2023

Occupational Stress of Adult Protective Service Workers

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

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MS, Walden University, 2017

BS, Arizona State University, 2010

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

February 2023

Abstract

Research has revealed that adult protective service workers experience high levels of occupational stress that often result in health complications such as burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue. Although several qualitative studies have been conducted over the past decade, there was limited information on the phenomenon of how stress is experienced by adult protective service workers investigating cases of alleged elder abuse. The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of a sample of adult protective service caseworkers from the southwestern United States that have experienced occupational stress while investigating cases of elder abuse. This study was derived from the transactional theory of stress and coping concepts and a phenomenological research design. The predominant research question focused on how participants identified and comprehended occupational stressors. The data were collected using semistructured face-to-face interviews and were coded and themed using NVivo software. The results of the study revealed the unique stressors within the field of adult protective services and how caseworkers experienced stress differently during the investigation and case processing of elder abuse. The experiences explored identified circumstances surrounding the role of an APS caseworker. Protective caseworkers are exposed to hostile and frustrating environments that result in feelings of fear, anxiousness, depression, and pressure. The study's conclusions may serve to promote positive social change by offering practitioners and researchers a better understanding of the phenomenon of occupational stress among adult protective service workers.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the loving memory of my grandmother, Betty. You were a fantastic woman who demonstrated that you could make mountains move through perseverance. I miss you more than words can express; thank you for always believing in me. I would also like to dedicate this work to all who have fallen victim to the consequences of elder abuse by opening the net of understanding to the issues concerning abuse; there is an advocation for change.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my committee and especially my committee chair, Dr. Lindahl. For without your expertise, dedication, and most importantly patience, this dissertation would not have been possible. I am also grateful for the encouraging words of Dr. Wallace, that had allowed me to be confident in my theories and methods to achieve the research results. I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to Bob Meyer for being a great support on the team.

A special feeling of gratitude to my mother, Theresa who has been a rock of support through thick and thin. I would like to recognize my brother, Patrick, for keeping a smile on my face even when times were tough. Words cannot express my gratitude of my best friend and husband, Juan. Without your constant love and support I would have been content with an ABD. Thank you for providing different perspectives on ways to look at data and listening to me during times of adversity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Stress contributes to physiological strain that can impair the ability to use logic and reason. After consistent exposure to stress, emotions often become the catalyst for decision making (Lings et al., 2014; Morgado et al., 2015; Singer et al., 2019; Sousa, 2016; Wagaman et al., 2015). With the heavy caseloads adult protective service (APS) workers often endure, the risk for burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue increases. In these stressful work environments, substantial turnover results in increased demands on the remaining social workers still employed (Lings et al., 2014). Understanding the occupational stress of APS workers may provide the ability to maintain a solid and healthy workplace and ensure that cases are being processed efficiently and without error.

This chapter presents the underpinnings of the study that will include a background of occupational stress experienced within APS and the purpose for conducting this study. Chapter 1 will also briefly identify the gaps within the current literature and explain why qualitative research can provide a bridge within the existing information. Finally, guided by a theoretical framework, I discuss the transactional theory of stress and coping and the significance of personal perception. Since stress has been diversely studied across academia, concise definitions of concepts and constructs will be clarified in this chapter, along with any assumptions and limitations.

Background of the Study

There has been ample research dedicated to exploring the quality of life of those working in social services (Cummings et al., 2020; Ghesquiere et al., 2018; Gil &

Weinberg, 2015; McFadden et al., 2021; Mette et al., 2020). It is well known that the role in which these individuals play is vital to the protection of vulnerable populations as they provide services that negate violence, exploitation, and abuse. Within the field of APS, caseworkers are exposed to high levels of occupational stress. Stress experienced in a protective service setting stems from the nature of the work that requires caseworkers to come into contact with environmental hazards during the investigation process, and occupational strains that may include budget cuts, low salaries, and heavy caseloads as well as legal obstacles (Ghesquiere et al., 2017).

Chihowski and Hughes (2008) discussed the effectiveness of the investigation process that APS caseworkers face when working with the elder population and societal taboos. Since many cases often pose challenges that limit imposing protection services, APS caseworkers often find it difficult to obtain court orders to protect victims (Chihowski & Hughes, 2008; Jackson & Hafemeister, 2015). In addition, occupational obstacles can cause an increase in stress and exacerbate the inability to cope. Acker (2018) discussed how stress experienced within protective services shows a negative statistical significance to occupational stress, self-care, and coping, indicating that when the ability to cope with occupational stressors decreases, the level of stress increases resulting in a greater risk of health complications. Excessive stress can cause physical illness and impact cognitive and decision-making abilities (Sousa, 2016). As reflected in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping, the perceived stress and the ability to cope successfully is dependent on one's ability to evaluate and determine the safeness of their environment.

Problem Statement

Adult protective social services were developed to help safeguard elder (i.e., 60 years of age and older) and vulnerable (i.e., adults who have serious disabilities) adults, while affording them the ability to live free from neglect, exploitation, and abuse. During in-home investigations, APS caseworkers evaluate the alleged victim's physical and cognitive condition and the individual's living environment and social supports to determine whether abuse, exploitation, or neglect is occurring (Arizona Department of Economic Security, n.d.).

In 2018, Arizona Adult Protective Services received over 17,000 cases of alleged abuse; however, only 10% of these cases were substantiated (Arizona Department of Economic Security, 2018). Protective service agencies are challenged with high case volume, which increases caseworkers' risk of severe stress, burnout, and employee disengagement (Acker, 2018; Morse et al., 2012; Owens-King, 2019). Research from Ghesquiere et al. (2017) as well as Jackson and Hafemeister (2015) found that APS caseworkers are regularly exposed to environmental hazards that are a result of unsafe living spaces and are subjected to verbal and physical attacks from clients or their family. Consistent exposure to occupational stressors results in employee disengagement, compromised health, secondary traumatic stress, and turnover (Acker, 2018; Cetrano et al., 2017; Morgado et al., 2015). Ghesquiere et al. and Singer et al. (2019) believe that occupational stressors influence an individual's cognition and judgment. When examining the literature, limited knowledge distinguishes how stress experienced from occupational stressors affects APS caseworkers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how APS caseworkers experience occupational stress during in-home investigations in reported cases of elder abuse. In addition, the study aimed to understand how APS caseworkers perceive occupational stress and how the perception of stress influences the progression of case processing. Within the realm of this research study, occupational stress has been defined as the occurrence or progression of stress experienced due to the responsibilities, conditions, and atmosphere of the work environment.

Research Question

The research question that has guided this study was "What are the lived experiences of APS workers investigating allegations of elder abuse?"

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study followed Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping. According to transactional theory, stress is regulated through a continuous evaluation of the environment. For example, if harm, threat, or challenge exceeds the individual's capacity to cope, it causes dysregulation of emotion, resulting in stress (Biggs et al., 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The transactional theory of stress and coping has been extensively used over the last 50 years to explain how stress affects the cognitive phenomenological processes (Biggs et al., 2017).

Conducting in-home investigations of alleged elder abuse could elicit high emotions and stress levels, making protective service work psychologically and

physically demanding (Ghesquiere et al., 2018). As stress is a multifaceted phenomenon and recognizing that cognitive function is dependent on effective stress coping skills (Sousa, 2016), the transactional theory helps to explain how APS caseworkers cope with perceived occupational stressors when conducting an investigation. In addition, understanding this phenomenon may provide a better understanding of how protective caseworkers offset occupational stressors in alleged elder abuse cases.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study followed a qualitative phenomenology method (Patton, 2015). Phenomenological research is used to understand how people describe their lived experiences about a particular phenomenon. Since there is limited literature dedicated to understanding the perception of occupational stressors when investigating allegations of elder abuse, a phenomenological method allowed APS caseworkers to illustrate their experiences of occupational stress through semistructured open-ended questions (Patton, 2015). I collected the data using semistructured face-to-face interviews and coded and themed these data using NVivo software.

Definitions

Adult protective service (APS): APS refers to the government agency investigating reports of abuse, neglect, and exploitation of vulnerable populations who are adults (Arizona Department of Economic Security, 2018).

Burnout: Burnout refers to emotional exhaustion that occurs when caseworkers experience emotionally demanding work environments that result in a sense of depersonalization and a limited accomplishment (Singer et al., 2019).

Caseworker: A caseworker is the first responder to the reported abuse. They are employees of state-funded departments responsible for assessing the alleged victims' risk factors and capacity to understand to give informed consent to further an investigation.

Elder abuse: Elder abuse refers to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect, abandonment, and even financial exploitation (Administration for Community Living, 2019; Bonnie & Wallace, 2016; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020).

Occupational stress: Occupational stress refers to the stress a caseworker will experience from the environment in which they will work due to the demands that exceed the environment's resources (Quick & Henderson, 2016).

Secondary traumatic stress: Secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue refers to emotional distress similar to post-traumatic stress disorder experienced from working with those exposed to trauma (Singer et al., 2019).

Stress: Stress can be defined as a non-specific response from feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope with emotional or mental stimuli.

Assumptions

Phenomenological research is used to gather information through the perception of those who have lived through a specific phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). As perception is subjective with multiple realities, researchers exploring events through a phenomenological lens depend on the memory of others for experiential details (Neubauer et al., 2019). Within this study, the findings are contingent on the assumption

of the truthfulness of the data and that occupational stress experienced by APS caseworkers influences how reported cases of elder abuse are processed.

Phenomenological research is based on the perceptions and how the lived experience is influenced by the lifeworld (Given, 2008). Data collected for this qualitative study were in the form of words and verbal and visual cues (see Creswell & Clark, 2018; Given, 2008). Asking participants to explain how they have experienced stress in their occupation is dependent on the interpretations and perceptions of memory, thought, emotion, language, and cognitive awareness. In phenomenological research, findings are founded on the assumption that the participants' perspectives will be truthfully described. Thus, the interpretation of these data will be accepted as accurate, providing a depiction of rich in-depth life experiences (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Scope and Delimitations

While occupational stress has been studied across many different fields, the reason for selecting the topic is the limited information currently available. By exploring the perceptions of stress and how APS caseworkers experience occupational stress during the investigation process illuminated how cases are processed and why cases are processed in a particular manner. Face-to-face interviews provide a more in-depth method of data collection than online surveys (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The sample selected were currently employed or previously employed by APS and have processed elder abuse cases. This study did not include those employees who have not processed cases of elder abuse.

Hans Selye's (1950) general adaptation syndrome theory provides a substantial foundation for stress studies. The theory recognizes that stress occurs between the individual and the environment. Through the three phases, the body will undergo alarm, resistance, and exhaustion. Similarly, Holmes and Rahe (1967) explained that stress results from lived experiences and that individuals will only recognize an event as stressful through experience. These two theories together present a basic knowledge of why stress is individualistic and can only be interpreted through experience. However, these theories were not selected based on the literature and their relation to stress perception and idealization development. By selecting Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress, I could take into account personal experiences and environmental appraisal, which is closely related to addressing the gap in the literature concerning the lived experiences of APS caseworkers who investigate alleged cases of elder abuse. The transferability of these findings clarified how stress is identified and perceived within the investigative setting to understand how abuse cases are processed.

Limitations

Limitations of the study pertain to the weaknesses within the methodological design and the reliability of the data collected. The trustworthiness of the data collected were reflected in the inferences and conclusions of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, the information that was collected was limited in its generalizability as each individual has their perceptions and opinions about occupational stressors (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015). Furthermore, a time-lapse experienced between the events and the interviews may have had some impact on the trustworthiness of the data as

well. The delay may create challenges regarding memory recall, limiting the accuracy and reliability of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, the data gathered may present limitations as participants may not have been willing to answer questions about job performance accurately.

Participants were selected based on location and accessibility. Additionally, the level of participation may differ from pre-pandemic conductions due to COVID-19 (Cardel et al., 2020). Furthermore, there were obstacles that need to be addressed for obtaining participants for this study, so reassuring participants that the purpose of this study is scholarly and that they would be afforded complete anonymity and confidentiality was essential. Lastly, having had secondhand experience with APS services, I may have had a degree of bias towards participants in the study (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Significance

The study was unique because it addressed an under-researched area of environmental effects and the occupational hazards among caseworkers in APS agencies (Acker, 2018; Ghesquiere et al., 2017; Jackson & Hafemeister, 2015). Previous studies have identified that social service caseworkers are confronted with heavy caseloads, long hours, and administrative challenges (Acker, 2018; Ghesquiere et al., 2017; Jackson & Hafemeister, 2015; Owens-King, 2019). Occupational stressors experienced in protective services increase the concern for the well-being of protective caseworkers and their ability to practice healthy self-care techniques in stressful work environments. This study explained the effects occupational stressors have when processing cases of alleged elder

abuse. The results may also open future discussions for policy changes within protective service agencies regarding self-care competencies and potential alternative methods for assessing and investigating cases, inevitably promoting positive social change for effective service provision.

Summary

APS workers are responsible for investigating reports of elder abuse. With many cases reported each year, caseworkers experience heavy caseloads that exacerbate budget cuts and low wages. Within this field, caseworkers are responsible for assessing potential risks of victimization. However, many challenges impede these assessments, which increase occupational stress. APS workers' primary function is to promote the well-being of elders with relation to autonomy. However, in many reports, clients who have severe mental illness can impede the application of services.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences and perception of occupational stress of APS caseworkers investigating cases of alleged elder abuse. This topic is essential as there is limited current literature on the complexities of occupational stress experienced during elder abuse investigations. This qualitative phenomenological study provided information that can contribute to understanding how perceived stress can influence processing cases of elder abuse. Understanding this phenomenon and what factors contribute to negative and positive responses has illuminated various ways APS caseworkers evaluate their environment. Chapter 2 will include the literature search strategy, an analysis of the theoretical framework, and a review and synthesis of the current literature about the phenomenon of interest.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

APS is responsible for safeguarding autonomy and the elimination of abuse among vulnerable adult populations. By conducting in-home investigations, APS workers acquire evidence to substantiate abuse and determine the eligibility of services. Although many jobs have a certain level of occupational stress, APS workers are exposed to specific stressors of the role of adult protection services. Occupational stressors may include high case volume, environmental hazards, and physical and psychological abuse. Research has indicated that constant exposure to stress can have negative psychological consequences that may impact an individual's cognitive abilities (Esteves & Gomez, 2013; Ghesquiere et al., 2018; Singer et al., 2019). Although Ghesquiere et al. (2018) and O'Donnell et al. (2015) presented innovative insights from an APS perspective, the data within the literature are limited. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how occupational stressors are experienced by APS workers in alleged elder abuse cases.

The literature review served as a foundation to understand the historical context of occupational stressors experienced by APS workers and how it relates to health complications and cognitive impairment. The current literature explained how occupational stressors increase the risk of chronic stress, burnout, and employee disengagement among protective service workers. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model provides a foundation to explain how APS workers perceive occupational stress theoretically.

Literature Search Strategy

Several keywords and phrases were used to conduct this literature review. I employed the following online search engines: Thoreau, SAGE Journals, PsycInfo, Taylor and Francis Online, and Academic Search Complete. A few of the keywords used for the literature review included *adult protective services, APS, protective service caseworkers, stress, employee disengagement, compassion fatigue, burnout, work hazards, self-care,* and *job performance*. These keywords support this study's purpose as the search procured a list of foundational literature of the ramifications of stress experienced within protective service work. The Thoreau database yielded 2,620 results when searching keywords *protective services* and *stress*. To further refine the search, *occupational stress* and *protective services* were used to yield 129 articles. Similar results were produced using PsycInfo and Academic Search Complete. I used SAGE Journals and PsycInfo to retrieve articles related to cognitive and behavioral implications from chronic stress. SAGE Journals retrieved 15,020 articles related to psychopathological consequences from chronic stress, whereas PsycInfo produced 3,691 articles. Although there may be limited literature dedicated to APS stress research, in the literature review for this study, I examined the methodologies and theories that have been used in stress research in child protective services.

Theoretical Foundation

The purpose of many stress theories is to explain stress and its relation to one's environment either as a stimulus (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) or a transaction (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stressors develop through the personal perceptions of environmental

well-being that are subjective reflections of the conflict between reality and ideal expectations. Stress theories imply that stress exists when an individual identifies and interprets a stressor as stress (Biggs et al., 2017; Edwards, 1992; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; McGrath, 1976). Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress explains that stress is grounded on personal experiences and appraisal of a stressor. Transactional stress theory suggests that stress experienced within the environment depends on an individual's lived experiences and environmental perceptions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Endocrinologist Hans Selye identified physiological changes that occur when exposed to a stressor. General adaptation syndrome theory results from what Selye (1950) characterized as the response and adaptation between the individual and the environment. When exposed to a stressor, the body will experience the stress in three phases: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion. During the alarm reaction stage, the body will experience an endocrine response characterized by high norepinephrine levels and cortisol (McEwen, 2017; Selye, 1950). This hormonal change will increase heart rate, blood flow, and cerebral function (Selye, 1950). If the perceived stress continues, the resistance will occur to counter the physiological change to return the system to homeostasis. After an extended time, coping resources will become depleted, and the body will become exhausted (McEwen, 2017). However, if the stressor poses no threat, the experience can result in *eustress*, or positive stress (Davis, 2016).

Stress in excess is understood to produce physical and psychological illness. To understand this phenomenon, Holmes and Rahe (1967), through stress stimulus theory,

explained that stress was a result of the context of a lived experience rather than the experience itself. Drawing upon the ability to cope with the actions leading to an event, the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) identifies 42 life-altering situations that would require a level of life adjustment (Homes & Rahe, 1967). Divorce is one life-altering event examined on the SRRS. Within the 1960s, divorce had a negative connotation as divorce was perceived as a negative consequence. Divorce can result in a loss of social status, personal identity, or financial stability.

Conversely, as society's concept of the nuclear family has evolved, the attitude toward divorce has changed as well (Lebow, 2020; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). In situations of abuse, divorce may be viewed as a favorable resolution. The application of stress stimulus theory becomes problematic, as it assumes that any change in life will impart a negative outcome. Additionally, stress stimulus theory also assumes that any life-altering event will generate the same stress demand and health complications across various populations (Lebow, 2020). While the stress stimulus theory is limited, it has revealed that the perception of a stressor is dependent on the individual and not the stressor alone (Brosschot et al., 2018; Gerst et al., 1978).

Examining stress as a continuum assumes that not all stress is detrimental. Good stress, or eustress, can induce motivation to achieve goals (Parker & Ragsdale, 2015). Stress experienced as eustress is not just the absence of a threat but the replenishment of energy that can improve cognition and rebuild other resources (Parker & Ragsdale, 2015). For example, when presented with a reachable challenge in the workplace, eustress can produce positive attitudes that promote purpose in one's occupation (Davis,

2016; Parker & Ragsdale, 2015; Wagaman et al., 2015). Eustress can provide employees with the ability to exert more effort to solve problems to attain organizational goals and boost morale (Bergeron, 1999; Parker & Ragsdale, 2015).

Acute stress within a continuum can evolve into distress that can exhaust coping resources (Pandey et al., 2011). Occupational stressors that stimulate distress can cause lasting complications and a reduction in life quality (Cetrano et al., 2017; Schneiderman et al., 2005). Social work stress research has documented that anxiety, depression, irritability, burnout, and fatigue are consequential from heavy caseloads, role ambiguity, and the lack of supervisor support (Ventura et al., 2015). Chronic stress obtained from occupational stressors can have lasting consequences exhibited in physiological symptoms such as autoimmune disorders, cardiovascular disease, and general body pain and fatigue (Schaafsma et al., 2021; Schneiderman et al., 2005).

Examining stress theories provides insight for the application of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping. As many theories examine the effects of stress, the transactional theory explores the progression of stress development. The transactional theory has guided stress and coping discussions to reveal how stress is experienced across various fields. Within the context of social services, the transactional theory has provided an understanding of how stress is experienced within child protective services (Biggs et al., 2017). However, stress and coping literature is limited within the context of adult protection services (Ghesquiere et al., 2018). Stressors experienced by APS workers are specific to the role; therefore, applying transactional

theory may shed light on how stress is experienced within a gerontological social work setting.

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory highlights the relationship between the person and the environment. The theory is based upon environmental appraisals that are constant and cyclical (Biggs et al., 2017). The transactional theory has two sequential core systems: primary appraisal and secondary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Throughout the primary appraisal, an individual will assess the situation based on personal beliefs and perceptions of the environment. When the demands exceed personal and social resources, the secondary appraisal assesses emotional resources' availability (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Therefore, if the person determines that the stimulus is non-consequential, positive emotions will result. However, if the stressor exceeds available resources to resolve, it will require an alternate coping method, thus restating the appraisal stage (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The appraisal phase compares the stressor to previously developed beliefs, experience, and commitment depth (Biggs et al., 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The level of stress experienced is based on the individual's perception rather than the event itself. If the stressor is determined to be a threat, it will result in negative emotional and physical consequences (Lings et al., 2014). The transactional theory assumes that stress is an external component provoking an internal response only when individuals rationalize their environment through the transaction of a stressor. The level of stress experienced is supported by the individual's perception and coping knowledge. Examining transactional theory within an occupational lens reveals that negative attitudes, job dissatisfaction,

psychological strain, withdrawal, and burnout occur if coping is unattained (Brough et al., 2018; Wagaman et al., 2015).

The transactional model has provided a foundation for hypothetical explanations of occupational stress. Utilizing the transactional model, Karasek's (1979) identified a correlation between job autonomy, social support, and job strain by describing how psychological strain experienced is not a result of one stressor but the accumulation of multiple stressors experienced at one given time. When job demands are high, job autonomy and social support are low, increasing the risk of job strain (Karasek, 1979; Van der Doef & Maes, 1999).

The research by Brough et al. (2018) and Van der Doef and Maes (1999) identified that low levels of supervisor support led to psychological strain and harmful coping mechanisms. However, Brough et al. noted that employees were more likely to use accommodating coping when experiencing either cognitive or emotional strain. Brough et al. stated that accommodating coping increases work engagement for those who specifically experience low supervisor support, suggesting that emotional and cognitive strains may influence employees' level of engagement when there is a lack of social support.

However, not all occupational demands produce the same coping mechanisms. Strain can be explained as an imbalance between environmental triggers and the coping response (Biggs et al., 2017; Edwards, 1992). Beus (2020) similarly found that strain could be explained as evaluating a stressor through the workplace environment's perception. For example, physical work conditions such as office temperature or level of

stress experienced by clutter on a shared desk can be a subjective assessment. The assessment of an environment's safety is determined through personal experience and the perception of an individual. Correspondingly, when APS workers examine their clients' safety, it is assessed through the same lens. Brosschot et al. (2018) have noted that stress is an influential factor in the perception of environmental safety and is the default response when no given information about the safety of the environment is provided. Using the generalized unsafety theory of stress, Brosschot et al. (2018) have explained that stress is continuously occurring and typically goes undetected until it is interrupted by a change in the level of stress experienced. For example, an individual walking down a dark street at night may only recognize the magnitude of stress experienced upon the safe arrival to their destination. The level of safety is recognized by comparing the perceived difference of stress levels from the beginning and end of an experience (Brosschot et al., 2018).

In a study on the development of the perception of stress and environmental safety, Côté-Lussier et al. (2015) found that children from families with an increased level of stress have a greater risk of sensing or perceiving danger within the environment. Families that continuously worry about illness, victimization, and job stability create environmental and social cues that can cause psychological insecurity and trauma (Côté-Lussier et al., 2015). Exposure to stressful environments at a young age can result in sleep deficiencies and other health concerns that can become long-lasting. While my study does not focus on safety perception development, it is integral to recognize that one's perception of safety is established through social and physical cues of the

environment experienced during childhood (Côté-Lussier et al., 2015). Therefore, the perception of safety is based on observable environmental and social cues subjectively founded upon personal experiences.

While many stress and coping theories focus on stressors, Brosschot et al. (2018) have identified that stress can occur without a stressor's immediate presence. Stress experienced from a high-stress level work environment has the potential to become prolonged stress-related activity. Thinking or worrying about a stressor can cause prolonged cognitive activity, even when the stressor is not present. This prolonged stress often results in many health risks. As previously mentioned, stress can cause fundamental physiological changes that influence one's perception. Similar to transactional and stress stimulus theories, generalized unsafety theory of stress states that stress engages the fight-or-flight response. Stress activates hormonal changes and the cardiovascular system; however, generalized unsafety theory of stress explains that prolonged activity can extend into one's leisure time whether an individual consciously or unconsciously thinks of the stressor (Brosschot et al., 2018). Long-term exposure to a high stress level creates health complications affecting the cardiovascular, autonomic, and endocrine nervous system. Recognizing how stress can impact one's perception of safety may explain how individuals acknowledge the existence of occupational stress.

Collectively applying Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory (1984) with Brosschot et al.'s (2018) generalized unsafety theory of stress may expand the current knowledge of how APS workers experience occupational stress within their work environment. Protection service workers are responsible for interpreting the environment

and how it relates to APS clients' well-being. Applying the transactional theory may help understand how APS workers perceive their environment, while generalized unsafety theory of stress may explain at what moment during an investigation APS workers experience stress level changes (Brosschot et al., 2018).

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

Elder Abuse and Adult Protective Services

Elder abuse is a global public health concern as it increases the risk of mortality. Throughout the 20th century, elder abuse was grouped into family violence; however, the term elder abuse gained recognition during the late 1970s when the courts examined the elements of elder mistreatment (Bonnie & Wallace, 2016). By the 1980s, elder abuse had gained much attention that has impacted how it is studied and researched today and has influenced literature in criminology, psychology, social work, and medicine. Examining elder abuse through a diverse lens brings depth to the concept beyond the use of basic terminology. However, challenges arise for practitioners unifying characteristics and risk factors of perpetrators, victims, and activities associated with elder abuse (Bergeron, 1999; Blundell et al., 2020; Enguidanos et al., 2014).

The CDC (2020) has defined elder abuse as "an intentional act or failure to act by a caregiver or another person in a relationship involving an expectation of trust that causes or creates a risk of harm to an older adult" (para. 1). While the CDC has defined the relationship between the victim and perpetrator, it has included the term *vulnerable* in the definition and has included abuse types (Administration for Community Living, 2019; Bonnie & Wallace, 2016; World Health Organization, 2022). The World Health

Organization (2022) has identified that elder abuse can occur within any relationship. The abuse can result in a severe loss of dignity that violates the individual's human rights that can involve cross-culture definitions and themes.

As definitions evolve, inconsistencies still exist amongst state statutes regarding terminology and age and processing cases of elder abuse (Enguidanos et al., 2014; Storey, 2020). Even with the wide range of definitions across academia, scholar-practitioners agree that elder abuse encompasses physical abuse, psychological abuse, neglect, financial exploitation, and abandonment (Bonnie & Wallace, 2016; CDC, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). Physical abuse is the infliction or the threat to inflict physical pain or injury. Physical abuse also includes prohibiting elders' basic needs such as nutrition, sanitation, and healthcare. Sexual abuse commonly occurs among vulnerable adults and is described as any non-consensual sexual contact (Bonnie & Wallace, 2016). Physical abuse often has apparent signs of hitting, slapping, pushing, kicking, and even restraining. Distinctive bruising, broken bones can indicate the warning signs of violence burns, bedsores, poor hygiene, hair loss, and unusual weight loss (Bonnie & Wallace, 2016; World Health Organization, 2020).

Emotional or psychological abuse can become more challenging to identify as psychological abuse victims may not exhibit outward markers (Shugarman et al., 2003). Psychological abuse can have long-lasting effects as perpetrators often isolate the victim from social supports (Bonnie & Wallace, 2016; Storey, 2020). Psychological abuse often coincides with other abuses such as physical abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation, as the perpetrator will use fear to control the victim (Comijs et al., 1999). The most common

signs of psychological abuse are withdrawal and depression. As the psychological abuse persists, the elder victim may no longer participate in social gatherings and may hesitate to speak freely (Chilhowski & Hughes, 2008). Often elders experiencing psychological abuse may be exhibited through sleeping abnormalities and hoarding behaviors (Bonnie & Wallace, 2016; Storey, 2020).

Neglect is the most reported form of elder abuse. Neglect can be categorized as either passive or active as perpetrators can purposefully refuse to undertake or fulfill caretaker obligations (Bonnie & Wallace, 2016; Storey, 2020). Neglect has been characterized as the failure to provide shelter, food, healthcare, and even protection for an elder person. Neglecting behaviors can often result in severe health consequences that can lead to hospitalizations and even death (Storey, 2020). Similarly, elder self-neglect is characterized as the refusal or failure to provide self-care threatening to the elder's health and safety (Dong et al., 2009). Behaviors often include failure for daily needs such as basic hygiene, nutrition, medical care, and home safety (Storey, 2020). Self-neglect has been shown to have communal damage as well. Authors Iris et al. (2014) note that elder self-neglect can create significant safety hazards that include rodent infestations and other environmental hazards. Self-neglect can result in domicile deterioration such as electrical wiring problems, structural dangers, and overall safety concerns (Iris et al., 2014).

Financial exploitation occurs when a perpetrator illegally profits from a vulnerable adult (Conrad et al., 2010; Jackson, 2015; National Adult Protective Services Association, n.d.). Although financial abuse typically occurs under duress or coercion, detecting the abuse is difficult due to monetary transaction legitimacy (Conrad et al.,

2010; Lindenbach et al., 2020). The elder often is unaware of the magnitude of the loss due to trusted persons such as family members, caretakers, friends, financial advisors, attorneys, and even medical personnel. While physical abuse and neglect often have outward indefinable markers, identifying psychological and financial abuse involves a more invasive evaluation. Obtaining information from the elder victim can become challenging due to cognitive impairment and fear of the repercussions that will occur to the suspected abuser (Conrad et al., 2010). Therefore, recognizing repeated abuse requires holistically developed assessment tools and training devoted to identifying abuse signs (Conrad et al., 2010; Iris et al., 2014; Lindenbach et al., 2012).

Elder abuse affects approximately one out of ten persons over sixty years of age within the United States (National Council on Aging, 2020; Strickland et al. 2020). Though many elder mistreatment cases go unreported, the National Council on Aging reports that nearly five million elders encounter abuse each year (National Council on Aging, 2020). The knowledge provided by Bonnie and Wallace (2003) and Enguidanos et al. (2020) has revealed that cases of abuse go unreported due to the discrepancies between definitions and identifying markers. Additionally, substantiating abuse requires state officials and protective service workers to understand state legislature regarding elder abuse. It also requires the agency to identify the signs of abuse defined by state statutes. The discrepancies of definitions and understanding of the terminology may impact how elder victims receive protective care (Chilhowski & Hughes, 2008; Lindenbach et al., 2020; Shugarman et al., 2003).

APS is a community-based social service program that assumes the responsibility to intervene on behalf of neglected, abused, and exploited adults. (Bourassa, 2009; National Center on Elder Abuse, n.d.). During an investigation, APS workers evaluate the client's physical, psychological, and cognitive function (Bonnie & Wallace, 2003; CDC, 2020; Davis, Lurigio & Herman, 2013; National Council on Aging, n.d.; Wyandt, 2004). APS workers often become the first response to life-threatening and dangerous situations (Bourassa, 2009; Leon et al., 1999). While there is ample research dedicated to the consequences of working with survivors of trauma, both Bourassa (2009) and Leon et al. (1999) discern that protective social workers are exposed to similar experiences as their role renders them vulnerable to equivalent occupational stressors.

Unique Occupational Stressors Within Gerontological Social Services

Occupational stress the physiological and psychological response that occurs when job demands are incongruent with available coping resources (Pandey, Quick, Rossi, Nelson, & Martin, 2011). Occupational stress has been a concentration of study since the mid-nineteenth century, when philanthropists, political activists, and psychologists identified the health consequences from long work hours and environmental hazards that existed within factories during the industrial revolution (Hutchins, 1913). Since then, occupational stress studies have explained how job demands deplete coping resources, result in distress, while some occupational stress is experienced as eustress (Kohn et al., 2017; Pandey et al., 2011).

APS's function is to assess for abuse, neglect, or exploitation while considering the need for protective services or guardianship (Blundell et al., 2020). The essential goal

of APS is to ensure their clients' well-being while respecting the clients' autonomy (Blundell et al., 2020). As the result of the unique stressors that occur within gerontological protection services, examining occupational stress experienced by APS workers may provide depth and insight to understand how stressors in the field may influence case processing decisions (Strickland et al., 2020).

Experiencing elevated occupational stress levels increases the likelihood of emotional exhaustion, withdrawal, and turnover (Steinheider et al., 2020). Lings et al. (2014) and Ventura et al. (2015) noted that APS protective service workers are often affected by lower levels of pay, inconsistent supervision, and limited professional growth opportunities. Occupational stress experienced by APS workers has historically been underreported and under-researched; therefore, the following section will provide an overview of the implications of stress exposure in an occupational setting within APS (Ghesquiere et al., 2018).

Reports of elder abuse require APS workers to conduct in-home investigations to determine the validity of the claim. Arriving at the alleged victims' homes, APS workers are often unsure of what to expect. Bergeron (1999) and Ghesquiere et al. (2018) identified that APS workers routinely encounter occupational hazards and violence. Of the homes visited, 80% of APS workers stated that dwellings were dangerous and unsanitary, cluttered with waste, spoiled food, insect infestations, mold, and mildew (Ghesquiere et al., 2018; Vinzant, 1998). Additionally, working with the community places protective services workers at a higher risk for workplace violence. The literature

explains that approximately 20% of APS workers have experienced physical abuse, while 50% mention experiencing verbal abuse (Ghesquiere et al., 2018).

During the interview, the APS protection worker will need to obtain consent to determine the elder's cognitive and physical function while simultaneously evaluate the elder's surroundings (Vinzant, 1998). Not only will stress levels increase in homes that are hostile and cluttered, but the environment may overstimulate working memory requiring the brain to prioritize information that is relevant to the case (Ji, Peng, & Mao, 2019). Workers that experienced fear-for-self or fear-for-the-client may make decisions about the case without collecting pertinent details (Bergeron, 1999; Shields et al., 2017; Vinzant, 1998). Frequently APS workers will conduct investigations unaccompanied; spending many hours traveling from one client to another expose's protection workers vulnerable to isolation and other occupational stress consequences (Karlsson et al., 2019).

By identifying the different types of hazards APS workers experience within a given month, Ghesquiere et al. (2018) describes factors that contribute to compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress. Other research by Bergeron (1999), Karlsson et al. (2009), Vinzant (1998), and Wagaman et al. (2015) have attributed burnout, sleep problems, depression, and negative emotional responses to occupational hazards and violence when working in the field of social services.

Challenges and Barriers With Elder Abuse Assessment

APS workers frequently witness elder clients affected by advanced stages of dementia or have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease (Chilhowski & Hughes, 2008; Ghesquiere et al., 2018). By devising ways to protect vulnerable adult populations, APS

workers establish approaches for clients to connect with family members and accessing community resources (O'Donnell et al., 2015). However, Chilhowski and Hughes (2008) discovered that caregiver offenders control their victims through fear and manipulation during investigations. The lack of client competency often is exhibited in confusion or fear, resulting in unwillingness or inability to accept community services to change one's environment (Chilhowski & Hughes, 2008). Due to the weighty responsibility, Bergeron (1999) noted that APS workers become more hesitant to make decisions when clients have diminished mental competency.

The research by Bergeron (1999) and Chihowski and Hughes (2008) depicts the challenges APS workers experience in cases concerning victims with advanced mental illness stages. The research states that even when substantiated evidence is often hard to prove, many cases are closed due to inappropriate and untimely forensic examination or the victim's credibility as a reliable witness. The consequence of underreporting victimization not only exacerbates the risk for continual abuse (Dong, 2017), but Bergeron (1999) revealed the inability to intervene increases feelings of frustration experienced by APS workers. While authors Bergeron (1999), Chilhowski and Hughes (2008), and Ghesquiere et al. (2018) address the occupational barriers that arise during in-home investigations, the research lacks clarification regarding the stressors that occur when substantiating evidence. Examining the pathways in which occupational hazards contribute to occupational stress may provide better approaches for elder abuse investigation and victim service implementation.

Assessment Instruments. Due to the natural physiological changes that occur with aging, there are challenges assessing elder abuse. While bruising and severe illness may be signs of abuse and neglect in child abuse cases, there are inconsistencies within the literature that systematically identify patterns that would aid in the deduction of abuse or unintentional injury (Beach et al., 2016; Leon et al., 1999). The aim of establishing assessment protocols is to increase the awareness of elder abuse within geriatrics. Empirically based assessment instruments guide protection services workers to identify elder abuse risk factors (Blundell, 2020). Assessment instruments typically follow three forms of assessment: self-disclosure, observational, and risk assessment. Self-disclosure assessment tools elicit the occurrence of abuse from the victim. In contrast, observational and risk assessment instruments aid in forming a conclusion of abuse by conducting an investigation (Cohen et al., 2007).

All practitioners may not be able to observe the signs and indicators of elder abuse. Therefore, instruments like the Elder Abuse Suspicion Index (EASI) and the Hwalek-Sengstock Elder Abuse Screening Test (H-S/EAST) were developed to support the assessment of elder abuse among cognitively coherent elders within the field (Yaffe et al., 2008; Neale et al., 1991). While the EASI and the H-S/EAST may help assess abuse among elders who are willing to disclose abuse, it may not be appropriate for those who are disinclined to discuss abuse or those who have advanced symptoms of Alzheimer's disease or dementia.

In many instances, APS workers make assessments through observation when clients cannot disclose abuse (Iris et al., 2013). Similar to the self-disclosure assessment,

the Actual Abuse Tool can be completed by directly asking the victim or through observation (Bass et al., 2001). Using the Actual Abuse Tool, one can report physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, or financial exploitation (Patel et al., 2018). Like the Actual Abuse Tool, observational assessment instruments may also help APS workers identify potential risks that pertain to socioeconomic status, demographics, cognition, physical mobility, and socialization (Cohen et al., 2007). Due to the lack of applicability to substantiate the frequency of abuse, APS workers use multiple assessment strategies to substantiate the occurrence of abuse (Gallione et al., 2017).

Studies by Iris et al. (2014a) and Iris et al. (2014b) examined the validity of elder self-neglect assessment instruments against cross cultures. The Self-Neglect Severity Scale (SSS) and the Elder Self-Neglect Assessment (ESNA) are assessment instruments that assess the severity of self-neglect by examining the client's cognitive function, personal hygiene, and environmental safety (Iris et al., 2014a; Iris et al., 2014b). While researchers may validate these instruments in a lab setting (Iris et al., 2014a), APS workers may find assessment instruments unreliable in the field as abuse markers may not apply to all populations (Iris et al., 2014b).

Neglect committed by a family member or caretaker can present more substantiating evidence than cases of self-neglect. This form of abuse has become challenging to substantiate due to self-neglect criterion variability (Dong, 2017). Self-neglect can be challenging to identify as many assessment tools are limited and do not assess risk factors associated with self-neglecting behaviors. Unable to screen for all risks

and behaviors of self-neglect increases the risk of excluding services and well-being (Dong, 2017).

The structured decision-making model (SDM) utilizes both evidence and research-based assessment approaches to improve each decision's consistency and validity. The SDM model seeks to reduce subsequent harm to vulnerable elders and improve service delivery (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, n.d.; Strickland et al., 2020). Assessment occurs in four stages, intake, safety, risk, and needs. The intake establishes the level of urgency, while the safety, risk, and needs assessment stages to determine the validity of risk and the client's needs (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, n.d.). LoCoco and Harff (2007) examined the effectiveness of the SDM through the perception of key stakeholders. The data indicated that while the SDM provides structure to the investigation process, the criteria is too limiting for officials to substantiate abuse in adult cases (LoCoco & Harff, 2007). The literature also indicated that APS workers believed that the SDM created too many difficulties to clarify decision-making and assessment (LoCoco & Harff, 2007; Strickland et al., 2020). Conversely, Nwufo and Castillo (2019) found that the SDM provided accurate results within the context of child protective services, however similar to LoCoco and Harff (2007) the results of the SDM had little to no impact on case processing decisions.

Elder abuse assessment instruments provide empirical-based evidence to support the occurrence and severity of abuse and self-neglect (Anthony et al., 2009; Iris et al., 2014; Naik et al., 2008; Yaffe et al., 2008). While assessment screening instruments are available, researchers (Anetzberger, 2001; Beach et al., 2016; Dong, 2017; Lindenbach et

al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2017) report that many available screening instruments may not provide substantial pattern markers that are relevant for confirmed cases of elder abuse across cultures. Additionally, many elder abuse assessment instruments rely on victims disclosing abuse, which often becomes difficult to obtain as older adults are often more reluctant to reveal that a family member is abusive (Cohen et al., 2007; Vandsburger et al., 2010). Furthermore, observational assessment instruments require APS workers to distinguish signs of abuse and neglect; however, signs of abuse may not be overtly evident (Iris et al., 2014a; Iris et al., 2014b). While researchers (Iris et al., 2014a; Iris et al., 2014b; Yaffe et al., 2008; Yi et al., 2019) have tested the reliability and validity of elder abuse assessment instruments, limitations to generalizability occur due to sampling and researcher bias.

Cross Referrals and Community-Based Services

APS workers provide services by organizing cross-referrals with community-based programs. Dong (2017), O'Donnell et al. (2015), and Teaster et al. (2009) note that elder abuse cases are multidisciplinary, requiring involvement across medical and legal fields. As 25% of all reported cases of elder abuse involve clients with mental illness (Teaster et al., 2009), providing services to clients is dependent on the collaboration with community-based mental health services. Involving other services like in-home help, private nurses, respite care, and day-care facilities increases the level of the elder's protection and minimizes isolation (O'Donnell et al., 2015). However, community services have long waiting lists that make it challenging to obtain services promptly. Still,

Vandsburger et al. (2012) found that the available community services are often not culturally applicable.

The United States Department of Justice (2019) projects the percentage of older adults living in rural areas will increase within the next decade due to the baby boomer generation moving from urban areas to rural areas and the outmigration of younger people moving from rural areas to urban areas (United States Department of Justice, 2019). In many cases, older adults who live in rural areas face higher risks of isolation as there is limited access to public transportation, adequate health care, and aging network services (Dimah & Dimah, 2003; Vanderburger et al., 2012). As the aging population moves out of urban areas, it raises concern for APS, as adults in rural areas are more likely to exhibit risk factors associated with dementia and abuse (Vandsburger et al., 2012). Additionally, APS protective service workers who have clients in rural areas often spend hours alone in their car; the outmigration will increase travel time from one client to the next (Vinzant, 1998). As more people move away from cities, APS workers' caseloads will increase, and community-based resources may become more challenging to attain (McConnell, 2000; Vandsburger et al., 2012).

Research has addressed that APS workers experience frustration due to the lack of authority to intervene in substantiated abuse situations (Bergeron, 1999; Vandsburger et al., 2012). Due to the diminished application of services, APS work environments can become stressful (Steinheider et al., 2019). Although research by Bergeron (1999), Otto and Quinn (2008), and Vandsburger et al. (2012) state that the availability of community services is limited due to the lack of funding. However, Dauenhauer et al. (2008) found

that the absence of community services may result from the quality of rapport between APS agencies and collaboration services.

APS does not have the right to implement services without the client's approval or obtaining a court order, placing gerontological social workers in conditions that require critical judgments (Chilhowski & Hughes, 2008). Beyond assessing environmental safety, APS workers formulate conclusions regarding the elder adult's medical, legal, and social wellbeing. Despite the existence of evidence of abuse, complexities may hinder the identifying markers. Substantiating evidence may be difficult to prove due to the discrepancies presented with evidence-based risk factors, assessment instruments (Iris et al., 2014a), and policy ambiguity (Poksakoff et al., 2007). APS workers regularly need to decipher situations where their decision to intervene would violate the elder's autonomy (Bergeron, 1999; Ghesquiere et al., 2018). After examining all risk factors, APS may determine that the elder would be safer without implementing an intervention plan. As a result, community satisfaction may decrease when community expectations supersede operational protocol. Lings et al. (2014) note that individuals in service roles, like APS, may experience higher levels of stress due to the organization's demands and client satisfaction.

Role Stress and Perceived Expectations

As the essential duty for APS workers is to understand and analyze the client's environment and needs, the literature indicates that APS workers need to collaborate with supervisors and colleagues to establish holistic decisions when cases pose ambiguous circumstances (Lindenbach et al., 2020). The research by Bergeron (1999) explored the

factors that influence APS workers' decision-making processes. The data portrayed that many APS workers support case processing decisions on personal, community support, professional creativity, and intra-office factors (Bergeron, 1999). Perceptions regarding the case, the environment, and the clients were noted as influential factors when making case processing decisions. However, to provide appropriate services to victims, the discovery of evidence relies on the APS protective service worker's findings. The work of Chilhowski and Hughes (2018) claims that many cases do not meet the standardized requirements for services due to unclear definitions, inadequate measures, and inconsistent forensic markers. Due to inconsistencies in assessment methods, it can compromise the investigation and inevitably delay the application of services (Chilhowski & Hughes, 2018).

Role stress occurs when the inconsistency of responsibilities transpires between the social worker and the agency (Acker, 2018). For example, social workers may perceive that the agency has established unattainable objectives by implementing rigid constraints on policies and budgets (Bergeron, 1999; O'Donnell et al., 2015; Ravalier, 2018; Vandsburger et al., 2018). Budget cuts have required social workers to re-strategize case management. To overcome challenges, APS workers have prioritized and geographically planned cases to fit within travel budgets (O'Donnell et al., 2015). Although it may elevate organizational strains, this approach increases the risk of excluding services for clients living in rural areas (Bergeron, 1999; O'Donnell et al., 2015). Strain experienced by role stress has led to increased "pain, anger, and frustration" among APS workers (Vandsburger et al., 2010, p. 365). As more elder abuse cases arise,

it will require social workers to work harder with fewer resources (Bergeron, 1999; Ghesquiere et al., 2018; Ravalier, 2018).

Implications From Stress Exposure

Compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout frequently appear in discussions about stress and protection service work (Cummings et al., 2019; Owens-King, 2019; Singer et al., 2019; Wagaman et al., 2015). Research has established that continuous secondary exposure to trauma can result in emotional exhaustion, leading to a lack of empathy and eventual burnout (Cummings et al., 2019; Singer et al., 2019). Although compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout are not the central focus of this study, the literature (Dalphon, 2019; Centrano, 2017; Leon et al., 1999; Leiter et al., 2018) provides knowledge of the consequences from the stress.

APS workers' occupational stressors have resulted from protocol ambiguities, heavy caseloads, and limited support from supervisors (Blundell, 2020; Leon et al., 1999). Current research mirrors these findings and explains that occupational stressors experienced by protective service workers decrease job satisfaction and job performance (Acker, 2018; Ghesquiere et al., 2018; Leon et al., 1999; Lings et al., 2014; Storey & Billingham, 2001). While occupational stressors within social services are unique and distinctive, Bourassa (2012) and Stuart (2020) suggest that the adaptation to cope is subjective and influenced by the APS workers' background, personality, physical ability, and professional experience.

Cognitive and Behavioral Implications From Stress

Effective decision-making incorporates five critical stages of case processing: referral, safety, investigation, evaluation, and case closure (O'Donnell et al., 2015). Through active listening, APS workers gain insight into the case's details; however, due to the nature of elder abuse, the investigation process can often appear too invasive (Cambridge & Parkes, 2004). APS workers must understand their clients' vulnerability to avoid further victimization, isolation, and exclusion of services (Cambridge & Parkes, 2004; O'Donnell et al., 2015).

Investigators need to assess for safety, but they are required to know policy procedures, agency responsibilities, and information about state statutes. APS workers need to analyze each case's unique characteristics and choose a plan of action specific to the victim. In many cases, APS workers collaborate with colleagues and supervisors to advise the most appropriate action plan (Lindenbach et al., 2012; Lindenbach et al., 2020). Communication is the critical element for success during the investigation process, not only with the client but also supervisors within the agency and working as a liaison between other service agencies (Cambridge & Parkes, 2004).

Working memory is a theoretical construct that explains the systematic progression of the encoding, retention, and retrieval process. As memory is an influential element of decision-making, exposure to chronic stress can negatively impact retaining and recalling information. Baddeley and Hitch (1974) describe working memory as a three-part system controlled by the executive system. One subsystem, referred to as the visuospatial sketchpad, is responsible for the interface between visual and spatial

information for motor control. The second subsystem, known as the articulatory loop, processes speech perception to speech production by retrieving verbal information. However, the working memory has a limited capacity and can be compromised when exposed to stress (Maheu et al., 2005). Baddeley et al. (1998) found that by disrupting the visuospatial process, short term memory was affected. Building upon the findings of Baddeley et al. (1998), Sepp et al. (2019) theorized that there is only a finite number of attentional resources and that the memory process can be interrupted when interference occurs during the encoding phase.

The retrieval process is essential for recalling verbal and visual cues as APS workers must decipher information in abuse cases. Investigation requires APS workers to assess the environments and take notes that will later influence processing cases. Research by Luethi et al. (2009) and Sazma et al. (2019) suggested that stress can have beneficial effects on memory by enhancing memory recall. Personal experiences may contradict the assessment and protocol results, which is why knowledge from experience and empirically-based tools should be used simultaneously (Maldei et al., 2019). However, formulating decisions through intuitive decision-making assumes that APS workers utilize routine elements from prior elder abuse cases to make life-altering decisions for current cases (Welling, 2005).

During APS investigations, APS workers will need to consider the best solution for the client and rationalize the best course of action through problem-solving. In many cases, stress can impair judgment, which can negatively affect this process. Morgado et al. (2015) found that the decision-making process can become impaired when exposed to

high levels of constant stress. If APS workers experience chronic stress, it may prompt neuroplasticity changes in the prefrontal cortex and striatum, altering rational valuation and decision-making (Morgado et al., 2015; Porcelli & Delgado, 2017). Excessive stress exposure creates changes in goal-directed habits (McEwen, 2017; Morgado et al., 2015; Pearson et al., 2014). Decisions made under stress often are influenced by reward and punishment sensitivity, automated response, or feedback processing (Porcelli & Delgado, 2017; Starcke & Brand, 2012). Due to the nature of the work, protective workers are more susceptible to maladaptive stress responses that may cause intuitive decision making it less reliable (Steinheider et al., 2020; Wagaman et al., 2015).

Stress Interventions and Coping With Occupational Stress

Maintaining happiness and satisfaction at work has been attributed to coping with occupational stressors (Steinheider et al., 2020). The holistic model of stress developed by Nelson and Simmons (2011) describes how psychological reactions of occupational stressors experienced during the workday influences positive and negative outcomes. Through the lens of the holistic model, Parker and Ragsdale (2015) found by examining the negative and positive markers of stress, meaningfulness, and happiness in the workplace could prevent negative consequences like workplace fatigue. Researchers (Brough et al., 2018; Podsakoff et al., 2007; Rich et al., 2010; Steinheider et al., 2020) found a correlation between the level of employee engagement and the quality of organizational climate.

Professional self-efficacy has been found to be a mitigating factor for strain experienced in the workplace. Occupational stress is manageable when workers have

higher levels of self-efficacy (Ventura et al., 2015). The reduction of professional self-efficacy experienced by APS agencies has placed their professional values, professional growth, and productivity at risk (Acker, 2018; Hackman and Oldham, 1976; Ventura et al., 2015). In support of Karasek's (1979) job demand-control model, when protective service workers experience an increase of job autonomy, their occupational strain decreases, allowing for increased engagement for more challenging tasks (Kain & Jex, 2010). Employees who perceive to have higher job autonomy and job satisfaction are more likely to cope with occupational stress demands (Acker, 2018; Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Acker's (2018) support Storey and Billingham's (2001) findings by identifying a negative correlation between job satisfaction and stress. A similar pattern was also recognized between colleague support and the level of stress experienced (Storey & Billingham, 2001). Brough et al. (2018) and Steinheider et al. (2020) found that as the level of support from their supervisors increased, APS workers were more equipped to manage their stress.

Current literature dedicated to occupational stress has noted a shift in organizational responsibility. Many organizations have implemented self-care training and health programs to reduce occupational stress (Ghesquiere et al., 2018; Quick & Henderson, 2016). Many organizations emphasize primary prevention methods and establish and maintain a work-life balance through supportive social networks. Several interventions address the challenges that APS workers face, including professional development, supervisor support, and job management. Many agencies have also implemented supplemental workshops that focus on mindfulness and self-talk exercises

to encourage employees to channel their energy to cope with stressors (Ghesquiere et al., 2018; Quick & Henderson, 2016). As job demands, physical demands, and interpersonal demands may exhaust the coping mechanisms, efforts have been implemented to avoid long-term consequences from occupational stress. Organizations provide resources to obtain counseling and therapy (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Quick & Henderson, 2016). Across the United States, many companies have provided employees with tools and training to improve employee safety, reduce occupational stress, and improve comping skills (Quick & Henderson, 2016).

Gaps in APS Occupational Stress Research and Theory

The supporting literature has provided evidence regarding the negative consequences that arise from occupational stressors. However, there is limited knowledge regarding how APS social workers stress while conducting investigations of elder abuse (Ghesquiere et al., 2018). Examining the unique stressors involved in elder abuse investigations may benefit by developing a standard definition of occupational stress experienced by gerontological protective service workers.

Insufficiency of Theory and Definition

The current literature addresses the risks, causes, and consequences of occupational stressors and ways to offset stress within a wide protective services lens. The use of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory and other derivatives have provided fundamental knowledge for explaining the association between job demands and strain and has framed numerous discussions of compassion fatigue, job satisfaction, burnout, and turnover within protective services. Yet, there is limited knowledge to

explain the how APS workers experience perceived stressors that influence elder abuse investigations. While the literature identifies workers are more susceptible to maladaptive behaviors, not all stress imparts negative consequences (Kohnet et al., 2017).

The Relevance of Qualitative Research

Most of the current literature dedicated to occupational stress within APS was framed in quantitative methods. However, the limited studies that used qualitative methods focused on self-protection measures against compassion fatigue or challenges of case management and critical factors that influenced decision-making within APS (Ghesquiere et al., 2018). Gerontological protective service research would benefit from acquiring more knowledge of the perceived stress experienced during in-home investigations by APS workers.

While bridging the literature gap may be used for professional advocacy, the information may provide more effective method ways for APS protective workers to cope with their stress to implement services for elder abuse clients. Additional stress research within gerontological protective services may also provide insight into the factors that contribute to decision-making regarding case processing in allegations of elder abuse.

Summary and Conclusion

The literature presented examines the consequences that occur from exposure to occupational stressors experienced by APS workers. The research illustrates the complexities and uniqueness that are commonly attributed to protection services. Through the lens of gerontological protection services, occupational stress presents significant difficulties and challenges across various settings and scenarios. As elder

abuse is a growing concern, occupational stressors have created barriers for protection workers as they impede the ability to complete tasks efficiently. Occupational stress can impose negative physical and cognitive consequences that impede the success of one's duties. It is well documented that APS workers are more susceptible to compassion fatigue, burnout, and turnover. However, the benefits from expanding the current literature may increase knowledge of the cognitive impact occupational stress imparts on protective social workers, specifically concerning case processing and decision-making. By gathering data pertinent to the lived experiences of those working as a protection service working within a gerontological setting, may provide a better understanding of how stress is experienced and develop better methods for stress intervention and stress management. In the next chapter, the methodology for this study will be explained. Chapter 3 will provide a rationale for a phenomenological research design as well as the instruments intended to be used and how the data will be obtained.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how occupational stressors impact APS workers in reported cases of elder abuse. This chapter reflects the methodologies used in current literature while justifying the need for qualitative data that examines the occupational stressors experienced by gerontological protective services workers. The role of the researcher will also be examined by unveiling any potential biases and ethical issues that may impact the quality of the research. Finally, this study followed a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of APS workers during the investigation process of cases of elder abuse.

Research Design and Rationale

Research Question

What are the lived experiences of APS workers investigating allegations of elder abuse?

I have used this question as a guide to identify the various factors that influence APS workers' perception of the occupational stress experienced during an elder abuse investigation. A qualitative research method was selected for this investigation to obtain insight and depth into lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Through quantitative research design is valuable for gathering a copious amount of data, the phenomenon of interest is dependent on the participants' perception that may only be achieved using a qualitative research design. In addition, qualitative research allows gathering specific details that would be unfounded in other research methods. Therefore, using a qualitative research design is beneficial as it provides access to historical

information that could not be directly observed during the investigation process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Within qualitative research, there are five ways in which a researcher can obtain data. The varying methods include ethnography, narrative, grounded theory, case study, and phenomenological methods (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). While these methods use comparable data collection practices, the purpose of the study is what sets these methods apart. In ethnographic research, the researcher immerses themselves within the participants' environment and becomes a participant-observer. Examining the purpose of this study from this perspective would have required me to follow the participant within the workplace setting to gain insight into how a phenomenon was experienced (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Applying an ethnographic method would have been challenging for this study as it aims to understand how stress is experienced as an APS caseworker, making dialog and interpretation of their experience an essential element of data collection. The narrative approach provides the ability for the participant to tell their story about a particular event. While this method has its benefits, the narrative approach is lengthy and would not necessarily have answered the research question as this method relies on the memory and writing skills of the narrator. Grounded theory is intended to develop a theory based on the collected data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Although a grounded theory study may provide the ability to understand how APS caseworkers experience stress; research founded in grounded theory is time consuming as it produces a large amount of data it also creates the chance for researcher generated bias due its unstructured nature (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

In the research tradition of phenomenology, researchers attempt to acquire meaning through lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By gaining insight into what was experienced, the data are rich and tell how the event was experienced without requesting a justification of participants' perceptions or behaviors. In addition, by examining the experiences of others, phenomenological research attempts to identify or rediscover implications (Laverty, 2003; Neubauer et al., 2019).

Phenomenological Research Design Rationale

Phenomenology applied in research is an approach that explores the lived experiences by focusing on what was experienced and how it was experienced (Given, 2008). Supported by the underpinnings of many philosophical traditions, phenomenology can be described through descriptive and interpretive approaches (Given, 2008). A hermeneutic perspective focuses on how the individual interacts and interprets their position within their environment. Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer focused on understanding how individuals comprehend their existence within the context of perception and language. This tradition of philosophy provides insight into how individuals rationalize their decisions within their lifeworld (Neubauer et al., 2019). Using a phenomenological research method is beneficial for gaining insight surrounding the motivations that guide individuals' decisions based on their perceptions of their environment (Neubauer et al., 2019). Furthermore, as occupational stress is personal and unique, the phenomenological approach provides the ability to understand people's perceptions through a dialogue of naturally occurring data (Neubauer et al., 2019).

As there is limited information on the lived experiences of APS caseworkers during the investigation process of alleged elder abuse cases, the phenomenological approach is beneficial to understand and meaning of the phenomenon of interest. Applying a phenomenological design to examine the occupational stress that APS workers experience when investigating cases of alleged elder abuse has provided depth to the current literature. However, this method is intended to capture data from actual lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thus, phenomenological qualitative research is best suited for this study as this study focuses on exploring personal perceptions of occupational stress.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research is dependent on the interpretation of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As the primary data collector, I was attempting to access perceptions of stress experienced during elder abuse investigations. I was responsible for collecting and analyzing the data gathered through open-ended semi-structured interviews. During this study, my role was to be an observer and not directly interact with the setting of interest that participants may describe. Systematic differences may have emerged from how the data was gathered, documented, and analyzed. The goal of this study was to handle the data in a neutral and unbiased manner; however, interpretations and analysis of language and events are only understood through the perceptions of lived experiences (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2011).

According to Tufford and Newman (2010), bracketing is a qualitative research method used to moderate preconceived ideas that would influence the study results. In

emotionally charged research studies, bracketing allows the researcher to separate emotions and feelings from the topic of interest (Creswell, 2003). I implemented bracketing by writing memos throughout the data collection processing and analysis. Emotions or thoughts were logged about the data provided the capability to be transparent of any potential bias. However, the information gained by interviewing participants provided a better understanding of behavior and perception of occupational stress that occurs during investigations of elder abuse. As a graduate student at Walden University, I had no personal or professional affiliation with the participants of this study.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

Qualitative research provides the ability to understand and incorporate the human experience. Rather than focusing on generalizability, phenomenological research emphasizes rich individualistic and subjective data. Since phenomenological data yields high-quality data, there are no established guidelines regarding sample size (Guest et al., 2006; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saunders et al., 2018). However, Groenewald (2004) agreed with Creswell (1998) and Morse (1994) that phenomenological data can plateau, and saturation can often be achieved with between five and 20 participants.

The population of interest for this study are APS workers from all demographic backgrounds. Since the purpose of phenomenological research is to generate in-depth understanding and insight on a particular phenomenon, purposeful sampling offers the ability to select participants that are specific to a particular population (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is a straightforward method to ensure that the participants provide

relevant data to the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The inclusion criteria require participants to be 18 years of age or older and to have been previously or currently employed by APS. Participants were screened to determine eligibility to safeguard that they meet the inclusion requirements. To ensure that participants were not exposed to harm, I disqualified and excluded from the study participants who were currently being treated for chronic stress symptoms. The American Psychological Association's (2017) ethical guidelines instruct researchers to protect participants from harm. While gaining insight from individuals who are currently being treated for symptoms associated with chronic stress could have been beneficial to the study, discussing stressful work-related situations could have potentially increased the risk for harm to the participant.

Participants were recruited through advertisements on the Walden University participant pool and other local university and college campuses. In addition, I created digital flyers and posted them on LinkedIn. All advertisement flyers included the title, description, and purpose of the study. The advertisements also included participant eligibility requirements, participation compensation in the form of a $10 Amazon gift card, and my contact information. As participation was voluntary, participants were responsible for contacting me to participate. Participants who met the inclusion criteria were welcomed to participate by email. Since this recruitment method yielded enough participants, snowball sampling was not used to gather additional participants. Although purposeful and snowball sampling result in sampling bias, both methods provide the best

technique to find participants who have experience related to the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

Instrumentation

The instruments for this research included an interview protocol (see Appendix), digital audio recordings of the interviews that were conducted using a videoconferencing platform, and any notes taken during the interviews. I produced and developed the data collection instrument based on the research question: What are the lived experiences of APS workers investigating allegations of elder abuse?

The interview protocol was structured following Seidman's (2019) three-series interview method that focuses on life history, work experience, and reflection on the meaning of the phenomenon. This method of interviewing focused on making meaning of the human experience through the lens of the participant. While it may be impossible to understand the participant experience entirely, a phenomenological approach allows an understanding of the experience as accurately as the participant perceives it (Seidman, 2019).

Traditionally, Seidman's (2019) interview method was designed to be conducted in three separate interviews. While this study did not require participants to be interviewed on three separate occasions, the interview questions were structured similarly to reconstruct their lived experience of stress exposure as an APS caseworker. The interviews were semistructured and guided by me. The interview questions were based on prompts adapted from existing literature. Each interview followed a 90-minute format. Seidman's interview questions guided the interview to collect rich data about how stress

is experienced during the investigation process of alleged elder abuse. Open-ended questions allowed participants to share perceptions of work-related stress without limitations (Allen, 2017). Bevan (2014) mentioned that open-ended questioning should also be descriptive in order to provide the opportunity to gather more details that will aid in interpreting participant experience. As the data were given as a narrative, descriptive questioning encouraged participants to define their experiences. Descriptive questioning aided in interpreting the data as the information gathered is founded on the interviewer's assumptions (Brevan, 2014). While descriptive questioning should not be ignored, the use of structural questions aided in identifying how the participant understands their experiences while increasing trustworthiness and credibility (Brevan, 2014). Structural questions provided depth to each question and validated the meaning of words and phrases conveyed.

In-depth interviews are meant to go beyond the superficial meaning of an event and yield insight through the social and cultural lens of the participant (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012). During the interview, questions of perceived stress prompted thoughts, meanings, and ideas regarding the investigation process. These types of questions were intended to incite a reflection of the methods for decision-making and case processing. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to provide the opportunity for the participant to review. This method of member checking was also used and was intended to strengthen the validity and credibility of the data (Ravich & Carl, 2016).

Data Analysis Plan

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a method of analysis that has been used in qualitative research to deliver a comprehensive assessment of lived experiences. Smith and Osborn (2015) noted that interpretative phenomenological analysis also allows researchers to understand and interpret how humans rationalize their environments independently and objectively without the influence of predetermined perceptions, theories, or ideologies. Once interviews were transcribed, I read the transcripts thoroughly to create initial codes. Coding was done using both the qualitative data analysis software NVivo (Release 1.6.1) and by hand.

The process also organized the raw data, allowing me to identify the patterns or themes that I then used to develop meaningful conclusions. The use of thematic analysis allowed for summarization about occupational stress experienced by APS caseworkers. Braun and Clarke (2006) identified a six-phase method that helps organize the data, including (a) analyzing the data, (b) generating codes, (c) looking for common themes, (d) thematic review, (e) defining the themes, and (f) writing up the conclusions. To ensure that themes were consistent required some level of data saturation. Ando et al. (2014) stressed that saturation is vital to the validity of qualitative research. Saturation is often identified when no additional concepts or themes are found. Often saturation can be achieved between 10 and 12 interviews (Ando et al., 2014). However, as this study emphasized the perceptions of lived experiences, the replication of exact data may not have been obtained. Nonetheless, similar themes emerged and were repeated, which indicated saturation was achieved (Saunders et al., 2018).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility within qualitative research depends on how accurately the researcher can ascertain the participants' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Preskill & Russ-Eft, 2005). To understand the potential threats of the study and take precautions to minimize these threats through experimental procedures respondent validation will be used to evaluate whether the researcher accurately understood and captured the meaning of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Given, 2008). After the interview, the transcription of the interview was completed. To check for accuracy the participants had the opportunity to review the transcription of the interview. Additionally, to increase the study's trustworthiness and credibility, I used data triangulation. Each participant's comments were measured against those of others to determine data accuracy (Seidman, 2019).

Transferability

There are often potential threats to external validity when researchers make assumptions from the data. For example, in qualitative research, threats to external validity often arise when researchers apply the findings to other groups beyond the study's experiences and sample (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For example, phenomenological studies emphasize lived experiences that are personal to the individuals within the study and may not be transferable to other populations or settings. However, capturing the lived experiences from the sample has

identified descriptive and interpretive data that have created the opportunity for transferability to others within APS.

Dependability

Dependability is what Ravitch and Carl (2016) referred to as the constancy of the data found within the research study. Dependability also is reflective of how the study can be replicated to obtain similar results. For this research study, an audit trail has been provided that contains the methods for data collection and any variation that may occur in the data collection process. Triangulation uses multiple data sources to validate the findings within the research data. In addition, triangulation aims to identify inconsistencies with emerging patterns and reduce systematic bias (Lemon & Hayes, 2020).

More than one analysis method will be used to examine the phenomenon to increase this study's dependability. This research study has used respondent validation and theoretical triangulation to examine the data through multiple theoretical lenses. Respondent validation is a type of triangulation that will be used during and after the interviews. Follow-up questions were asked during the interview to clarify terms and meanings. Staging the questions into three category structures also increased validity as it placed the participants' responses into context that allowed the researcher to review the responses through follow-up questioning.

Confirmability

An audit trail provided the opportunity for transparency and illustrated the findings of the participants in an unbiased manner. Due to the data collection process in

qualitative design, changes often transpire, requiring the researcher to make choices that may alter the progression of the study. Using an audit trail ex post facto has provided the opportunity for the researcher to justify the research findings. The researcher has documented findings, observations, and changes that have occurred within the study's design (Given, 2008).

Ethical Procedures

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary, and participants who prematurely concluded or withdrew from the study did so without penalty. Participants gave their permission to participate in this study and were provided informed consent to participate. As the researcher, I provided each participant with the purpose of the study for them to make an informed decision about participation. This informed consent included any potential risks by participating in the research and any potential benefits. At any time if the participants had withdrawn from the study, the data was to be excluded. None of the participants experienced distress, however, participants were provided a crisis hotline telephone number. In addition, all study participants were provided with contact information for the researcher, the committee chair, and the university.

The information participants provided during the study will remain private and confidential. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. Any information linking participants to their actual identities will be securely stored to reduce the risk of compromising confidentiality. All digital information has been encrypted by using password protection on all files stored on the researcher's personal computer. Any written information about participant information has been stored in a locked filing

cabinet at the researcher's home. While I will remain in the sole custody of the research data, it is available to the dissertation chair and second committee member. The data is also accessible to the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) upon their request. All documents will be held in storage for 3 years. All handwritten documents will be shredded at the end of this period, and digital data will be destroyed and erased.

The IRB has reviewed this study to compare its methods with the ethical standards established by the U.S. federal government to ensure that this research study follows all ethical guidelines. The IRB approval number for this research study is 03-01-22-0619300. By receiving this approval, I have taken steps that follows the university's IRB to guidelines for ethical research.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology for this research study. Within this chapter, approaches of participant selection were discussed and the ethical processes to gain access to participants. This chapter also discussed methods of gathering data and ways to ensure reliability and validity. The purpose of gathering this data is to understand the lived experience of APS caseworkers during the investigating process of alleged elder abuse cases. The intended data by this study is to gain insight into the occupational stress experienced during the investigation process to understand the process of processing elder abuse cases.

In Chapter 4, I will describe the purpose of the research question with details of the participant demographics and any influence that dictate the data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 will also include the specific codes and themes identified within the

data and emphasize their importance. The following chapter will also examine the trustworthiness of the data about the strategies found within this chapter. Lastly, Chapter 4 will reveal the data results highlighting each research question and depicting tables to illustrate the results.

Chapter 4: Findings

To answer the research question "What are the lived experiences of APS workers investigating allegations of elder abuse?" this studied provided an understanding of how APS caseworkers experience stress during the investigation process of elder abuse. The research question was the guiding element in uncovering this phenomenon. In this chapter, the setting and demographics of the participants will be discussed, along with the data collection, analysis, and the study's results.

Setting

For this qualitative study, I used an interview protocol that included a semistructured interview. As this study was phenomenological, many participants went beyond the questions being asked to provide a better understanding of their lived experiences. There were 12 interviews conducted via the Zoom videoconferencing platform (https://zoom.us) from April 2022 to May 2022. Participants were sent consent letters that included information about the purpose of the study and contact information for emergency mental health services if needed.

As the interviewer, I had scheduled interviews based around the participants' schedules. Communication with each participant was conducted by email via my Walden University email address. Once participants provided a day and time that worked with their busy schedule, I sent them a link to the scheduled Zoom meeting. Each participant received a unique link to their own meeting date and time to their personal email address. Sending the link via email provided the option for participants to participate either through a desktop, laptop, tablet, or smart phone device. On the day of each interview, I

had set up my laptop in a quiet room in my home away from any other occupant in the same domicile.

Approximately 15 minutes before each interview, I would join the meeting through Zoom to ensure that I was ready to greet each participant on time. I split the screen so that I could view both applications, Zoom and the interview protocol through Microsoft Word. In front of my laptop keyboard, I had a note pad to take handwritten notes during the interview. This helped with bracketing and identification of significant keywords.

Once in the Zoom meeting room, I used my laptop camera so each participant could see me. I allowed participants to decide if they wanted to turn on to use their cameras during the interview. All participants chose not to use their cameras. The interviews followed the interview protocol, which provided a structure; however, I experienced some challenges and unusual circumstances during the data collection process.

All participants in this study were responsible for finding a physical location to participate in the interview. The data collection method required participants to have a reliable internet connection and a quiet setting so that background noises would not interfere with the audio. In two of the 12 interviews, the participants lost the connection, which interrupted the interview flow. However, once the internet connection was re-established, the interview was completed. Background noise interference also became a distraction during the interview. Questions had to be repeated and rephrased for the participant to hear and understand what was being asked.

The interviews ranged from 20 to 60 minutes and were audio recorded via Zoom software. I transcribed verbatim the interview audio and was sent via email to the participant. I asked participants to read the transcripts for member checking and accuracy. No changes were made to the original transcripts after completing the member checking. None of the participants expressed any personal or organizational conditions that would have influenced their experience during the interview process.

Demographics

A purposeful selection strategy was used to find volunteers that matched the qualifications of the population of interest. I recruited participants using advertisements on the Walden University Participant Pool, LinkedIn, and public postings at local community colleges and state universities. However, the volunteer participants responded to the Walden Participant Pool and the LinkedIn posting. All participants who volunteered indicated that they reside in the eastern region of the United States. The sample was 58% were male, 42% were female. Of the sample 16% identified as retired or no longer working for a protective service agency. The length of work experience ranged among the participants from approximately 4 to 30 years of service, with an average of 6 years in the field of protective social services. The number of cases handled in a month also varied among participants. The number of cases investigated ranged from three to 45, with an average of 14 new cases per month.

Table 1 summarizes the participants' sex, the region where they live, recruitment method, employment status, years of experience, and the number of cases handled in a

month. In the data analysis section of this chapter, each participant will be profiled individually to identify significant themes.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Matrix

Participant pseudonym	Sex	Method of recruitment	Employment status	Years of experience	Average no. of new cases per month
Participant 1	Female	LinkedIn	Resigned	5	6
Participant 2	Female	LinkedIn	Employed	5	20
Participant 3	Male	LinkedIn	Employed	3	10
Participant 4	Female	LinkedIn	Employed	5	15
Participant 5	Male	WUPP	Retired	20	45
Participant 6	Female	LinkedIn	Employed	4	15
Participant 7	Male	LinkedIn	Employed	4	11
Participant 8	Female	LinkedIn	Employed	6	20
Participant 9	Male	LinkedIn	Employed	2	6
Participant 10	Male	LinkedIn	Employed	6	7
Participant 11	Male	LinkedIn	Employed	5	3
Participant 12	Male	LinkedIn	Employed	4	10

Note. WUUP = Walden University Participant Pool.

Data Collection

Twelve individuals volunteered to participate in the research interview. Permission was granted by the Walden University IRB to post a request for participants from the Walden University Research Participant Pool, LinkedIn, Facebook, and flyers posted on public bulletin boards. Only one potential participant responded to the post on the Walden University Research Participant Pool and requested information about the study and volunteered to participate. The remaining 11 participants volunteered through the advertisement posted on LinkedIn.

The interview protocol was the guide for each interview. However, phenomenological research allows participants to describe their lived experiences, allowing each interview to be unique to the participants' experience. The interview was intended to follow the protocol, and many opportunities allowed for additional questions to be asked that went beyond the prepared questions. During many interviews, additional follow-up questions were required to encourage participants to answer the questions and clarify questions so that participants could understand what the question was trying to attain.

In this study, I examined the data about the lived experiences of 12 participants. The interviews lasted between 20 and 60 minutes each and were recorded and transcribed for accuracy. In addition, I emailed each participant their transcripts to complete member checking. Participants were scheduled for an interview via email and were informed that the interview would take no longer than one hour of their time. The data were collected using the video telephony platform, Zoom. While this software can use video, only the audio of each interview was recorded and saved.

The recordings were transcribed using the NVivo transcription services and then transcribed manually for accuracy in areas where the audio was too faint for NVivo to recognize. Once the transcriptions were completed, I asked the participants to review their transcripts for accuracy. The participants were asked to read through the transcriptions and make any corrections if needed. No discrepancies were found. NVivo was then used to generate themes and similarities within the data. The analysis and

transcriptions were then saved on a password-protected external hard drive and stored in a locked filing cabinet.

Data Analysis

NVivo software was used to perform qualitative data analysis for the data gathered from participants. After recording the interviews through Zoom, transcribing the audio recording both through NVivo and manually, and verifying each transcription for accuracy through member checking, I uploaded the transcriptions as individual files into the NVivo software. Analysis was then performed using the software's auto-coding feature to identify and extract codes and similarities. Additionally, manual coding supplemented the data produced by NVivo for accuracy. I read each transcript line by line to identify codes and sentiments by each participant. Inductive coding was then used to classify codes and themes. Specific codes were extracted from each participant's transcripts. Codes that emerged included hostility, depression, exhaustion, frustration, inadequacy, incompetency, anxiety, depression, pressure/strain, and fear. I then classified these codes into two categories: environmental and organizational stressors relating to how the APS caseworker experienced the stressor. These categories were then themed into relating how the stressors were experienced.

Phenomenological research permits the uniqueness of data. However, discrepant information was also considered. For example, one participant indicated that nothing was challenging about his role as an APS caseworker and that his one stressor is that he is "exposed to people in the world." While these responses were unique from other data, the participant indicated similar situations, such as experiencing long hours, untruthful

clients, and difficulties with communication. Nevertheless, the data analysis validated relationships to the fundamental theories presented in Chapter 2. The themes that demonstrated Lazarus' and Folkman's transactional theory (1986) included: (a) safety assessment of the environment, (b) stress is experienced through perceived environmental factors, and (c) coping mechanisms generated through experience. Themes related to Brosschot et al. (2018) generalized unsafety theory are (a) anxiousness about potentially unsafe situations and environments, (b) occupational stressors produce reactive behaviors, (c) chronic stress has led to health problems, and (d) level of ability to cope with stress can impact job performance and the perception of stress.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research is intended to ensure accuracy in the findings of the data. Member checking and bracketing were used to establish the credibility of this study. First, a copy of the transcriptions was sent to each participant. Participants were allowed to review their interview transcripts and were asked to make any corrections if needed. This process was to establish the accuracy of the data that were documented. Bracketing was the second method to increase the credibility of the data. Bracketing is a method that is intended to regulate personal beliefs and values to ensure that participants' lived experiences are described accurately (Chan et al., 2013). During each interview, I took notes regarding any assumptions or biases that arose during each interview. These notes were used to help separate any conclusions from the experiences being described. The number of individuals who showed interest in volunteering to participate in the study

was noteworthy. Participants were eager to share their work experiences, but some were disinclined to discuss emotional issues, past trauma, or psychological health issues that could be related to their professional performance. Nevertheless, each interview ended positively, and participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to participate.

Transferability

Transferability is the ability to generalize the findings of a qualitative study to another setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenological research has been widely used to understand how individuals experience specific phenomena (Neubauer et al., 2019). Lived experiences are influenced through perception and can only be captured through the interaction between the researcher and the participant's ability to recall and communicate these experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Among the participants, everyday stressors were experienced while conducting an investigation. However, these stressors are specific to APS caseworkers and would not be observed or conveyed in any other population. While the findings of this study may not be transferable to other settings or populations, the concepts and knowledge gathered from these interviews may be relevant for future inquiries in APS.

Dependability

Dependability is the study's ability to be replicated to obtain similar results. Future researchers who want to replicate this study can use the detailed audit trail. Lemon and Hayes (2020) suggested that triangulation is the best way to validate findings in research. The interview protocol followed a three-series interview method established by Seidman (2019) that uncovered participants' life history, work experience, and stressors

experienced as an adult protective caseworker. This method of interviewing allowed for a cohesive structure for the participant to formulate the meaning of their experiences as protective caseworkers. In addition, this method strengthens the data obtained during the interview as it begins with basic memory recall of life history to specific experiences of occupational stressors. The three-series interview method allowed for respondent validation. Respondent validation provided the opportunity to use follow-up questions throughout the interview process. Follow-up questions were asked to clarify that data were concise and correct. With member-checking, respondent validation ensured that the data were collected accurately.

Confirmability

Confirmability establishes the accuracy of the data. The audit trail provides the outline and details of how the data was obtained to obtain confirmability. Data collection commenced through participant recruitment. Participants were obtained using the Walden Participant Pool and LinkedIn. The data were obtained through audio recordings using Zoom recording software and were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis and thematic identification emerged using both NVivo Software and manual coding. For this study, the audit trail includes the interview protocol, audio recordings of each interview, transcriptions, consent forms, and thematic data. Additionally, bracketing was used to ensure that any biases, findings, and observations perceived by the researcher were documented.

Results

The findings of this research were relevant to the research question that drove the intention of this study. By asking how APS workers experience stress uncovered the occupational stressors that are specific to adult protective case workers and were explained in themes pertaining to perceived environmental and organizational stress.

Theme 1 - Environmental Stressors

All 12 participants indicated experiencing environmental stress during their employment as APS caseworkers. The participants expressed that environmental factors such as safety risks during the investigation process were common when conducting interviews at potential victims' homes. These risks included risk assessment, hostility from the client or another resident in the home, and dirty living environments. Risk assessment played an influential role in feelings of being stressed. Often participants experience aggressive behavior in the form of verbal and physical abuse. For example, 30% of the participants expressed they have been "yelled at" or told to "never come back here [the client's house] again," and even spat on. Participants also mentioned dirty living conditions. For example, Participant 5 stated that he "knew what home he was going to because of the odor he could smell before getting to the door."

Participants 4, 5, and 10 talked about feeling apprehensive about the "unknown" when conducting in-home investigations. The term "unknown" was used to describe the uncertainties of the situation. While participants receive basic history information, many "hidden mental health issues" are involved. In response to environmental stressors, Participant 4 learned self-defense techniques to protect herself. Nearly half of the sample

explained that they had felt fear and emotional strain because they "did not know" what to expect when they entered a client's home. Anxiety and embarrassment yielded from the perception of inadequacies felt by adverse incidences during previous investigations.

Theme 2 - Organizational Stressors

All participants indicated that they had experienced stress from administrative duties and responsibilities, inconsistent managerial support, and limited staffing. In addition to new cases, participants receive cases that were outstanding or not handled properly. For example, Participant 5 indicated that many open cases he received were as old as six years. Two participants stated that they experienced "a lot of pressure" and "anxiety" because of the need to meet with all their clients. Eleven of the 12 participants indicated that the heavy caseloads led to "a lot more turnover" and "burnout."

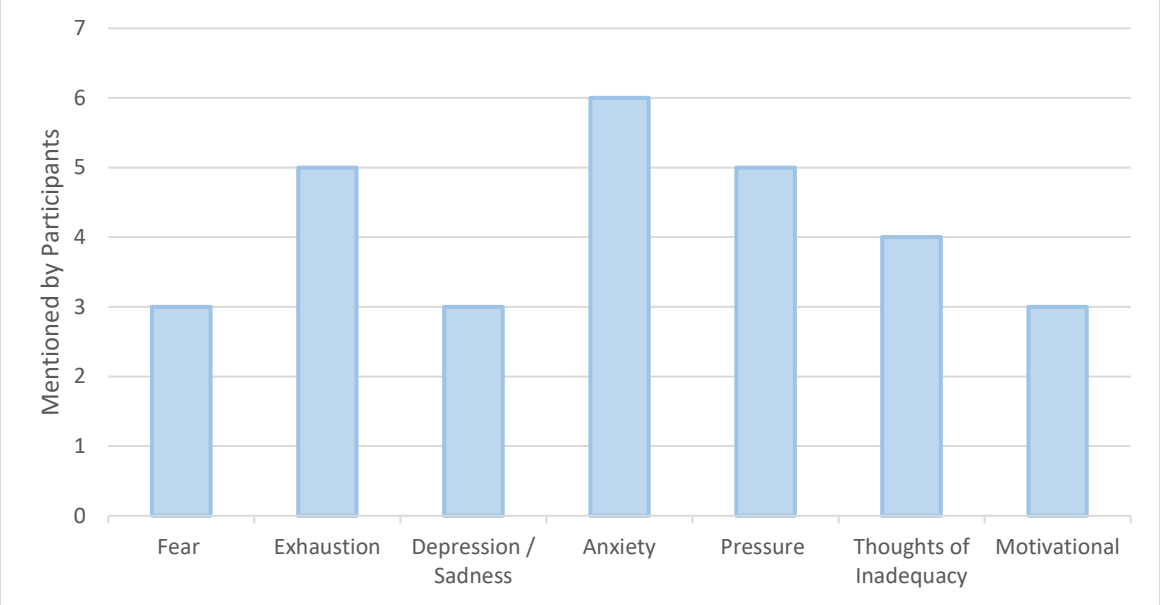
Additional stressors resulted from the inability to communicate effectively with clients and collaborative partners. Participants explained that obtaining accurate and complete information is challenging when elder clients have mental health issues such as dementia or Alzheimer's. When clients' memory fluctuates daily it becomes challenging to conduct risk assessments accurately. Participant 7 mentioned that alleged victims are often "brainwashed" by their abuser which makes the victim unwilling to provide accurate information. Feeling empathetic toward the victim, Participant 7 stated that these situations are "really, really, really tough on your mental health." Nevertheless, communication challenges also extend beyond the internal operations of APS. Participant 1 indicated that cooperation between the protective agency and law enforcement was a

stressor; stating that law officials were often late to appointments and frequently gave her incorrect records.

It is understood that elder abuse investigations take a significant amount of time. Over half (75%) of the sample indicated that working as an APS caseworker requires complying with the demands of long hours and heavy caseloads. While policy states that cases must be closed within 60 days, participants feel intense "pressure" to ensure they complete all their work on time. Cases often require extensive research and several visits to the client's home to collect enough evidence. Feeling the demand to finish reports, participants indicated that they eat lunch on the drive between clients or while working on reports in their vehicles.

Figure 1

How Stress Is Experienced



Note. This figure demonstrates the frequency participants experience stress.

Theme 3 - Stress as a Stimulus

During in-home investigations, participants discussed the need to "diffuse situations" when clients are aggressive. The stress that is felt was described as distress and eustress. Those participants explained feeling "embarrassed," "inadequate," "anxious," and "scared" during confrontational situations. While most of the sample did not mention ever having chronic stress symptoms, 16% revealed high blood pressure and chronic depression in the past. While it was revealed that all participants discussed distress, only 25% of the sample described becoming more motivated to understand the hostility's origin and find solutions to help their client.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the findings of this research study. The participants discussed how stress is experienced as an adult protective case worker and how stress influences case processing. The participants discussed how stress has a negative impact, such as: feeling scared or anxious, thoughts of inadequacy and pressure, leading to exhaustion, sadness, and depression. However, stress positively impacted some participants, leading to better approaches to case closures.

The significance of these themes is discussed in Chapter 5, with the interpretation of knowledge and a comparison to the literature described in Chapter 2. Chapter 5 also examines the theoretical framework related to the research study's findings, the limitations, recommendations for future study, and the implications for positive social change.

Chapter 5 – Interpretation, Recommendations, and Implications

This qualitative study aimed to explore how APS caseworkers experience occupational stress during in-home investigations in reported elder abuse cases. Identifying how stress is experienced unveiled how protective caseworkers manage stress while conducting investigative procedures. While the majority of the findings revealed that stress has negative consequences during the investigation process; this study found that stress can be motivational for case closures.

Interpretations of the Findings

This research study revealed that there are both negative and positive responses to stress experienced by APS caseworkers. The 12 participants in this study experienced distress, while only three described eustress. When experiencing high levels of stress, the body produces cortisol which stimulates the "fight or flight" response (Brosschot et al., 2018). When the stressful stimulus is resolved, hormone levels regulate, resulting in a successful coping technique (Shields et al., 2017). Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory focuses on the relationship between the person and the environment. The theory is based on cyclical environmental appraisals (Biggs et al., 2017). While participants noted engaging in coping mechanisms, APS case workers experienced stress as fear and anxiety from the worry of potentially hazardous and violent circumstances, the administrative pressures to complete work, and feelings of inadequacy that resulted in anger or sadness. Many participants noted experiencing long-lasting adverse health complications from stress such as exhaustion, depression, and hypertension.

How Stress Is Experienced

APS caseworkers experienced a significant level of stress. Often these stressors begin as soon as they enter their office. Many participants indicated receiving as many as 45 new cases every month. The findings of this study are consistent with preceding literature (Ghesquiere et al., 2018) regarding protective caseworkers' heavy caseloads and heightened risk of burnout. However, this study revealed that participants experienced pressure to complete the work accurately and correctly that causes the feelings of stress. For example, Participant 11 indicated that even though he works long hours, there is not enough time to complete the work. Participants stated they had to "adjust" to the level of stress and work volume. Participant 5 believed that "You'll make good in human services once you go past the two-year mark, the stress of seeing the abuse of seniors or kids and the intense amount of paperwork."

Administrative duties are mentioned as a substantial stressor within the field of protective services. Documentary evidence helps establish evidence and supports the findings of an investigation. Recording misinformation can have severe consequences not only for the client, the client's family, but also the organization. While accurate documentation is a vital responsibility for qualification of services, it has become the utmost stressor for most protective service workers.

APS clients with mental health issues create challenges for conducting investigations. Patients with dementia often experience memory loss, poor judgment, and confusion. APS caseworkers stated that the information was frequently unreliable from clients with dementia. Participants stated that due to the limited ability to conduct

consistent assessments made the job challenging as they were unable to effectively perform their job. Participant 5 stated,

> To see what their mental capacity is for that day, that is tricky for me, because someone can be cognizant today and not know their own name tomorrow. I mean they can know everything you ask them, whether you're doing the clock, the presidents, the day and the week. You know there are so many mini-cogs you can give someone, but like I said tomorrow they might not know anything.

The safety concern exists as APS workers cannot conduct proper mental assessments for their clients. Several participants indicated that caretakers, often adult children, are responsible for the abuse. Participant 7 mentioned that relatives living with the client often do not want them to do their job as the client is being "brainwashed" not to disclose facts.

Although APS caseworkers work with other agencies to gather additional evidence on cases of abuse, these agencies can hinder the investigation process. Participant 1 claimed most of her stress stems from law enforcement, who often do not provide the correct information to process cases. Believing that financial exploitation is difficult to prove, Participant 5 specified that the criminal justice system does not want to get involved due to the liability of a lawsuit. As a consequence of the obstructions in the process, caseworkers expressed feeling frustrated and strained. In addition, the pressure to complete tasks increases the likelihood of a shortfall in responsibilities, thus increasing the level of stress and thoughts of inadequacy and incompetency.

Stress and Consequences

APS caseworkers are exposed to considerable environmental threats. All participants indicated that conducting an investigation is stressful when they are not positively received at the client's home. Participant 2 mentioned that the job entails "meeting a lot of different people with a lot of different scenarios." On numerous occasions, when APS caseworkers arrive at alleged victims' homes, there is a misunderstanding of the purpose of the service. Participants indicated that victims are under the impression that the APS caseworkers are there to take their home. Misunderstandings often result in hostility and anger towards the APS caseworker, though experienced APS caseworkers approached situations impartially when faced with aggression. For example, in the presence of hostility, Participant 5 stated that he tried to de-escalate the situation by trying to understand the origin of the aggression. He stated he strived to make an effort to build trust with everyone that is in the client's home. However, many other participants indicated emotional challenges when faced with stressful situations. Participant 8 remembers feeling tense when she entered an abusive environment. Participant 4 expressed a need to learn self-defense to protect herself against violence. Furthermore, Participant 6 stated that stress at the beginning of her career affected her emotionally, and she would "break down" when she experienced cases of violence.

However, caseworkers often need to call for emergency medical services or implement crisis intervention practices to create stable environments. Participant 6 mentioned feeling pressure from being exposed to distressed people and the

responsibility for protecting lives. Participant 4 mentioned that as a protective caseworker, her role is to observe the environment and potentially prevent others and herself from "getting into danger." The dirty living conditions mentioned in this study are consistent with previous literature. Participants mentioned that homes were often infested with roaches, rodents, and even barnyard animals creating a smell that would permeate the victim's home. Participant 2 stated, "the stressors we experience is basically it's always a new environment to everyone … you have to understand the conditions." Although the intention is not to disrupt or change one's living situation, APS caseworkers must consider the living environment's safety while respecting clients' autonomy. In order to do so, caseworkers must be cognitively coherent to make sound decisions.

Participants discussed how they empathized with their clients. While it is essential to have compassion for clients, depression was a common condition mentioned by multiple participants. Participant 7 stated that he would "feel bad" and had experienced depression for months after witnessing how his clients' were living. Participant 10 even expressed the need for medication to help him cope with depression. Another unique stressor that is unavoidable is managing the death of a client. Participant 5 mentioned that during his career, 80 of his clients passed away. He mentioned that every death bothered him. Coping with death in any circumstance is challenging; however, it depends on the individual's personality, history, culture, and other lived experiences.

All participants in this study mentioned feeling time anxiety. Time anxiety was identified as the feeling that time was wasted or lost. In addition, participants mentioned feeling rushed from one client to the next due to the pressure to be satisfied with the

amount of work completed each day. In the investigation process, assessment interviews are conducted. Caseworkers indicated that this portion would take a significant amount of time as they would not only have to wait for their client to be ready, but the assessment would take an hour to perform. Often, interviews would be delayed due to unreliable information requiring caseworkers to reschedule a time to revisit the client's home. Caseworkers have had to limit the allotted time spent with clients due to heavy caseloads, fatigue, and feelings of time anxiety. Decreasing the amount of time spent with each client could negatively impact how elder abuse cases are processed.

Stress and Assessing the Environment

The stressors described above are consistent and cyclical, focusing on the theoretical framework of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional stress theory. Throughout the day, APS caseworkers are consistently unshielded from stressful situations and environmental hazards. Several participants mentioned feelings of fear and anxiety about the unknown. This distress stems from worrying about the possibility of future threats or psychological triggers from previous negative experiences. Consistent with transactional stress theory, participants who managed their stress during escalated situations could continue with the investigation or leave the situation promptly without taking the negative interaction personally. Nevertheless, not every caseworker handles stress the same, and stress often has lingering consequences.

APS caseworkers tend to feel incompetent when they cannot help their clients. Even after leaving their client's home, participants indicated experiencing sadness and depression. Although all participants of this study expressed a passion for helping others,

those with personal experiences with elder abuse or relatives with mental health issues expressed notable sympathy toward clients. Participants 7 and 10 both explained feeling bad when they saw how their clients lived. Participant 10 said, “it might even put you in a bad mood for the rest of the day.” Participant 11 also experienced lasting effects from working with clients. He mentioned that he would get angry at himself if he did an inadequate job. These findings support Brosschot et al.’s (2018) generalized unsafety theory of stress, which states that prolonged stress occurs without a stressor. Sustained stress was also associated with a prolonged physiological response that will lead to a pathogenic state resulting in sleep disturbances and health complications.

Other adverse consequences from stress were described as a lack of mental clarity, cognitive difficulties, and negative self-talk. Participants mentioned feeling bad for their clients. However, as they explained, they internalize the situations and keep rethinking their clients after they have left the client’s homes. The exposure to constant stress resulted in compassion fatigue which was indicated explicitly by Participant 7. Participant 5 explained how he would get a sense of powerlessness in the face of patient suffering.

Other health complications mentioned by participants were psychological disturbances such as depression and anxiety. The demands and stress of the job can be linked to the high level of turnover in the field. Participant 10 stated that he thought of quitting as the “demands were way too heavy” and “way too demanding,” while Participant 7 indicated that situations would make him feel “down and not want to continue.”

Perception and Case Processing

During stressful events, cognitive function is dependent on practical coping skills. Exposure to persistent stress can have a detrimental effect on how one can process their environment. Literature on acute stress is consistent with this study's findings as the experiences presented by participants confirm that continuous exposure to stress exhausts coping resources that result in cognitive and emotional strain (Brough et al., 2018). Participant 6 revealed that the pressure and anxiety that she sensed from seeing people in distress impacted her ability to assess the environment and the situation stating: "When its [anxiety] already on you tend to bring in less of what is expected. You wouldn't be active the way you should be." Participant 2 believed that stress can harm the interview investigation, stating, "When you're not yourself and you're not mentally or emotionally okay, and you're crying, it can lead to ineffective communication with your client."

However, not all stress carries negative consequences. The findings of this study are consistent with the literature on eustress (Kohn et al., 2017; Pandey et al., 2011; Parker & Ragsdale, 2015). For example, three participants indicated that they felt driven to help their clients more when they experienced manageable challenges. The ability to cope with stress had a significant impact on how participants were able to manage their caseloads and the stress associated with the role of a caseworker.

Effective Stress Management

The caseworkers who had years of experience in the field felt that challenging situations increased their desire to find solutions for the clients; however, it was dependent on the attitude towards stressors specific with the role. In the beginning of

their careers, APS caseworkers indicated that the stress they experienced impacted their ability to perform the duties that were specific to their role as protective caseworkers. The participants indicated that to make it as an APS caseworker it is necessary to foster effective coping aptitudes. Participants identified stress management techniques that included having a healthy diet, participation in routine exercise, yoga, meditation, listening to music, counseling, attending organized seminars, and connecting with social supports.

Thirty percent of participants liked attending agency-arranged stress management seminars that would teach skills on ways to cope with occupational stressors. Participant 7 specifically discussed how exercise and music helped him cope, stating that "music is really an escape from all the stress" that he experienced. Additionally, participants discussed the importance of social supports. Participants turned to spouses, other family members, religious communities, and their neighborhood for reaffirmation. Social supports have provided participants with the ability to cope with difficulties by providing encouragement and a sense of belonging.

Summary

APS caseworkers are exposed to stressors that are unique to their role. Stressors yield from hostile and unsanitary environments, administrative duties, long hours, and heavy caseloads. Many caseworkers indicated experiencing distress that resulted in anxiety, fear, and depression. Stress experienced as distress has the potential to have a negative influence on the role and duties within protective services (Cetrano et al., 2017; Schneiderman et al., 2005). However, some APS caseworkers described experiencing

eustress that motivated case closures. For APS caseworkers, stress management has proven to be a valuable skill. Participants indicated it was essential to incorporate physical exercise, meditation, and social support to help cope with stressors experienced in their occupation.

Limitations

The limitations to this study included not being able to ascertain the trustworthiness of the participants' answers to the research question. The participants were informed of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses as well as the seriousness of this research study. This method was used to encourage participants to share their experiences without being traceable to the participant's identity which were not used for the purposes beyond those of the study.

Professional consequences are a possible limitation to this study. Professional consequences refer to participants answering questions relating to work performance, such those that involve how they are able to manage stress and how that impacts their ability to close cases. Participants may have been hesitant to disclose true experiences when discussing work performance.

Transferability is limited to the ability to relate the information gathered to the individual research study. The perception and definition of stress may have a different meaning for each participant and therefore this qualitative study of how stress is experienced by APS caseworkers may not be transferable to other populations. While it is not possible to demonstrate that the findings of this study are transferable to other

populations, the information gathered from this study may be relevant for future protective service studies.

Recommendations

All the participants in this study identified experiencing stress in their role as an APS caseworker. While stress was mainly discussed as a negative consequence, a few participants stated that stress was a motivational factor in achieving goals for their clients. Participants who indicated having depression and heightened levels of stress indicated that they had had personal experiences with friends or family members needing assistance. Personal experience may be related to psychological triggers that cause overwhelming feelings, sadness, or distress. Future stress research on APS caseworkers should consider examining the relationship between psychological triggers and safety perception development as influential factors in case processing. Additionally, understanding the relationship between emotional intelligence and case closure will provide further insight into how stress is experienced as an APS caseworker. A study to support caseworkers within protective service agencies regarding self-care competencies and potential alternative methods for assessing and investigating so that more cases can be closed inevitably promotes positive social change for adequate service provision.

Implications

The findings of this study support Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and Brosschot et al.'s (2018) generalized unsafety theory of stress. One or more participants' experiences confirm these theories and how their stress and safety is formulated and how it impacts their daily responsibilities as an APS caseworker. The

implication for positive social change of this study concentrated on the individual but also how stress is an influential factor for helping victims of elder abuse.

Studies using phenomenological inquiry are important for social change in studies examining APS caseworkers as it allows for these individuals to share their personal experiences. As protective services is a high stress role with unique stressors specific to the field, this study extended previous literature on the effects of stress within this field. While majority of literature is dedicated to protective services in child welfare, this study explicitly examined how stressors are experienced within APS. This qualitative data provides insight how stress is experienced and will be important for future inquires of occupational stress within APS.

Conclusion

This study was critical as it demonstrated the unique stressors within the field of APS and how caseworkers experience stress differently during the investigation and case processing of elder abuse. The experience explored identified circumstances surrounding the role as an APS caseworker. Protective caseworkers are renowned for heavy caseloads; however, caseworkers are exposed to hostile and frustrating environments that result in caseworkers feeling distressed. Distress was experienced as fear, anxiousness, depression, and pressure. Without proper coping abilities, stressors intensified, leaving caseworkers feeling incompetent and discouraged. While all participants indicated having experienced negative consequences from stress, the more experienced caseworkers were able to cope more effectively than novice caseworkers. The caseworkers who understood stress management's value were better equipped to reduce daily stressors. Participants

indicated that stress experienced from challenging cases increased their motivation to find a resolution.

This study confirms Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress as it demonstrated how negative experiences adversely influenced how caseworkers perceived themselves and the environment. While Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory is based on the appraisals of the environment concerning the individual's coping resources, the Generalized Unsafety Theory of Stress (Brosschot et al., 2018) considers the unconscious perceived unsafety beyond the understanding of a stressor. Generalized Unsafety Theory of Stress examines safety perception as a determinate factor for the interpretation of the environment and for how long the individual perceives the stressor. These theories have provided insight into how APS caseworkers can evaluate environments in elder abuse cases.

In a role that guarantees high occupational stress, APS caseworkers must acquire stress-coping techniques. Deprived of sufficient stress management skills, caseworkers succumb to long-term health complications, while APS agencies discern an increase in staff turnover. As the data from this study portrays, cases are left open for months without closure resulting in the lack of services or care for victims of elder abuse. Unveiling this phenomenon has identified the need to discuss how stress impacts the lives of APS caseworkers but also how occupational stress in this role affects the lives of those suffering from the victimization of elder abuse. For further studies in understanding how APS caseworkers experience stress, researchers should examine how stress is

experienced in relationship to emotional intelligence and personal experiences with elder abuse.

Gaining qualitative insight provided a better understanding of the lived experiences of APS caseworkers during the investigation process of alleged elder abuse cases. However, further knowledge on how those in protective services experience stress is needed to broaden the understanding of stress's impact on the safety and security of vulnerable populations within our communities.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Date_____ Beginning Time _____ Ending Time _____

Pseudonym _____

The audio of this interview session will be recorded for accuracy. If you choose not to be recorded, please inform me before we begin. This interview is completely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw at any time. Do you understand? Y/N May we begin? Y/N

Introduction

Thank you again for taking time to participate in the interview portion of my study. As previously mentioned, the intent of this study is to understand how occupational stress is experienced as an adult protective service case worker. The interview today will last approximately one hour during which I will be asking you about your life and work history, the investigation process, and stressors that occur when processing cases.

Interview Guide

Life and work history questions:

1. What inspired you to become a protective service caseworker?
2. How long have you been a caseworker?
   Follow up: About how many cases do you think you handle per month?
3. Describe the aspects of the job which you enjoy.
   Follow up: Why are they enjoyable?
4. Describe any aspects of the job which you find challenging.
   Follow up: What makes them challenging?

Details of lived experience questions:

5. Briefly describe for me a typical work day.
6. Describe the job stressors you have experienced, both currently and in the past.
7. Explain the steps you take to prepare for an in-home investigation in alleged cases of elder abuse.
8. Describe the stressors you experience when you arrive at the alleged victim's home.
9. What are the stressors you experience during the investigation interview?

Reflection questions:

10. How do these stressors impact you emotionally?
11. In what ways do these work stressors impact you physically?
12. Reflecting on your daily tasks, how do these stressors impact your ability to professionally perform? Negatively or positively.
13. Describe how work stress effects your view of clients.
14. Describe if you have ever felt out of your depth helping a client.
15. What are ways in which you manage work stress?
16. How does your organization help you with managing your stress?
17. In your opinion, what ways do you think protective service agencies, in general, can help reduce or manage work stress?

Conclusion:

I would like to thank you again for taking time for this interview as this information is valuable for the research of this study. Once all the interviews have been completed, the data will go through a transcription and analysis phase which will take approximately four to six weeks. During this phase, I will be analyzing the data to find common themes. As a reminder your responses and identity will be anonymous and once the results have been compiled you may request the results of this research. Upon completion, I will be contacting all the participants via email. Do you have any questions for me regarding our interview today or the analysis process? Thank you again for your participation.