modified version of the MBI, known as the MBI-Human Services Survey, or MBI-HSS, is the most
commonly used in research. The MBI-HSS was used in this study as it pertains directly to the field of social work. The MBI-HSS includes three scales; emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment, which together calculates the levels of burnout experienced by an individual (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The emotional exhaustion scale measures a core aspect of burnout, stress. The depersonalization scale expands on the effects of the previous scale by assessing the worker’s engagement with their clients, and whether the practitioner is actively distancing themselves from the engagement process (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The last scale, personal accomplishment, measures how a worker feels towards one’s effectiveness and general attitudes towards their accomplishments (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

The MBI is also used as a tool to examine an individual’s relational transactions in the workplace (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). This model was applied in Kim, Ji, and Kao’s (2011) study where the authors used the MBI to assess levels of burnout amongst social workers and its correlation with physical health. The authors found that workers with a high initial level of burnout eventually experienced more health ailments (Kim et al., 2011). In another study by Brinkborg, Michanek, Hesser, and Berglund’s (2011), the MBI was used to examine the impact of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy on levels of stress and general mental health for Swedish social workers.
Job Demands-Resources Model

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) has been utilized by researchers as a tool to study job stress and job burnout. The JD-R separates working conditions into two categories, job demands and job resources. The model demonstrates that work overload, emotional/physical job demands, and work-home conflicts could all be risk factors for burnout, but that these factors can be relieved by job resources such as job autonomy, social support, and quality of relationship with supervisor (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The JD-R model theorizes that if job demands are high and job resources are low, there is a greater risk of burnout and stress. It also implies that a balance between the two categories leads to greater job satisfaction and higher levels of motivation (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Ramos, Brauchli, Bauer, Wehner, and Hammig (2015) applied the JD-R theory in their study in order to examine the relationship between volunteering and health among the general working population in Switzerland. They concluded that volunteering may have an impact on a worker’s sense of balance and ultimately have a positive impact on health (Ramos et al., 2015). Kim and Stoner (2008) also used the JD-R to study the intersection of role stress, job autonomy, and social support in burnout and turnover rate. They concluded that creating balanced and supportive job conditions are essential in preventing burnout as well as retaining social workers (Kim & Stoner, 2008).
Summary

The focus of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of volunteerism as a coping mechanism for social workers against professional burnout. The Maslach Burnout Inventory and Job Demands-Resources Theory are effective tools in assessing burnout and the role of volunteerism as a resource to attenuate the symptoms of burnout among social workers. Social workers face many challenges in their professional environment, leaving them prone to professional burnout. By focusing on new strategies to cope with burnout, this study adds to the literature on professional burnout in social work practice.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study aims to determine whether social workers’ involvement in volunteerism affects their level of professional burnout. This chapter provides information regarding how this study was conducted. The following sections will be discussed: study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

Study Design

The goal of this study is to determine whether volunteerism affects burnout among social workers. This descriptive study also intends to expand on current research of burnout prevention and coping by utilizing known measures, such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory- Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS) to measure levels of burnout. This study uses a quantitative method for data collection, specifically an online survey. This survey was developed using a modified MBI-HSS to assess emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment of social work professionals. Additionally, questions on the type of volunteer activity and how often participants engage in the activity were also asked.

The methodological strengths to this design include the potential for a wide-variety of participants which can be reached with an online survey format.
Furthermore, online surveys provide a degree of flexibility for completion which can benefit participants who wish to complete the survey at their convenience. Surveys also provide participants the opportunity to report on their experiences in a structured and anonymous manner.

The limitations to using surveys are that response rates could potentially be low, and that there was a risk for responses that would result in outliers during analysis. A survey format is also more rigidly structured than a qualitative interview, which could result in a narrow view of the participant’s experiences. Another limitation with the online survey format lacks the presence of an interviewer who could immediately clarify any questions the participants may have regarding the study, or to observe non-verbal cues stemming from the questions.

Sampling

The sample was obtained through a post on a professional networking site known as LinkedIn, as well as the social work board of an online forum, Reddit, which both solicited participation in the study. The sampling technique used in this study was a self-selecting sample, due to the utilization of an online survey. Potential participants determined whether they fit the requirements outlined including that participants must be current social work professionals who have a Bachelor of Social Work or higher degree in the same field. These criteria were chosen because the most appropriate source of data to answer this study’s
proposed research question would be from social workers who are active in the profession. This study aimed to have a total of 100 participants throughout the data collection period, but ultimately collected a sample size of 442.

Data Collection and Instruments

Quantitative data was collected via surveys that were conducted online through survey site, Qualtrics. Informed consent was provided, as well as an introduction and overview of the study and its purpose. Demographic information was collected as a part of the survey. This information included age, gender identification, ethnicity identification, number of years in field, and title. After the demographic information was collected, the survey then went on to ask questions regarding the participants’ volunteer experience. For this study, the independent variable was volunteer involvement, with a ratio level of measurement using the number of hours per month. Additional data collected on volunteer involvement with consist of frequency and duration of volunteering, as well as the type of activity (e.g. nonprofit work, religious, mentorship, etc.).

The dependent variable was level of professional burnout experienced, an interval level of measurement based on scores on a modified version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), specifically the Maslach Burnout Inventory Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS). The MBI was created as a tool to measure burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The survey is composed of 22 items and covers 3 dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low sense of
personal accomplishment. The responses are on a frequency rating scale which includes “never, few times a year or less, once a month or less, a few times a month, once a week, a few times a week, and every day” (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The scores on the MBI determined level of burnout and if volunteering is related to levels of job burnout.

Reliability is supported in a couple ways including test-retest reliability and internal consistency (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Convergent validity was also supported in several ways. The MBI scores correlate with independent behavioral ratings scored by an individual who knew the participant well (Maslach et al., 1996). The scores were also correlated with certain job characteristics that were projected to contribute to burnout (Maslach et al., 1996). Last, the scores also correlate with measures of outcomes that had been linked to be related to burnout (Maslach et al., 1996). Discriminant validity is successfully demonstrated by further testing the instrument and confirming burnout as its own syndrome that is distinguished from psychological constructs (Maslach et al., 1996).

One limitation of the MBI is the possibility of participants misinterpreting burnout as job dissatisfaction and answering the survey based on this perception. This limitation could be addressed by providing participants a definition of the term “burnout,” including common characteristics. With that being said, the MBI was developed specifically for fields such as social work, and thus the MBI may be more relevant in measuring the characteristics of burnout specific to social services fields.
Another limitation of the data collection method is that the data collection primarily happened remotely online through various sites. This could potentially be an issue because it limits the questionnaire to a rating system rather than any questions as there will be no interview present. Furthermore, the participants might not feel as if they are “accountable” for their answers and might be dishonest or even answer absentmindedly. On the other hand, an online collection data method can be more practical. Since it is remote, location is no longer an issue and data can be collected from a wider audience. Furthermore, online surveys allow participants to give a sense of anonymity which might encourage them to answer more truthfully.

Procedures

The primary method of data collection was through an online survey. A listing asking for participants to complete a survey will be created and posted on a professional networking website, LinkedIn, and the social work board of an online forum, Reddit. The post included information describing the purpose and goals of the study. It also outlined specific requirements for participation including, all participants must be social workers currently working in the field who hold at least a bachelor’s level of degree in Social Work. Social work interns were also solicited to participate in the survey. Those who responded were provided an electronic version of an informed consent form. Upon agreement
they were able to complete the survey questions. The surveys took between 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

The survey was created using the online survey site, Qualtrics. The advantage of this method included the convenience given to participants to complete the survey in any location, time, and duration that fits best with their schedules. The researchers collected the data as the surveys are completed. The data collection process took around three months to complete.

Protection of Human Subjects

The identity of those who participate in this study was kept confidential, and no identifying information was obtained. Furthermore, it was emphasized that due to the nature of internet platforms it is impossible to guarantee absolute confidentiality. Participants were informed of risks, such as those involving online data, through informed consent and debriefing statements. Participants were able to download and save a copy of the informed consent and debriefing, should they so choose. The data obtained from the survey was transmitted from the survey to a private account on Qualtrics, a survey building and hosting website. This data was downloaded stored on a password-protected computer. All data, including informed consent files and documentation, will be deleted one year after the completion of this study.
Data Analysis

The data gathered in this study was analyzed using SPSS. Quantitative analysis techniques were also utilized. Demographic information such as gender, age, ethnicity, education, professional status, and years in the field was gathered from the surveys and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Three independent $t$-tests for differences in means were conducted comparing those social workers who volunteer and those who do not on the MBI-HSS’ three subscales (e.g. emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment).

Summary

In this study, quantitative methods such as the use of an online survey was utilized to increase the number of responses. Future revisions of this chapter will include information regarding data analysis as well as, copies of the informed consent and debriefing statements as appendices.
CHAPTER FOUR
RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the statistical analysis that was conducted on the collected survey data. The first section shows the descriptive statistics of the sample which includes age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, professional status, and years in the field. The following section will display the descriptive analysis that presents data of those who volunteered and those who did not and the means of the MBI-HSS subscales; emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. The last section presents the inferential analysis of the data which is composed of the statistical tests to determine the correlation between volunteerism and level of professional burnout. Three t-tests were conducted to determine differences in means comparing those who volunteer and those who do not, and their corresponding levels of burnout measured by the three scales.

Presentation of Findings

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 below displays the demographic characteristics of the sample. In the first category of age, a majority of the survey participants reported to be in the range of 25-34 (n=279, 63.1%), followed by 18-24 (n=79, 17.9%), 35-44 (n=51, 11.5%), 45-54 (n=15, 3.4%), and lastly 55-64 (4, 0.9%). For gender, participants
identifying as female were the majority (n=366, 82.8%) followed by male (n=55, 12.4%), transgender (4, 0.9%), and non-binary (n=6, 1.4%). Race/ethnic identification was composed of majority White (n=343, 77.6%), followed by Hispanic/Latino (n=32, 7.2%), Asian (n=19, 4.3%), Black/African American (n=10, 2.3%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (n=4, 0.9%), American Indian/Alaska Native (n=3, 0.7%), and Other (n=16, 3.6%). The majority of participants reported their highest level of education as MSW (n=309, 69.9%), followed by BSW (n=114, 25.8%), and PhD (n=3, 0.7%). The most common level of professional status was MSW (n=135, 30.5%), followed by student/intern (n=96, 21.7%), BSW (n=80, 18.1%), LCSW (n=69, 15.6%), and Other (n=47, 10.6%). Finally, the majority of participants answered that they had 1-5 years of experience in the field (n=246, 55.7%), 6-10 (n=81, 18.3%), less than 1 (n=68, 15.4%), 11-15 (n=25, 5.7%), 16-20 (n=6, 1.4%), 21-25 (n=1, 0.2%), and 26-30 (n=2, 0.5%).
Table 1

**Demographic Statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>79 (17.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>279 (63.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>51 (11.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>15 (3.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>4 (0.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55 (12.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>366 (82.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>4 (0.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Binary</td>
<td>6 (1.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>343 (77.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>10 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>32 (7.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>3 (0.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>19 (4.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>4 (0.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16 (3.6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education (Completed or in Progress)</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BSW</td>
<td>114 (25.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSW</td>
<td>309 (69.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>3 (0.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional status</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student/Intern</td>
<td>96 (21.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSW</td>
<td>80 (18.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSW</td>
<td>135 (30.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCSW</td>
<td>69 (15.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>47 (10.6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years in field</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1</td>
<td>68 (15.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>246 (55.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>81 (18.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>25 (5.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>6 (1.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>1 (0.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>2 (0.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Descriptive Analysis

Table 2 presents the frequency distribution of volunteers and the mean scores on the emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment subscales. Most participants reported that they did not engage in any volunteerism (n=255, 57.7%), but the study still had a considerable number that did actively volunteer (n=172, 38.9%). The calculated mean for emotional exhaustion is $M= 35.10$. For depersonalization, the mean was found to be $M= 13.31$. Personal accomplishment resulted in a total mean score of $M= 45.21$.

Table 2

*Frequencies of Volunteers and Total Mean Scores for Maslach Burnout Inventory-Human Services Survey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you volunteer?</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>172 (38.9%)</td>
<td>35.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>255 (57.7%)</td>
<td>13.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Emotional exhaustion subscale | 35.10 |
| Depersonalization subscale    | 13.31 |
| Personal accomplishment subscale | 45.21 |

Inferential Analysis

Table 3 presents the results of three $t$-tests for differences in means comparing those who volunteer and those who do not on the MBI-HSS’ three subscales for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. For emotional exhaustion, the results yielded no statistically
significant results between those who volunteer (M = 34.11) and those who do not (M = 35.75); t (376) = -1.39, p = .16). Results for depersonalization also showed no significant difference in scores for those who volunteer (M = 12.84) and those who do not (M = 13.64); t (377) = -1.29, p = .19). Finally, means for personal accomplishment also produced no statistically significant results between those who volunteer (M = 45.43) and those who do not (M = 45.06); t (371) = .570, p = .57).

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Volunteer</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>34.11</td>
<td>35.75</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depersonalization</td>
<td>12.84</td>
<td>13.64</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal accomplishment</td>
<td>45.43</td>
<td>45.06</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The following chapter will discuss the results of the study, limitations, as well as, implications for social work practice, policy, and research. The purpose of this study was to determine if participating in volunteerism effects levels of professional burnout among social workers. Evidence from the study may shed light on whether volunteerism could be a potential coping mechanism against burnout. This chapter will conclude with a brief overview of the study, including results and consequent insights.

Discussion

Professional burnout is a significant concern within helping professions. Those who work in these fields have been found to experience it more often than other professions (Maslach & Jackson, 1982; Ray, Wong, White & Heaslip, 2013; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). The aim of this study was to identify volunteerism as an additional type of coping against burnout. Volunteer work is accessible and even encouraged within the profession as part of the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2018). Research conducted in similar fields, such as nursing and the public sector, found that volunteering does play a role in decreasing the level of burnout.
The results from this study did not yield any significant differences between levels of burnout and whether social workers volunteer or not. Despite this lack of significant results, there are trends with the results that show the means for those who volunteer are lower than those who do not in two of the three subscales of the MBI-HSS; emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Furthermore, the mean score for those who volunteer is slightly higher than those who do not in the personal accomplishment subscale. This may indicate that social workers who do in fact engage in volunteerism may experience lower levels in characteristics of burnout.

The statistically non-significant differences in means on the MBI-HSS may be due to the type of volunteer work that participants are engaged with. It was common for participants who do volunteer outside of their professional work to participate in activities related to human services as well. It could be inferred that participating in volunteer work that is incredibly similar to social work would not alleviate any burnout or stress because their volunteer work entails similar conditions to their work which does not offer adequate respite from the stress of their professional roles.

Limitations of the Study

The format of the collection process made it possible to obtain data from hundreds of social workers from all over the world. Over 400 social workers with different backgrounds took the time to participate in the survey. While a strength of the study was that it was able to reach a wide variety of social workers, it is
simultaneously a limitation of this sample, which is that it is a convenience sample. This means that the collected sample might be biased since it does not represent the entire population, therefore some groups can be overrepresented or alternatively underrepresented which ultimately impacts the quality of the data. Another limitation of the study is its quantitative nature. This makes it so that the participants have predetermined responses and ratings, and therefore do not have the ability to elaborate on a certain question if they wish to do so.

Implications on Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

The topic of professional burnout is critical in the field of social work. The effects of burnout may impact both the individual social worker and the quality of the services which they provide. Such issues are consequential at the agency level in the form of high attrition rates and disruptions of services. Thus, there is a vested interest in finding effective methods of burnout prevention for social workers. While the present study ultimately did not find evidence in support of utilizing volunteerism as a coping strategy against professional burnout, it did illuminate a discrepancy between its impact on social work versus other helping professions. This is important to note, as many social work practices stress the importance of self-care and burnout prevention, but often do not implement realistic measures against it. As previously stated, service and volunteerism are encouraged in the Code of Ethics as an ethical duty, but it may be adding extra pressure to an already strenuous workload for social workers.
If a future study were to be conducted, it would be beneficial to utilize a qualitative approach in order to obtain more in-depth answers on the participants’ volunteer work. This will be helpful in ultimately identifying if there is a correlation between decreased levels of burnout rates and the type of volunteer work. One question in the present study allowed the participants to briefly describe their volunteer work, and most of the participants identified work that is extremely similar to social work. Therefore, it can be said that because they are essentially volunteering in a similar field or capacity as social work, there is no clear distinction and any levels of burnout they feel at work can be heightened by their volunteering.

Summary

Volunteerism, though effective in other helping fields, proved to have no significant relationship to job burnout among social workers in this study. The results from this study may have not supported the hypothesis, however, the trends in the results indicate future studies may be necessary to determine whether volunteerism truly does not have any effect on professional burnout. Future research should further explore if the type of volunteer work has any impact on burnout. Burnout is a pervasive issue in the social work field, and it is vital that methods of prevention and coping are further studied to support the health and effectiveness of social workers.
APPENDIX A

MASLACH BURNOUT INVENTORY- HUMAN SERVICES SURVEY
## MBI–Human Services Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Often</th>
<th>Statements:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. _______</td>
<td>I feel emotionally drained from my work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. _______</td>
<td>I feel used up at the end of the workday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. _______</td>
<td>I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. _______</td>
<td>I can easily understand how my recipients feel about things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. _______</td>
<td>I feel I treat some recipients as if they were impersonal objects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. _______</td>
<td>Working with people all day is really a strain for me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. _______</td>
<td>I deal very effectively with the problems of my recipients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. _______</td>
<td>I feel burned out from my work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. _______</td>
<td>I feel I’m positively influencing other people’s lives through my work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. _______</td>
<td>I’ve become more callous toward people since I took this job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. _______</td>
<td>I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. _______</td>
<td>I feel very energetic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. _______</td>
<td>I feel frustrated by my job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. _______</td>
<td>I feel I’m working too hard on my job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. _______</td>
<td>I don’t really care what happens to some recipients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. _______</td>
<td>Working with people directly puts too much stress on me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. _______</td>
<td>I can easily create a relaxed atmosphere with my recipients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. _______</td>
<td>I feel exhilarated after working closely with my recipients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. _______</td>
<td>I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. _______</td>
<td>I feel like I’m at the end of my rope.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. _______</td>
<td>In my work, I deal with emotional problems very calmly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. _______</td>
<td>I feel recipients blame me for some of their problems.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Maslach & Jackson, 1996)
### MBI Human Services/Educators Scoring Key

**Personal Accomplishment (PA) Subscale**

**Directions:** Line up the item numbers on this key with the same numbers on the survey form. Looking at the unshaded items only, add the scores in the "How Often" column and enter the total in the "PA" space at the bottom of the survey form.

**How Often**  
0-6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>How Often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
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<td>11.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Form Ed Cut Points**

**Categorization (Form Ed): Emotional Exhaustion**

- **Frequency:**
  - High: 27 or over
  - Moderate: 17-26
  - Low: 0-16

**Categorization (Form Ed): Depersonalization**

- **Frequency:**
  - High: 13 or over
  - Moderate: 7-12
  - Low: 0-6

**Categorization (Form Ed): Personal Accomplishment**

- **Frequency:**
  - High: 31 or over
  - Moderate: 21-30
  - Low: 0-20

(Maslach & Jackson, 1996)

---

### MBI Human Services/Educators Scoring Key

**Emotional Exhaustion (EE) Subscale**

**Directions:** Line up the item numbers on this key with the same numbers on the survey form. Looking at the unshaded items only, add the scores in the "How Often" column and enter the total in the "EE" space at the bottom of the survey form.

**How Often**  
0-6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>How Often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>8.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Categorization:**

- **Emotional Exhaustion**
  - High: 27 or over
  - Moderate: 17-26
  - Low: 0-16

(Maslach & Jackson, 1996)
APPENDIX B

SURVEY
Please select the answer that best applies to you

**Demographics**

Gender:
A. Male  
B. Female  
C. Trans  
D. Non-Binary

Age:
A. 18-24  
B. 25-34  
C. 35-44  
D. 45-54  
E. 55-64  
F. 65+

Ethnicity:
A. White  
B. Hispanic or Latino  
C. Black or African American  
D. Native American or American Indian  
E. Asian/Pacific Islander  
F. Other:  
   a. ____________

Education (Completed or in Progress):
A. BSW  
B. MSW  
C. Professional Degree (PhD)  
D. Doctorate Degree (DSW)

Professional Status:
A. Student/Intern  
B. BSW  
C. MSW  
D. LCSW

Years in field:
A. Less than 1  
B. 1-5  
C. 6-10  
D. 11-15  
E. 16-20  
F. 21-25  
G. 25-30  
H. 31+
Volunteerism

1. Do you volunteer?
   A. Yes
   B. No
   If you answered no, please skip ahead to the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Human Services Survey

2. How long have you been volunteering?
   A. Less than a year
   B. 1-5 year(s)
   C. 6-10 years
   D. 10-15 years
   E. 16+ years

3. How often do you volunteer?
   A. Once a week
   B. Once a month
   C. Once a year
   D. Week

4. Why do you volunteer?
   A. Give back to the community
   B. Gain new skills, knowledge, and/or experiences
   C. Requirement for program/job
   D. Activity with an unaffiliated group (church, club, etc)
   E. Other: ____________________

5. What type of volunteer work do you most engage in?
   __________________________________________

6. Do you feel like your volunteerism impacts your attitude towards work?
   A. Not at all
   B. Slightly
   C. Moderately
   D. Significantly
Maslach Burnout Inventory-Human Services Survey

Please rate the following statements as it pertains to your professional capacity as a social worker. Use the following scale for each question.

1. Never
2. A few times a year or less
3. Once a month or less
4. A few times a month
5. Once a week
6. A few times a week
7. Every day

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Often (0-6)</th>
<th>Statements:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ___________</td>
<td>I feel emotionally drained from my work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ___________</td>
<td>I feel used up at the end of the workday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. ___________</td>
<td>I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ___________</td>
<td>I can easily understand how my clients feel about things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. ___________</td>
<td>I feel I treat some clients as if they were impersonal objects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. ___________</td>
<td>Working with people all day is really a strain for me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. ___________</td>
<td>I deal very effectively with the problems of my clients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. ___________</td>
<td>I feel burned out from my work.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>I feel I’m positively influencing other people’s lives through my work.</td>
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<td>14. ___________</td>
<td>I feel I’m working too hard on my job.</td>
</tr>
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<td>15. ___________</td>
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<tr>
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<td>In my work, I deal with emotional problems very calmly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. ___________</td>
<td>I feel clients blame me for some of their problems.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Created by Jessy Jean Salloum & Francesca Maria Augusta Twohy-Haines
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT
INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine the relationship between engagement in volunteering and level of professional burnout among social workers. The study is being conducted by Jessy Saloum and Francesca Maria Tewey-Whines, graduate students, under the supervision of Dr. Armando Barragan, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB).

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine the relationship between engagement in volunteering and level of professional burnout among social workers.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked a few survey questions regarding their participation in volunteer activities, frequency of participation in volunteer activities, and level of professional burnout associated with their social work careers, and some demographic information.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You may skip or not answer any questions. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: It will take 5 to 10 minutes to complete the survey.

RISKS: There are no foreseeable risks to the participants.

BENEFITS: There are no direct benefits to the participants.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Barragan at (909) 537-3501.

RESULTS: Results of this study can be obtained from the PLA Library ScholarWorks database (http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2019.

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

Place an X mark here

Date
REFERENCES


ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This is a two-person project that was completed primarily through a collaborative effort. The authors shared all the responsibility to complete the research project proposal including the following sections; problem formulation, literature review, methods, data collection, and analysis. Both authors were also dually responsible for adapting the survey questionnaire, informed consent, and all other components of the Human Subjects Application Packet.