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The Role of Social Support in the Mitigation of Social Worker Burnout During the Aftermath of Hurricane Maria

Miguel Angel Soto
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Miguel Angel Soto Cordova

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Peter Meagher, Committee Chairperson, Social Work Faculty

Dr. Alex Casiano, Committee Member, Social Work Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost

Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University

2024

Abstract

The Role of Social Support in the Mitigation of Social Worker Burnout During the
Aftermath of Hurricane Maria

by

Miguel A. Soto

MS, Inter American University of Puerto Rico, 2015

BS, Universidad Metropolitana, 2013

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

May 2024

Abstract

Social workers are among the first responders to be activated during a natural disaster, and they remain aiding victims through the final stages of the recovery process. During the aftermath of natural disasters, social workers are required to work under extreme pressure and are at an increased risk of developing mental health issues that can affect their ability to provide adequate services. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. A purposive selection methodology was applied to select a sample of 12 social workers who met the criteria of being 18 years of age or older, had a master's degree in social work, were fully licensed to provide social work services, and had the experience of providing services in Puerto Rico after the impact of Hurricane Maria. This study utilized the concepts of social support theory to explore the experiences of this group of social workers. The participants were interviewed via Zoom, after being recruited through social work group pages on social media. Thematic coding was applied to the interview transcripts resulting in five themes: (a) the importance of external help and human connections, (b) the utility of individual strategies to avoid burnout, (c) the lack of social support provided by social work organizations, (d) the unavailability of therapeutic services, and (e) the importance of being knowledgeable of community resources to promote social support. The data produced through this study can be used to improve positive social change through social aid in the wake of hurricanes.

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Dedication

I would like to acknowledge that had it not been for all of those beacons of light that lit the way for me during my darkest moments, I too, like so many others would have remained lost. I would like to dedicate this work to the social workers of Puerto Rico. They are the unsung heroes, many of them led from the front during Hurricane Maria, and in spite of feeling the unprecedented devastation, they remained true to the mission and values of the social work profession. I am honored, and completely blown away because after giving so much, a group of social workers from Puerto Rico decided to give more and allowed me the privilege to access their experiences. Gracias desde el fondo de mi corazón.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Introduction

On September 16, 2017 Hurricane Maria, a Category 5 storm, made landfall and devastated Puerto Rico impacting thousands (Duhart, 2019). Researchers have extensively studied natural disasters and their impact (Orengo-Aguayo et al., 2019; Rojas, 2020; Yuma et al., 2019). As explained by Caldera and Wirasinghe (2022), natural disasters are large-scale geological or meteorological events that can alter the living conditions in entire regions, and that have the potential for loss of life. Natural disasters can be based on various environmental factors, and can be categorized as land or water based, atmospheric, biological, or a combination of these factors (Caldera & Wirasinghe, 2022). Natural disasters come in the form of tornadoes, severe storms, hurricanes, tropical storms, wildfires, earthquakes, and droughts; in every form of natural disasters, social work services are a vital necessity (Koketso et al., 2021). Social workers, among other professionals, played a key role in the response and recovery efforts to Hurricane Maria (Chandra et al., 2021). However, these professionals were also impacted by the disaster and were at a disproportionate risk for physical and psychological harm (Powell, et al., 2020). Social support seems to provide resilience for responders to natural disasters.

This study used a qualitative approach to interview social workers who were living in Puerto Rico and were involved in the response efforts to better understand how social support affects burnout. This research has the potential for positive social change impacting the well-being of social workers who respond to natural disasters. In turn, this

could help future response efforts and thus have a positive effect on communities impacted by natural disasters.

Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review provides the introduction to the study, problem statement, purpose statement and research question, nature of the doctoral project, significance of the study, implications for positive social change, theoretical and conceptual framework, values and ethics, review of the professional and academic literature, and a summary.

Problem Statement

The social work practice problem involves the impact of social support and its relation to burnout of social worker responders to natural disasters. Alston et al. (2019) reported an increased frequency of natural disasters worldwide and added that there is a rising rate of trauma to individuals, communities, and social workers. During the aftermath of natural disasters, social workers are among the first responders to be activated, and they remain aiding victims through the final stages of the recovery process (Koketso et al., 2021). Harms et al. (2022) added that social workers are crucial to the recovery process during the aftermath of a natural disaster because of their wide range of applicable skills. Harms et al. (2022) also underscored that since some natural disasters happen spontaneously, first responders have limited timeframes for preparation, which increases their need to access social support. Brooks et al. (2019) affirmed that during the aftermath of natural disasters, social workers are required to work under extreme pressure and are at an increased risk of developing mental health issues that can affect their ability to provide adequate services. The stressors and increased workloads that are caused by

the impact of natural disasters can have a detrimental effect on social workers' professional and private lives (Brooks et al., 2019). The use of social support may increase resilience of social workers in the field, and thus have the potential to protect social workers from stress related symptoms (Powell et al., 2020). Social workers play a significant role in the response and recovery of communities (Powell et al., 2020). Understanding how social workers utilize social support in the field during natural disasters may improve the delivery of services to victims.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The social work practice problem involves the impact of social support and its relation to burnout of social workers responders to natural disasters. The focus of this study is on social worker's use of social support during Hurricane Maria and its impact on well-being. This qualitative study was guided by the following practice-focused research question: What was the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout?

The following is a list of key concepts and corresponding definitions:

- *Natural disasters*: Events that include six broad categories: environmental pollution disasters, geological disasters, biological disasters, meteorological disasters, marine disasters, and fire (Chaudhary & Piracha, 2021).
- *Social work practice*: The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2021) code of ethics states that social work practice is the professional application of the values, techniques, and principals of the social work profession directed at positively impacting individuals, families, and

communities in their need to obtain tangible counseling and psychotherapy services. Social work practice also participates in legislative processes, and assists individuals, families, communities or groups obtain, or improve social and health services.

- *Burnout*: An individual's psychological response which is reflected in workers as a reduced sense of professional efficacy, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization (Maslach, 1998).
- *Social support*: An array of systems directed at supporting, improving, and enhancing positive mental health outcomes among human services and social work professionals (Dayal De Prewitt & Richards, 2019).
- *Crisis response*: The act of utilizing a skillset aimed at providing support to individuals facing distress, and hardships, and may involve the planning and provision of services after a stressful event or disaster (Dombo & Ahearn, 2017).
- *Wellbeing*: Brooks et al. (2019) underscored that wellbeing is an understanding or perception that outcomes are favorable for individuals and society. It is the overall state of an individual that may include psychological factors. Wellbeing may involve good living conditions, economy, health, and safety with an overall perception that life is going well.

The implications of this research may lead to a better understanding of the role of social support and its relation to burnout. This research may also provide insight into how the processes involved in providing social work services to victims of natural disasters

are influenced by social worker burnout. The data produced through this study can be used to improve social aid in the wake of hurricanes. Understanding how social workers experienced burnout in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria and identifying the role of social support and its relation to burnout during the aftermath of a natural disaster will contribute to social work practice. For example, the field of social work would gain a broader understanding of the factors of burnout and how social work practice is impacted by the availability of social support during a natural disaster. Findings from this research may ignite a positive social change by indirectly improving the strategies and processes social workers use to reduce or eliminate burnout during natural disasters.

Nature of the Doctoral Project

In this study, a generic qualitative research design was applied. The goal of a generic qualitative study is to investigate people's opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections according to their experiences about a specific phenomenon (Kennedy, 2016). This type of methodology was appropriate for this study because the aim of this research was to understand the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. When the purpose of the research question is to understand and explore a specific phenomenon, a qualitative approach is more appropriate (Creswell, 2014).

The main source of data included 12 purposively selected social workers who were in the crisis response to Hurricane Maria. The participants were recruited using digital flyers, emails, and social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The digital flyer was posted on social media pages related to the social work profession. The digital

flyer was also sent to the Puerto Rican Board of Social Work Professionals with an email request to circulate it among the board's members. After the sample of 12 purposively selected social workers was selected, if data saturation was not reached according to guidelines presented by (Guest et al., 2006), recruitment of additional participants or collection of additional forms of data that are congruent with thematic analysis would have been implemented. The following selection criteria were used to select eligible participants: (a) being licensed to practice social work in Puerto Rico, (b) holding a master's degree in social work practice, and (c) having lived through the experience of providing social work practice to clients in Puerto Rico directly after the impact of Hurricane Maria.

The data collection process was informed by an interview guide (see Appendix A) that I developed based on the research question. Since the native language in Puerto Rico is Spanish, I also provided a Spanish translation of the interview guide to maximize clarity and eliminate the risk of meanings being lost in translation. The methodology that was applied to gather, organize, and analyze the data was the six steps of thematic analysis, as explained by Braun and Clarke (2015).

Significance of the Study

Social workers have a high rate of mental health distress because of factors such as anxiety, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress during disaster recovery (Powell et al., 2020). Limited existing research has produced data about the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout (Orengo-Aguayo et al., 2019; Rojas, 2020; Yuma et al., 2019). The

findings, and potential contributions from this study may lead to indirect improvements in strategies and processes social workers use to aid victims of natural disasters in a way that foster positive social work outcomes while providing support to and preventing burnout among social workers. By ensuring disaster relief approaches suggested through this research and others are effective and realistic, the outcomes of both social workers and disaster victims may be improved. Future research efforts might include not only the impact of social support and its relation to burnout, but that may consider the role of social support during natural disasters and its relation to other mental health distress related factors like anxiety, and secondary trauma. Further, this study uncovered how the field of social work can better care for social workers to determine the most prevalent social support interventions during a natural disaster and relief strategies to prevent burnout.

Additional findings from this study about the involvement of social workers and their experience regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout will offer the field of social work a positive social change. With a deeper understanding of how to better support social worker responders to natural disasters such as Hurricane Maria, social services would be improved, benefitting victims. Understanding the role of social support and its relation to burnout during natural disasters can also assist in creating treatment and relief strategies to prevent social work burnout among social work professionals during similar events.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework used in this qualitative study is the social support theory. Dow and McDonald (2003) stated that people face stress at some point of their lives. The social support theory emerged from the publications of Don Drennon-Gala and Frances Cullen who identified three separate categories of social support: instrumental, emotional, and informational support (Eskandari & Ghahramanloo, 2020). *Instrumental support* is the type of support that is tangible in a physical way; this type of support can be the provision of funds, tools, and resources to make the stressors of a task manageable (Schaefer et al., 1981). *Emotional support* refers to the empathetic interactions received from family and friends (Schaefer et al., 1981). *Informational support* refers to guidance, training, or information that can be used to reduce the effects of stressors (Schaefer et al., 1981). All three types of support are vital, especially in a disaster-stricken community where both social work service providers and their clients experience the same devastation. Dow and McDonald underscored that an effective way to cope and manage stressors is by receiving social support. In this study, I used the social support theory to explore the use of social support and its relation to burnout as outlined in the problem and purpose statements.

Social support is defined as the certainty that others will understand your needs, and will attempt to support or lessen the need (Dow & McDonald, 2003). What this means is that social support can be viewed as the certainty that one's needs are considered, and that a person is understood and cared for by a supportive community or network. The social support theory was utilized as the theoretical framework because it

served as a lens to identify the different types of social support available during the aftermath of Hurricane Maria and their significance in the mitigation of burnout.

Social support is not a new concept in the field of social services. For example, time banking, a social support model, was first introduced in the 1980s as a form of broadening social networks and providing effective support to communities (Leung et al., 2022). Schaefer et al. (1981) underscored that the inclusion of the social environment to mitigate stress and improve health is not only possible but necessary. Since social support is defined and perceived differently from person to person, the social support theory aligned with this study because it was used to identify and distinguish perceived social support from social networks that had little to no supportive value (Schaefer et al., 1981). Dow and McDonald (2003) affirmed that social support is required when frontline workers are impacted by the magnitude and severity of a catastrophic event such as Hurricane Maria.

Social disconnection has been identified as a factor that heightens psychopathologies and physical illness (Schaefer et al., 1981). Social networks are different from social support. Schaefer et al. (1981) explained that social networks may be vast in sizes, but may offer little to no support. Schaefer et al. also asserted that psychological wellbeing can be sustained through supportive components like nurturance, social integration, attachment, worth, reassurance, guidance, and a feeling of alliance. The social support theory was adequate for this study because it provided a baseline to identify the presence of social support, and the value each social work practitioner assigned to it in their efforts to mitigate burnout.

Social support theory also contains constructs that explain that when there is a perceived value to a social interaction, a distinction is made classifying the interaction as social support regardless of the size and nature of the social network (Schaefer et al., 1981). Schaefer et al. (1981) also explained that when assessing what individuals classify as social support, there must be a direct effort to assess how people define supportive qualities, underscoring that individuals may classify or value qualities differently. Because social support theory can be used to identify and explore how individuals define social support, it was relevant to the current study.

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. The social support theory aligned with the focus of this study because it accurately identified social support and expanded on how social support was utilized in the mitigation of burnout. Through the use of the social support theory, this qualitative study utilized the concepts of social support theory to explore the experiences of a group social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout.

Values and Ethics

The NASW (2021) code of ethics informed this research and the social work at the center of the study. Generally, the NASW code requires social workers to display good character, ethics, and integrity in all of their professional actions and decisions. More specifically, the values of service, social justice, dignity/worth of a person, integrity, importance of human relationships, and competence inform the code. Service

was a key value for the social workers involved in the present study, as they worked tirelessly and provided vital services to victims of natural disasters (Kranke et al., 2021). Brooks et al. (2019) affirmed that during natural disaster response efforts, the demands and stressors of the role can have a negative impact on the ability to provide effective services. This study supports the social work values and ethical principle of service which required extreme efforts after the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico (NASW, 2021). The values identified in the NASW code informed this research; by utilizing the value of service to inform the exploration of social worker's ability to provide adequate and effective social work services while experiencing the same devastation as their clients, and adhering to the NASW code.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In building this study's literature review, I accessed the Walden University library to locate applicable databases in relation to the focus of the study. Specific online databases and search engines used in the review of the literature included Google Scholar, ERIC, Global Health, Ingenta Connect, JSTOR, Journal Storage, EBSCOhost Online Research Databases, and Journal Seek. The key search terms and combination of search terms queried in online databases were the following: *Hurricane Maria*, *social worker burnout*, *worker burnout*, *burnout in social work*, *challenges for social workers in natural disasters*, *disasters and social workers*, *social work services in natural disaster*, *social support services in natural disasters*, *social work support*, *burnout*, *social support theory*, *training as a form of support*, and *preventing burnout*.

In the following section, I review the literature on Hurricane Maria and will transition to natural disasters underscoring recovery efforts directed at responding to these natural events. The review of literature also focused on the role of social work after natural disasters, and reviewed literature on sustainable social work practices in disaster-stricken areas in an effort to gain a deeper view of the challenges natural disasters pose for the social worker responders in the field. Through the review of peer-reviewed articles, the impact of natural disasters on social work responders was established and the need for continued support for the social worker responders to natural disasters was identified. Additional outputs of the following section include a review of literature on burnout, its prevalence and correlation to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), trauma, and other psychological stressors during natural disasters, followed by literature review on various social support services which tend to be stigmatized to a certain extent. Literature on work-related wellbeing, aiding social workers, and coping resources for social workers after natural disasters was also reviewed. A summary concludes this section.

Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico

Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico and other regions of the Caribbean in 2017 (Duhart, 2019). Hurricane Maria left at least 2,975 people dead in Puerto Rico, though unofficial estimates of later deaths from disaster complications are well above that number. On top of approximately \$90 billion in damage, the Category 5 storm left much of the island without power for weeks or months on end and limited access to other vital resources (Duhart, 2019).

Relief efforts in the wake of Hurricane Maria are a point of contention for many of the over 3.3 million Puerto Ricans who lived on the island at the time of the storm (Duhart, 2019; Llorens, 2018). Days after the storm, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) approved \$6.2 million to aid survivors, a figure that is nearly 23 times smaller than the aid approved for Hurricane Harvey survivors in Texas in the same time frame. Subsequent aid also fell far below estimates of what was necessary to restore and revive the island (Duhart, 2019). Beyond relief funding, responses from the president and other key political figures also reflected less concern for Maria's victims than victims of natural disasters on the U.S. mainland in the eyes of many.

Puerto Rico's pre-hurricane conditions and history also informed recovery efforts and the process of rebuilding (Duhart, 2019; Llorens, 2018). Failure of the electrical grid during the storm which, for some Puerto Ricans, left them without power for months was just one event that highlighted weaknesses of the island's existing infrastructure. The San Juan metropolitan region that is the primary hub for many industries and gatherings was restored relatively quickly, while smaller mountainous regions such as Arecibo were significantly affected for far longer. The process of distributing resources allocated for hurricane relief also became a significant challenge (Llorens, 2018). Even after funding and supplies were allocated by the government, significant delays obstructed the process of transporting supplies to areas that needed them the most. Overall, the conditions in Puerto Rico before, during, and after the storm emphasized the narrative of second-class U.S. citizenship on the island, and the conflicting nature of significant efforts to fuse

Puerto Rican cultural nationalism with U.S. consumerism and economic qualities, despite clear disadvantages.

Natural Disasters

The destruction and repercussions caused by natural disasters are many, and it is important for social workers to understand them if they are to respond effectively. During the aftermath of a natural disaster, people are affected and may display a wide spectrum of needs requiring immediate attention like injuries, homelessness, and displacement (Laframboise & Loko, 2012). In an effort to better understand the challenges faced by the responders to natural disasters, the following section will focus on response efforts to natural disasters, and on the role of social workers as responders to these natural disasters. Based on the Emergency Events Data Base which is kept effective thanks to the Collaborating Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, a disaster is determined if one of the following occurs, 10 fatalities, or at minimum 100 people affected by the event, a call for international aide, or a declaration of state emergency (Laframboise & Loko, 2012). Natural disasters also impact global economy on a yearly basis, but their effects are far more devastating to the marginalized communities, and developing countries (Alexander, 2018).

Unpredictable natural disasters can be extremely distressing for affected communities, individuals, and social workers. Several authors have noted how social workers are at risk for health and mental health consequences, especially in communities that are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change like small island nations (Baldschun, 2018; Hayward & Joseph, 2018; Joseph, 2017). Hayward and Joseph (2018) added that

the increased prevalence of hurricanes and other natural disasters highlights the importance of preparation and enhanced well-being of social workers in response to natural disasters. This is vital to address given that social work as a profession and social workers within communities are distinctly qualified and well-positioned to respond to these natural and environmental threats and challenges (Hayward & Joseph, 2018). Joseph (2017) further delved into this topic and focused on vulnerabilities in small islands, like Hayward and Joseph's (2018) study. Joseph (2017) noted that social workers in these islands need to focus their attention on improving the efficacy of the community's coping strategies, which could be facilitated by social work intervention at the macro-level. Therefore, the role of social workers is crucial to the outcomes of sustainable growth and towards the improved day to day lives of a country's human resources in the wake of natural disasters such as hurricanes, enhancing the community's well-being (Hayward & Joseph, 2018; Joseph, 2017).

Response and Recovery to Natural Disasters

Natural processes such as earthquakes, floods, cyclones, storms, wildfires, and landslides can cause natural disasters (Chaudhary & Piracha, 2021). Natural disasters are categorized based on six disaster types: environmental pollution disasters, geological disasters, biological disasters, meteorological disasters, marine disasters, and fire (Chaudhary & Piracha, 2021). In the wake of these disasters, numerous agencies, organizations, and government entities coordinate to provide relief and help communities return to normalcy.

Social workers are vital to the response and recovery of communities affected by natural disasters (Kranke et al. 2020). Because of the practice-based nature of the social work profession, social workers possess a wide range of skills that make them suitable to take on various roles during the response and recovery phases directed at overcoming the consequences of natural disasters (Harms et al. 2022). Because natural disasters can occur in any part of the world, there is no cookie cutter approach when it comes to working across differences. Therefore, it is important to take a closer look at social work practice and the role of social workers as responders to natural disasters.

In a study conducted by Harms et al. (2022), social workers were noted to play critical roles in response and recovery efforts during natural disasters. Several authors noted that social workers are dedicated to supporting individuals and communities in distress, with the aim to achieve a better quality of life for all (Pollock et al., 2020; Schiettecat et al., 2018). Social workers play a vital role in the response and recovery during the wake of natural disasters (Powell et al., 2020). Kranke et al. (2020) examined this topic further in their study, examining the role of social workers in disaster settings. Utilizing case study analysis, the authors found that social workers are crucial in helping displaced members of the community integrated back into their communities and the rebuilt society.

Social workers also aid in helping disaster-stricken communities overcome severe socio-economic, health, security and environmental threats (Kranke et al., 2020). Kranke et al. (2020) further underscored this and noted that social workers' perspectives and practices are vital for conducting research after a disaster or traumatic event and their

impact during disasters is not widely recognized. This is vital to address given that there is little research focusing on the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. Hay and Pascoe (2019) added that there is limited understanding of social workers, which may pose a barrier for other professionals to identify and engage with them in the mitigation and planning phases of emergency management.

The Role of Social Workers After Natural Disasters

Social work is an academic discipline and a practice-based profession whose goals are to promote social change, development, and the empowerment and liberation of people (Kam, 2021). Social workers have begun to incorporate disaster work into their practice because of the increase and severity of natural disasters (Alston & Chow, 2021; Hay & Pascoe, 2019). In an overview of disaster management in New Zealand, Hay and Pascoe (2019) noted the vital role of social workers, given that they have applicable and transferable skills, knowledge, and capabilities that enable them to adapt and to provide effective services to a diverse population at levels including the individual, family and community. Hay and Pascoe added that social workers are well situated in contributing to effective emergency response programs and management interventions. This underscores the importance of further understanding social work, as a profession, as social workers have been put into the front lines of service responses (Alston & Chow, 2021). Also, this body of findings underscores the need to give attention to social workers and their needs in the field, which is essential for the planification and mitigation of individual, family, and community response plans (Alston & Chow, 2021; Hay & Pascoe, 2019).

Social work practice can be applied at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of society giving social workers the ability of positioning effective interventions in a wide range of circumstances (Payne, 2022). Many social work practitioners responding to natural disasters are under extreme pressure to provide services while enduring the same devastation and associated stressors as their clients (Powell et al., 2020). In support of research, it is vital to examine social work responders within the context of natural disasters to better understand their challenges, and to outline how they can be supported.

Social Workers in Disaster Stricken Areas

In order for social workers to provide effective services, social workers need to be continuously supported in their roles and responsibilities in the field, as well as being knowledgeable about the types of social work practice such as services, resources, and/or treatment to determine the most prevalent interventions during a natural disaster and relief strategies to prevent social work burnout. Several authors outlined various roles of social workers in disaster-stricken areas: to continue the outreach towards afflicted communities, assisting individuals to empower themselves and to move towards sustainable development, helping them to develop and work towards goals and objectives which result in the integration and positive growth of economic, social and environmental outcomes (Hayward & Joseph, 2018; Joseph, 2017). These findings provide deeper contexts regarding the crucial role of social workers in light of natural disaster areas (Joseph, 2017). This, therefore, underscores the need to further explore ways to ensure optimal health and well-being for social workers who are working in disaster-stricken areas.

Like Baldschun (2018), Joseph (2017), and Hayward and Joseph (2018), Brooks et al. (2019) underscored the need to address social workers' work-related well-being in order to ensure successful case outcomes in the field. Brooks et al. delved further into this topic, noting how social workers' psychological wellbeing is negatively affected by their experience of burnout and trauma. As a result, social workers' health, personal lives, and productivity at work can be also negatively impacted (Brooks et al., 2019). Brooks et al. further underscored the need for social work organizations to consider the possible impact of natural disaster on the wellbeing and productivity of social workers and how they could be supported in order to minimize the risk of mental and physical health problems. These findings are in line with those of Powell et al. (2020) who underscored the need to explore social workers' perspectives on how they can be supported on the field as first responders. Brooks et al. proposed the use of contingency plans, which could be used as psycho-social support services that are likely to be used during the recovery phase of both communities and social workers who are exposed to these communities. These could be beneficial in addressing burnout and protecting the mental health and overall well-being of trauma-exposed social workers (Brooks et al., 2019).

Sustainable Social Work Practices in Disaster Stricken Settings

Social workers need to be supported, equipped, and educated with sustainable social work practices, the types of social work practice such as services, resources, and/or treatment to determine the most prevalent interventions during a natural disaster and social support strategies to prevent social work burnout. Alston et al. (2019) noted that social work in post-disaster sites and areas requires sustainable practices for both the

community and the social workers. In such contexts, trauma therapy needs to be provided for both the community and the social workers. Alston et al. added to this, noting the increased frequency of natural disasters all over the world. As a result, more communities, individuals, and social workers are devastated and affected in terms of trauma. Alston et al. noted how social workers lack preparation to face the challenges of this field of practice. The authors further underscored the vital role of social work professionals in disaster work, including the preparation phase and practice, during the disaster, and the post-disaster phase and practice. As such, this calls out the need to focus more attention and place more efforts on exploring the complexities of social work disaster practice through the lens of social workers themselves (Alston et al., 2019). Alston et al. also indicated the need to advocate for self-care protocols and strategies in disaster practice, noting that there are benefits in the organizational protocols and personal strategies that can be adopted to aide and support social workers in the field.

These findings are similar to those of Acker (2018). This body of findings provide empirical evidence regarding the need to explore the gaps of social work practice, focusing on the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. This also highlights the need to further examine the availability of social support for social workers like self-care practices that could aid social workers in the field of disaster practice, as well as social work students and academics (Acker, 2018; Alston et al., 2019).

Impact of Natural Disasters on Social Work

Being a social worker entails encountering countless challenges and complex situations, including addressing trauma among clients and in the community. In a study conducted by Powell et al. (2020) the findings concluded that high rates of mental health distress were present in social workers during natural disaster recovery. Many social workers experience shared traumatic reality which is when social workers and the clients they serve are confronted and affected by the same threat (Ashcroft et al., 2022). Shared traumatic reality is a well-known challenge among social workers and occurs when social workers have to manage themselves and their families while providing professional guidance and care to individuals in the community affected by traumatic events such as a natural disaster (Malka, 2022). Several studies have been conducted on the effects of shared traumatic reality among social workers (Kranke et al., 2020). When social workers experience shared traumatic reality, their professional obligations begin to compete with their personal concerns and priorities (Kranke et al., 2020). The double exposure between professional and personal concerns creates anxiety, burnout in social workers, and lapses in empathy (Kranke et al., 2020). These findings provide context to the current study regarding the use of social support and its relation to burnout, and its impact on social workers who experience the same trauma as their surrounding communities which can result in burnout (Kranke et al., 2020; Malka, 2022).

Trauma-Informed Social Work in Disaster Stricken Settings

Social workers are also exposed to traumatic events, like the communities who are in the disaster-stricken areas. Several authors noted the prevalence of traumatic stress,

and burnout among social workers, especially those who are working in disaster-stricken settings (Mersky et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2020). Levenson (2017) defined trauma in social work practice as “an exposure to an extraordinary experience that presents a physical or psychological threat to oneself or others and generates a reaction of helplessness and fear” (p. 105). The author underscored the need to provide trauma-informed care not only to affected individuals in disaster-stricken communities, but also to social workers. Social workers need to be helped in terms of psychosocial functioning and coping strategies (Levenson, 2017). As such, trauma-informed social work for social workers facilitates posttraumatic growth, and advocates principles of safety, trust, collaboration, choice, and empowerment among social workers (Levenson, 2017). Kanno and Giddings (2017) similarly stated these findings by Levenson (2017) wherein Kanno and Giddings (2017) noted how social workers often encounter and are affected by the traumatic experiences of clients in their efforts to provide services to victims of crime, disaster, and violence. This is due to the nature of their role in the field, engaging and empathizing with traumatized victims (Kanno & Giddings, 2017).

As such, social workers are at risk of acute emotional reactions such as rage, terror, and grief (Kanno & Giddings, 2017). Kanno and Giddings (2017) further outlined that these acute emotional reactions are, in fact, identified as traumatic stress, which also include burnout, compassion fatigue, traumatic countertransference, vicarious trauma, and secondary traumatic stress. Quinn et al. (2019) explored specific risk and protective factors such as support that could shield social workers from developing secondary trauma. Secondary traumatic stress has become a major concern in the social work field

which is different than that of burnout. Secondary traumatic stress symptoms are also classified as vicarious trauma in which a change occurs within a mental health professional as a result of empathetic engagement with a client's trauma. Vicarious trauma was also explored in other studies conducted by authors Lewis and King (2019) and Powers and Engstrom (2020). Quinn et al. (2019) stated that it is important to further study social workers' work experiences and how it impacts secondary traumatic stress to build evidence that can be used to generate social support, and affect positive change in the workplace for social workers.

Owens-King (2019) stated similarly to that of Quinn et al. (2019), underscoring the prevalence of secondary traumatic stress among social workers. The author explored this topic further and examined the correlation of clinical social work practice with clients exposed to trauma and secondary traumatic stress among social workers (Owens-King, 2019). With the use of an online survey, the author evaluated 161 social workers' job satisfaction, exposure, and responses to secondary traumatic stress (Owens-King, 2019). The findings of the study showed that high-magnitude social work practice, specifically those who are working with disaster-related events and trauma survivors, exhibit higher levels of burnout, and secondary trauma (Owens-King, 2019). It was also found, similar to the finding of Kanno and Giddings (2017), that self-care practices and trauma-informed care for social workers can mitigate the impact of burnout, and secondary trauma (Owens-King, 2019). As such, this body of findings highlights the need for trauma-informed care in social work in disaster-stricken settings, not just for the affected communities and its individuals, but also for the social workers who are working

with the affected communities and individuals as well (Kanno & Giddings, 2017; Owens-King, 2019; Mersky et al., 2019). These findings further add to the context of the current study in exploring the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout, adding justification regarding the need for self-care, trauma-focused, and trauma-sensitive approaches for affected groups and social workers (Kanno & Giddings, 2017; Mersky et al., 2019).

In line with Dayal De Prewitt and Richards's (2019) and Yuma et al.'s (2019) findings, Findley et al. (2017) noted the need to focus on disaster relief following a significant weather-related event underscoring the need of mental health counseling for social workers. Findley et al. added, in order to optimally address the immediate needs of devastated communities, social workers' needs first need to be acknowledged and addressed. This includes providing programs and interventions related to disaster response and behavioral health, as well as resiliency-building. These aspects of post-disaster interventions are essential to the well-being of both social workers and surrounding communities (Dayal De Prewitt & Richards, 2019; Findley et al., 2017).

There are occupational and social factors associated with psychological distress and disorder among social workers. Several scholars have examined human service workers' needs after a natural disaster (Brooks et al., 2016; Nilakant et al., 2016). Nilakant et al. (2016), for example, conducted a study regarding the needs of human service workers and social workers following the Canterbury earthquakes in 2010 and 2011. The authors employed 43 human service workers and conducted qualitative research interviews among this population group (Nilakant et al., 2016). The findings

revealed that the human service workers and social workers reported several challenges in their work during the aftermath of the Canterbury earthquakes: the challenging nature of work, emotional labor related to shared trauma, environmental stresses, complex demands, limited resources, ethical dilemmas, burnout, and moral distress (Nilakant et al., 2016). As a result, participants reported that they re-evaluated their priorities in terms of professional and personal life (Nilakant et al., 2016). The participants also reported questioning the values and priorities of their employing organizations (Nilakant et al., 2016). Brooks et al. (2016) conducted a similar study among disaster responders wherein the authors explored the topic further through a systematic review. Brooks et al. aimed to examine the needs of social workers given the social and occupational factors associated with the nature of their jobs. The authors of the study included 111 peer-reviewed articles in their study wherein the results showed that there are various factors associated with the job of social workers on the field as first responders (Brooks et al., 2016). The results revealed that social workers experienced psychological stressors linked to disasters such as occupational stress, peri-traumatic distress/dissociation, role-related stressors, emotional distress, stress due to threat and risk of harm, burnout, and lack of social support (Brooks et al., 2016). These factors were found to be imminent through the different stages of disaster (before, during and after) (Brooks et al., 2016). This body of findings could provide more contexts regarding the stressors and risks of job burnout experienced by social workers in the field. Given that social workers are prone to psychological risks and mental health problems, there is an increased need to address and explore this topic further, which merits the need for the current study. Addressing the

needs and identifying the occupational stressors of social workers who are involved in post-disaster efforts in Puerto Rico could result to improved outcomes of community efforts, as well as the well-being of social workers themselves (Brooks et al., 2016; Nilakant et al., 2016).

Contributing Factors to Secondary Traumatic Stress

Traumatic stress of social workers needs to be acknowledged and addressed. Several authors noted that persistent levels of traumatic stress lead to other health problems such as compassion dissatisfaction, burnout, and compassion fatigue (Caringi et al., 2017; Lewis & King, 2019; Singer et al., 2020). Quinn et al. (2019) explored predictors of secondary trauma among social workers and specifically looked at the supervisory relationship. The findings suggested that in addition to the trauma displayed by clients, other factors can heighten the risk of secondary traumatic stress in social workers. Factors such as higher and positive ratings of clinical supervision, higher compensation and income levels, size efficient caseloads, and prioritizing needs to reduce personal anxiety can decrease secondary trauma symptoms, resulting in a decrease of compassion dissatisfaction, burnout, and compassion fatigue (Quinn et al., 2019).

Like Quinn et al. (2019), Cieslak et al. (2016) noted the need to explore the mental health outcomes among professionals indirectly exposed to burnout, and trauma. Focusing on factors of traumatic stress among social workers exposed to traumatic events, Cieslak et al. (2016) investigated the impact of an internet-based self-efficacy intervention (the experimental condition), compared to an education (the active control condition). After employing a hundred and sixty-eight health and human services

professionals who were indirectly exposed to a traumatic event at their work place, the findings showed that through self-efficacy interventions, participants' STS and self-efficacy levels significantly improved (Cieslak et al., 2016). It was further found that social workers who experienced a rise in self-efficacy through the intervention were more likely to display lower STS (Cieslak et al., 2016). This body of findings could provide empirical evidence regarding the need for support and interventions for social workers, especially in addressing experienced burnout, and secondary trauma among this population.

This body of knowledge could be used by social work leaders and organizations in developing applicable and effective support systems that promote and aid workers on the field by improving mental health outcomes among human services and social work professionals (Quinn et al., 2019; Cieslak et al., 2016). This is vital to address given that burnout among social workers may lead to other psychological risks and problems, which results to overall decreased well-being of social workers (Quinn et al., 2019). Furthermore, these findings highlight the need to address burnout and compassion fatigue through effective support interventions, as well as job satisfaction, among social workers who are working in disaster-stricken areas (Quinn et al., 2019).

Burnout and Natural Disasters

The demands of responding to a natural disaster while experiencing the same devastation as their clients, exposes social work practitioners to burnout and other psychological consequences (Chatzea et al., 2018). Burnout may manifest as mental and physical exhaustion depleting the responder's ability to provide effective services to

survivors (Doherty et al., 2020). In support of research, it is imperative to take a closer look at burnout in the context of natural disasters. By examining burnout and natural disasters, the findings of this study may provide insight on social support and its relation to burnout in the hopes of identifying preventive strategies that can reduce or avoid burnout.

The stress and complex experiences associated with social work necessitate care and attention to social workers' personal needs, for their benefit and their clients' (Acker, 2018; Cuartero & Campos-Vidal, 2019). Without attention to self-care and access to social support and professional resources, social workers can experience burnout to the extent that their professional capacity to assist clients through difficult experiences is diminished. The following subsections center on rescue work, PTSD, burnout, and social support services for social workers, which are stigmatized to some extent.

Rescue Workers, PTSD, and Burnout

Similar to Mao et al. (2018), Chatzea et al. (2018) conducted a similar study regarding well-being among rescue workers. Chatzea et al. (2018), however, took a different approach and conducted a qualitative study regarding the topic among 217 rescue or emergency workers who were deployed in disaster areas. The respondents in the study were those who provide rescue and recovery services, as part of their daily work obligations (Chatzea et al., 2018). The authors utilized the instruments PTSD Checklist-Civilian Version (PCL-C), the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the Well-being Index (WHO-5) to assess the participants' self-assessed PTSD, perceived well-being and burnout (Chatzea et al., 2018). The findings of their study showed that

17% of the respondents had PTSD while 57% of the respondents reported burnout (Chatzea et al., 2018). These findings of Chatzea et al. (2018) are consistent to that of Mao et al. (2018) wherein Mao et al. (2018) noted how rescue workers deployed in emergency or disaster areas are at risk of psychosocial and psychological problems. It was also found that PTSD was positively correlated with perceived burnout, and PTSD was inversely correlated with perceived well-being (Chatzea et al., 2018). This underscores the need to address PTSD, burnout, and stress levels among social workers in the field of disaster areas. Furthermore, this could be used as empirical evidence to create and develop effective interventions focused on social workers working in disaster-stricken areas, which aim to enhance the occupational psychological burden of this population group (Chatzea et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2018).

Throughout the process of adaptation in post-disaster events, both clients and social workers are in dire need of psychosocial support. The demand of social workers after a natural disaster are essential because they provide vital services to communities during the immediate response (Yuma et al., 2019). After a natural disaster, social service providers work in conditions of stress while dealing with first response and rescue operations while simultaneously mitigating their personal losses and other challenges that are brought about by natural disasters (Yuma et al., 2019). Researchers have cited that social workers often experience workplace stress, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout (Holmes et al., 2021). This body of knowledge underscores the concept and experience of shared traumatic reality, which is prevalent among social workers who are working in disaster-stricken areas such as Puerto Rico. This could be used as empirical reference in

understanding the needs of social work service providers who are coping with psychosocial challenges on top of meeting their responsibilities in the field (Holmes et al., 2021).

Social Support Services and Organizational Commitment

One of the ways to mitigate risks of psychological stressors among social workers is to provide social support and increase organizational commitment. Several authors noted how social support, along with organizational commitment, can mitigate and minimize job burnout among social workers (Collins, 2016; Scales & Brown, 2020; Setti et al., 2016). According to Collins (2016), commitment among social workers is vital, as it entails a deep attachment to the social work profession, which results to high levels of dedication to providing high-quality services to their clients. Collins (2016) added, with high levels of social work commitment and social support, social work organizations and service users are able to benefit from high levels of stability, efforts, consistency, focus, high retention and productivity and low turnover rates (Collins, 2016). Delving into this further, Setti et al. (2016) conducted their study regarding this topic, examining the role of perceived social support and affective commitment in protecting emergency responders against burnout and vicarious traumatization. The authors of the study employed 782 participants in their study who were mainly emergency workers (Setti et al., 2016). The findings of the study showed that affective commitment was the most significant factor in reducing burnout levels (Setti et al., 2016). That is, the higher the levels of affective commitment, the lower the levels of stress and burnout, as well as posttraumatic symptoms, among the participants in the study (Setti et al., 2016). Social

support also played a vital role in decreasing the participants' stress levels, mitigating risks of burnout (Setti et al., 2016). Scales and Brown (2020) also underscored the role of organizational commitment in enhancing social workers' well-being outcomes. The authors of the study noted that aside from decreasing burnout prevalence and rates, increased organizational commitment also decreased turnover among social workers (Scales & Brown, 2020). The authors found this in their mixed-methods study, examining the perceptions of organizational commitment, voluntary turnover, intent to leave, and harmonious passion among social workers (Scales & Brown, 2020). Through one-on-one interviews, the results showed that organizational commitment and harmonious passion levels are low among social workers, which merits the need to find ways to increase organizational commitment among this population (Scales & Brown, 2020). Increasing organizational commitment could lead to better social work services outcomes, as well as decrease in turnover among social workers (Collins, 2016; Scales & Brown, 2020). This body of findings highlights the role of work environments in enhancing employee well-being outcomes such as employee effort, productivity, stability, consistency, focus, and high retention and low turnover rates (Collins, 2016; Scales & Brown, 2020; Setti et al., 2016). As such, social work organizations and leaders could use this body of findings as empirical evidence to focus on providing support and increasing commitment among social workers, in order to mitigate risks of psychological issues, burnout, and mental distress (Scales & Brown, 2020; Setti et al., 2016).

Support Services for Social Workers After a Disaster

Social workers are mental health first-responders in natural disaster events. In the aftermath of natural disasters such as hurricanes, social workers and volunteers may experience psychological distress or post-traumatic stress symptoms (Dayal De Prewitt & Richards, 2019; Mhlanga et al., 2019;). However, after a disaster and throughout the recovery process, social service providers are unlikely to receive mental health support or psychological help (Yuma et al., 2019). This results to increased risks of burnout, secondary traumatic stress, depression and anxiety (Dayal De Prewitt & Richards, 2019). Additionally, Dayal De Prewitt and Richards (2019) noted how psychosocial support is vital to provide not just for children and affected communities, but also for social workers and volunteers in the field. These services range from assistance to childcare centers and organizations, and providing psychological and psychiatric services, such as psychosocial support, and emotional support in the wake of post-disasters (Dayal De Prewitt & Richards, 2019).

Yuma et al. (2019) added to these findings by Dayal De Prewitt and Richards (2019), utilizing these interventions to assess the need to provide accessible and available psychosocial interventions specific for social service providers and their well-being, especially in the aftermath of a disaster. These studies support the need for understanding the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout for the current study. The authors delved further into this topic and focused on Resilience and Coping for the Healthcare Community (RCHC), a group-work program intervention for social service professionals who have

worked and provided services to families, children, and communities after a natural disaster (Yuma et al., 2019). Currently, RCHC is delivered as an intervention to disaster-stricken areas such as New York, New Jersey, the gulf coast of the United States, and the island of Puerto Rico (Yuma et al., 2019). The results of their study showed that the RCHC psychoeducational intervention effectively provides applicable knowledge on, and strategies for, chronic and acute PTSD, coping strategies, burnout, and resilience, tailored for the needs of first responders (Yuma et al., 2019).

Yuma et al. (2019) concluded in their study, psychoeducational interventions such as RCHC are effective ways in providing essential benefits to social workers in the field, including the retention and wellbeing of providers of social work services. This is vital to address given that psychosocial and emotional support could significantly mitigate and improve immediate and longer-term effects of chronic stress faced by social workers and volunteers in the field (Dayal De Prewitt & Richards, 2019). Therefore, this could be used as empirical reference in implementing interventions specific for social service providers, catering to their specific needs (Yuma et al., 2019). This is one of the evidence-informed strategies that can support social service providers in post-disaster settings such as Puerto Rico.

Support in the Form of Training

Training is a form of professional support for social workers in disaster-stricken areas that is also needed, especially for post-disaster operations. Several authors noted that most of the time, social workers lack preparedness for the imminent psychological impact after a natural disaster (Brooks et al., 2019; Orengo-Aguayo et al., 2019). As a

result, social workers' well-being is negatively impacted (Brooks et al., 2019). Orengo-Aguayo et al. (2019), for one, noted the need to providing skills for psychological recovery training for social workers, as well as school psychologists, to meet the needs of individuals with sub-clinical trauma-related concerns after a natural disaster. Brooks et al. (2019) stated similarly in their study, noting the need to provide tools and post-disaster strategies and protocols for the psychological impacts on disaster-exposed responders. Brooks et al. (2019) explored this topic further through a systematic review. The authors examined 15 peer-reviewed articles and analyzed the results of the studies (Brooks et al., 2019). The results of their analysis showed that conducting skills training and disaster education for social workers can significantly improve employee confidence in handling post- and pre-disaster operations (Brooks et al., 2019). The findings also revealed that psychological debriefing is an effective way in helping social workers cope with stress and secondary trauma (Brooks et al., 2019). As such, these findings highlight the need to provide training and education for social workers in order to enhance employees' confidence in their ability to cope with disasters (Brooks et al., 2019; Orengo-Aguayo et al., 2019). More research is needed regarding the effectiveness of psychological strategies as disaster interventions in helping social workers succeed in their professional roles and avoid burnout (Brooks et al., 2019).

Sufficient training has been linked to lower stress levels in disaster recovery and post-disaster operations. Several authors underscored the importance of providing job training, strategies to reduce stress, and job satisfaction techniques during disaster recovery for social services workers (Bellamy, Wang, McGee, Liu, & Robinson, 2019).

Bellamy et al. (2019) explored this topic further, examining crisis counselors' experiences with job training and methods to cope with work-related stress as predictors of job satisfaction. The authors administered surveys among 532 participants, analyzing the results through regression analysis (Bellamy et al., 2019). The findings of the study indicated that high levels of job training quality and satisfaction are linked to lower levels of job stress (Bellamy et al., 2019). These findings underscore the need for provision of proper training and management of stress among crisis workers such as social workers in the field of disaster areas, which are necessary for influencing levels of burnout, staff job satisfaction and stress levels. Provisions of high-quality training could result to enhanced outcomes among social work efforts and programs in disaster-stricken areas such as Puerto Rico (Bellamy et al., 2019).

Like Bellamy et al. (2019), Dombo and Ahearn (2017) similarly concluded that training is needed for effective coping strategies and social supports among social workers who are exposed to traumatic events. The authors further underscored that with proper training, social workers are more equipped to handle stressful situations prevalent in emergency and disaster areas (Dombo & Ahearn, 2017). This body of knowledge could provide further justification regarding the need for more training interventions as support for social workers in the field of disaster-stricken areas, which could lower social workers' stress levels, and burnout in their roles (Dombo & Ahearn, 2017; Bellamy et al., 2019).

Self-Care Practices as a Form of Support

Self-care practices and coping strategies possibly employed during the aftermath of a natural disaster are vital among social workers. According to Acker (2018) and Cuartero and Campos-Vidal (2019), social workers often face heightened stress levels due to various factors such as budget cuts, trauma, and burnout. According to Cuartero and Campos-Vidal (2019), social workers are especially at risk of compassion fatigue, and burnout due to the relational nature of their job. Acker (2018) further delved into this topic, examining the relationships between self-care strategies, job autonomy, and job satisfaction, role stress, and turnover intention. The author employed 469 social workers and tasked them to answer a survey to examine the multiple measures of self-care including factors like professional support, coping strategies, professional development, and professional resilience, and their effects on turnover intention and job satisfaction (Acker, 2018). The findings of the study showed that self-care practices and strategies are associated with both job satisfaction and turnover intention (Acker, 2018; Cuartero & Campos-Vidal, 2019). This underscores the need to advocate self-care among social workers who have experienced natural disasters, which could reduce burnout, and lead to better decision making of service delivery (Acker, 2018; Cuartero & Campos-Vidal, 2019).

Dalphon (2019) also concurred to Cuartero and Campos-Vidal's (2019) assertion, noting the need of self-care in the prevention and treatment of burnout and compassion fatigue among social workers. Burnout is a psychological syndrome of emotion exhaustion (Doherty et al., 2020). Compassion fatigue can be defined as a syndrome

resulting from an empathetic based exposure to a client's distress (Cuartero & Campos-Vidal, 2019). Without addressing burnout and compassion fatigue among social workers, social workers can suffer from adverse health effects (Cuartero & Campos-Vidal, 2019; Dalphon, 2019). Cuartero and Campos-Vidal (2019) explored this topic further through their quantitative research, evaluating 270 social workers and their need for self-care practices. The findings of the study showed that personal and professional self-care practices significantly decreased burnout and compassion fatigue levels as well as increased overall satisfaction levels among social workers (Cuartero & Campos-Vidal, 2019). This is in line with the findings of Quinn et al. (2019) who noted the need to address compassion fatigue, burnout, and compassion satisfaction of social workers, as well as their traumatic stress. Dalphon (2019) added, burnout in the field of social work is prevalent, and therefore, needs to be addressed by social work services organizations. As such, self-care is vital for social workers who wish to remain healthy, and live balanced lives. At the same, self-care for social workers results to positive social services outcomes for the affected community, individuals, and social workers themselves (Dalphon, 2019). Therefore, promoting self-care practices as support for social workers in the field, could result to significantly increase personal benefits for the social worker professionals, resulting in successful social work services outcomes (Cuartero & Campos-Vidal, 2019; Dalphon, 2019).

Lewis and King (2019) concurred and added to the findings of Dalphon (2019), underscoring the need to teach self-care among social workers in the field. The authors argued the effectiveness of self-care practices in preventing compassion fatigue, burnout,

and vicarious trauma (Lewis & King, 2019). This is especially because social workers who are working with suffering clients inevitably are at risk of intense emotional experiences as they provide services to clients in need (Dalphon, 2019; Lewis & King, 2019). As such, practicing self-care skills, techniques and strategies on a daily basis is an essential tool and practice to prevent compassion fatigue, burnout, and vicarious trauma among social workers (Lewis & King, 2019). Powers and Engstrom (2020) concurred, highlighting the need for radical self-care for social workers, especially in the global climate crisis. The authors noted that social workers often experience compassion fatigue, burnout, and vicarious trauma from work with those immediately affected (Powers & Engstrom, 2020). Furthermore, social workers face an increased risk working within the context of the global climate crisis (Powers & Engstrom, 2020). As such, social workers need to be supported through practices and education of self-care strategies and practices, which helps them promote sustainable communities and environments more effectively (Powers & Engstrom, 2020). This body of knowledge highlights the importance and implementation of social support for social workers in the form of social work self-care strategies, use of self-care activities and practices in order to mitigate the risk of compassion fatigue, burnout, and vicarious trauma among social workers in the field (Lewis & King, 2019; Powers & Engstrom, 2020).

Seeking Help and Stigma Among Social Workers

Social workers are faced with a stigma of seeking help, which can likely be identified as a barrier or challenge to providing services. Several authors outlined how stigma on self-reported help among social workers prevent them from addressing their

work-related needs (Kagan & Itzick, 2020; Kagan et al., 2018). Kagan and Itzick (2020) conducted their study on this topic, exploring the likelihood of a social worker seeking social work services compared with non-social workers. The authors also considered the variables like gender and stigma attached to seeking social workers' help in their study among 802 participants (Kagan & Itzick, 2020). The respondents in their study were comprised of 355 social workers and 447 non-social workers (Kagan & Itzick, 2020). The findings of the study showed that social workers, regardless of their gender, had an increased likelihood than those who were non-social workers of seeking help from social workers (Kagan & Itzick, 2020). In terms of gender, female social workers reported a greater openness to seek social workers' help than male social workers (Kagan & Itzick, 2020). Moreover, it was found that high levels of stigma were linked to lower chances of seeking social worker help; this was found to be true in all participants, regardless of gender or professional status (Kagan & Itzick, 2020). This finding highlights the need of raising awareness regarding the importance of seeking help among social workers, which is vital given that this population is at risk of intense emotional experiences and burnout (Kagan et al., 2018; Kagan & Itzick, 2020). Furthermore, these findings reveal that a special emphasis is needed on raising male social workers' awareness of the importance of seeking help, given that male social workers are less likely to seek help compared to female social workers (Kagan & Itzick, 2020).

Kagan et al. (2018) stated similarly to that of Kagan and Itzick (2020). Kagan et al. (2018) aimed to evaluate the relationship between demographic factors which included education, psychosocial factors, self-rated health and self-reported loneliness,

relationship status, age, factors related to attitudes and behaviors associated with seeking help like prior experience with social workers, attitudes towards social workers, and the stigma attached to seeking help from social workers, and the self-reported likelihood of seeking social workers' help among older men in Israel. Through structured questionnaires, the authors employed 256 participants in their study wherein the findings showed that there are several avoidance factors that impact individuals from seeking social worker help (Kagan et al., 2018). The findings showed that individuals with a higher educational level, experience less loneliness, report lower health rates, have no prior experience with social workers, report a lower rate of positive attitudes towards social workers, and a higher stigma attached to seeking social work services, are less likely to seek social workers' help (Kagan et al., 2018).

In line with the conclusions of Kagan et al. (2018), Kagan and Zychlinski (2016) found similar findings, outlining the factors that impact the likelihood of seeking help from social workers. The authors found that among 2,188 social workers, the majority of the social workers' demographic characteristics (including variables like marital status, religiosity, and age) significantly influenced the likelihood of seeking help from a social worker (Kagan & Zychlinski, 2016). These findings could be used to develop tools and interventions aimed at helping social workers who face barriers of seeking social worker help (Kagan & Zychlinski, 2016). This is vital to address given that social workers are constantly exposed to traumatic events and emotional challenges, which make them vulnerable to health risks, burnout, and mental health problems (Kagan et al., 2018; Kagan & Zychlinski, 2016). This could be used by social work leaders and organizations

in developing practices that advocate positive perceptions and attitudes towards seeking help among social workers in the field (Kagan et al., 2018; Kagan & Zychlinski, 2016).

There are other factors that act as barriers to seeking help among social workers. According to Jones et al. (2018), first responders such as social workers face obstacles to care and stigma in reference to mental health support when they seek help for themselves. As a result, social workers refrain from help-seeking behaviors (Kotera et al., 2019). Kotera et al. (2019) conducted a study to evaluate social work students' attitudes towards mental health challenges and explore the correlation between mental health symptoms, shame, self-compassion, self-criticism, and role identity. The findings of the study confirmed that social work students take into consideration how their community views mental health problems and their self-compassion, role identity, and self-criticism which all relate to their poor mental health. Jones et al. (2018) indicated similarly, exploring the prevalence and correlates of stress, burnout, and psychiatric symptoms among first responders in a Southern State.

The authors Jones et al. (2018) noted that first responders such as social workers are at increased risk for developing burnout and mental health problems. This is vital to address given that accumulated burnout, mental health problems and stress could result to severe PTSD (Jones et al., 2018). Jones et al. (2018) further explored the specific risks related to unaddressed psychiatric symptoms among first responders. Conducting their study among 220 first responders such as social workers in emergency settings and emergency health care teams, the authors found that 28% reported moderate-severe and severe anxiety symptoms, 26% reported significant symptoms of PTSD, 14% reported

moderate-severe and severe depressive symptoms, 34% indicated high risk for suicide, 93% reported significant sleep disturbances, and 31% reported harmful/hazardous alcohol use and dependence (Jones et al., 2018). These findings have significant implications for first responders such as social work providers (Greinacher et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2018).

Stigma and obstacles to support and care are commonly experienced by a significant proportion of social workers in the field, which can lead to heightened risk of chronicity of post-trauma psychopathology, mental health issues, and burnout for this population group (Greinacher et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2018). This could be used as empirical reference in addressing the needs of social workers who experience risks of mental health problems, and burnout especially with the prevalence of barriers to seeking help among social workers. Addressing and minimizing the stigma related to help-seeking behaviors could lead to positive outcomes for social workers in the field of natural disasters, especially those working with trauma-inflicted population groups (Greinacher et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2018).

Self-Care Behaviors and Self-Care Barriers in Social Work

In line with self-care deficits among social workers, Xu, et al. (2019) aimed to expand on this topic further, assessing to identify the relationship between self-care barriers, self-care behaviors, burnout, compassion dissatisfaction, and secondary traumatic stress. Xu et al. (2019) administered a survey among social workers in a mid-Atlantic state in the U.S. and measured levels of compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress. With the application of multiple regression analysis, the findings of the study showed that self-care behaviors and self-care barriers had a

significant effect on the level of burnout (Xu et al., 2019). That is, self-care behaviors promote greater levels of professional quality of life among social workers (Xu et al., 2019). Significant results were also found on the impact of social workers' individual-level self-care activities on their well-being and secondary traumatic stress (Xu et al., 2019). As such, these findings add to the current study's knowledge regarding the importance of self-care strategies and practices in promoting social workers' well-being. These findings could be utilized by social work leaders and organizations in developing programs directed at supporting their social workers to mitigate burnout and improve the quality of the services they provide (Acker, 2018; Alston et al., 2019; Baldschun, 2018; Xu et al., 2019).

Work Related Well-being During Disaster Rehabilitation

Baldschun (2018) stated similarly to the findings of Acker (2018) and Alston et al. (2019) regarding social workers' work-related well-being. Baldschun (2018) aimed to gain an understanding of the significance of the social workers' work-related well-being for effective service provision and case outcomes. Utilizing concepts of burnout, occupational stress, compassion fatigue, countertransference, traumatization, secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma, the findings showed that work-related well-being of social workers needs to be prioritized by social work organizations (Baldschun, 2018). Baldschun (2018) noted various reasons to prioritize the well-being of social workers: the nature of social work and, especially, in the emotionally charged and demanding worker-client relationship in relationship-based settings. In fact, the findings in the study showed that work-related well-being is vital for the successful development and maintenance of

social work services (Baldschun, 2018). This was found to be true especially in contexts wherein social workers help to find sustainable solutions in the field of disaster rehabilitation (Baldschun, 2018). Furthermore, Baldschun (2018) found that there are several factors that aid in enhancing work-related well-being: specialized training, leadership style, organizational support, emotional strength, and effective supervision. Conversely, deficits in the organizational structure and lack of resources decrease work-related well-being among social workers (Baldschun, 2018). These findings underscore the factors involved in the care and development of work-related well-being among social workers (Alston et al., 2019; Baldschun, 2018).

Aiding Social Workers after Natural Disasters

Social workers are often times exposed to traumatic experiences in the field. Several authors noted the need to explore the practices of social workers in order to understand how to aid social workers in their work and well-being (Pollock et al., 2020; Schiettecat et al., 2018). Dekel et al. (2016) explained that in natural disasters, social workers and surrounding communities are exposed to the same devastation. That is, both groups of social workers and served individuals are living and providing services in the same high-stress community, which underscores the need to cater not just affected individuals, but also social workers themselves (Dekel et al., 2016). Dekel et al. (2016) found this in their study after conducting focus groups consisting of thirty mental health professionals who provided mental health services to traumatized populations in a war zone in southern Israel. The findings showed that there are high levels of stress, burnout, and trauma among the professionals in the disaster-stricken area (Dekel et al., 2016).

Mao et al. (2018) noted similar findings, examining the psychological impacts of disaster on rescue workers, which include social workers in disaster areas. The authors of the study conducted a review of literature related to the topic, examining a total of fifty-five articles – one qualitative study, fifty-three quantitative studies, and one mixed-methods study (Mao et al., 2018). The findings of their study revealed that responders who were deployed to disaster sites might suffer from acute stress disorder (ASD), burnout, depression, and anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other psychological disorders (Mao et al., 2018). This was found to be true especially after a disaster deployment (Mao et al., 2018). As such, these findings underscore the need to address the psychological challenges faced by social workers, especially after a disaster deployment, in order to address and mitigate negative psychological consequences among social workers (Mao et al., 2018). These findings could be used as empirical reference in developing interventions for social workers who have been deployed in disaster areas such as Puerto Rico to attempt to prevent burnout (Mao et al., 2018). This is vital to address given that much of the psychosocial support after natural disasters has been developed and implemented for the affected communities and individuals, but not for the social workers working with the affected communities (Mao et al., 2018; Thordardottir et al., 2018).

Coping Resources in Social Service Providers after a Disaster

Social workers are significantly affected by disaster-related distress. However, there is a lack of efforts and strategies regarding the ways in which social workers could mitigate the risks of disaster-related distress (Powell, Wegmann, & Shin, 2019a; Powell

et al., 2019b). According to Powell et al. (2019a), psychosocial interventions are needed for social service providers in the aftermath of a disaster. Without addressing and acknowledging the needs of social workers, the success of disaster recovery efforts is at risk for failure (Powell et al., 2019a; Powell et al., 2019b). The authors Powell et al. (2019a) indicated this in their study, as the authors aimed to identify the impact of the Caregivers Journey of Hope (CJoH), which is a psychosocial program developed to decrease stress and increase coping resources in social service providers after a disaster. The authors of the study examined and evaluated 722 social service providers in New York and New Jersey, measuring factors of knowledge, satisfaction, future orientation, stress, and social support (Powell et al., 2019a). With the use of t-tests, the authors of the study found that after the intervention, all participants reported significant improvements in stress levels (Powell et al., 2019a). The findings also showed that there are negative correlations between coping knowledge, current stress, and perceived ability to manage stress (Powell et al., 2019a). Furthermore, the results indicated that social support was linked to having greater levels of knowledge of community resources, tools to identify the signs of stress, and knowledge of coping strategies and mindfulness breathing techniques (Powell et al., 2019a). These findings could be used as reference to develop coping strategies to mitigate burnout for social workers in the field, especially those in disaster-stricken areas where burnout and stress levels accumulate and are high (Powell et al., 2019a).

Powell et al. (2019a) and Powell et al. (2019b) examined whether healthcare and social service providers had access to healthcare after a natural disaster. Powell et al.

(2019b) noted how such social service providers in these settings are at increased risk of developing PTSD, secondary traumatic stress, anxiety, and burnout. Powell et al. (2019b) examined a similar topic to that of Powell et al.'s (2019a) study, focusing on social support and resilience factors. To explore providers' responses to recent disasters, Powell et al. (2019b) focused on social workers' mental health distress, work-related stress, and protective factors in Puerto Rico and Texas. Powell et al. (2019b) conducted among 1,101 respondents ten to twelve months after hurricanes Harvey and Maria, the authors measured the participants' levels of PTSD, burnout, secondary traumatic stress, anxiety, resilience, social support, and compassion satisfaction. The findings of the study showed that factors of anxiety, PTSD, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress, were positively correlated (Powell et al., 2019b). Moreover, the authors found that participants with high levels of social support, resilience, and compassion satisfaction reported lower levels of mental health distress, which underscores the need to provide more emotional and psychological support for social workers (Powell et al., 2019b).

This body of knowledge highlights the need to focus on providing and ensuring high levels of social support, compassion satisfaction, and resilience among social workers, in order to improve their overall well-being and mental health (Powell et al., 2019a; Powell et al., 2019b). Further, this pool of literature underscores the effectiveness of interventions such as the CJoH, which could also help mitigate the negative psychological risks and impacts on disaster-affected social workers in Puerto Rico (Powell et al., 2019a; Powell et al., 2019b). Given these findings, it is vital that

accessible, evidence-informed interventions be available to support social workers who are working on post-disaster efforts such as Puerto Rico.

Summary

A significant number of researchers have focused on the nature of social work in the wake of other natural disasters and challenges; however, few put direct emphasis on the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria on Puerto Rico, social workers on the island experienced a lack of basic resources, and funding, increased workloads, and stressors increasing the likelihood of burnout. To better understand the nature of social work during natural disasters, there needs to be a better understanding regarding the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. Understanding the role of social support and its relation to burnout in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria is key for achieving success to the mission of social service provision during similar natural disasters.

Previous researchers have not explored the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. This was vital to address given that social workers are crucial in helping displaced members of the community integrated back into their communities and the rebuilt society. As a result, social work services need social work support and practices in order to prevent burnout. Further, it was essential to develop and implement psychosocial

intervention programs intended to support not only children and affected communities, but also for social workers in the field.

Social workers are key stakeholders and essential resources in the principal phases of disasters management, mitigation, preparedness, intervention, and recovery. Researchers have established that those social workers are crucial in helping displaced members of the community integrate back into and rebuild their communities. Researchers have also underscored that there is a need to address and understand the resilience factors of both social service providers, as well as the surrounding, affected communities. Furthermore, there was a need for more rigorous examination of how social work leaders and organizations can potentially alleviate immediate and longer-term effects of burnout and chronic stress faced by social workers and volunteers in the field. Enhancing social workers' well-being also increases their working capacity to effectively serve the affected communities and their respective clients, especially in natural disaster contexts such as Puerto Rico. Among the implications of past research, researchers have suggested that dimensions of social workers' practices should be identified and analysed to facilitate effective provision of social work services during a natural disaster. That is, there are specific and critical dimensions of social work in natural disaster settings that need to be considered through capturing the impact of the availability of support of social workers in such interventions.

The gap in the literature was the seeming lack of research about not only the role of social support and its relation to burnout of social workers in natural disaster areas, but also how burnout shapes social workers' professional experiences. Past researchers have

primarily focused on the general social workers population group, such as social workers who work with individuals with disabilities, substance abuse challenges, or social workers who work in children welfare settings. However, no findings are specific to the population of social workers in disaster-stricken areas such as Puerto Rico, capturing the role of social support and its relation to burnout in social work practice after a natural disaster.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. The social support theory was used as a theoretical framework to underscore the importance of understanding factors that contribute to burnout among social workers and on the role of social support and its relation to burnout during a natural disaster. This research was intended to result in a deeper understanding of social worker burnout in the course of delivering social work services in disaster-stricken areas. The specific experience and challenge of interest in this research, respectively, were the gaps in research on the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. The section that follows consists of details about the research design and data collection methods selected for this study.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Introduction

The social work practice problem that was addressed in this study involved the impact of social support and its relation to burnout of social workers responders to natural disasters. This section provides details pertaining to the research methods selected for the current study. The research design is identified and explained first, followed by the research methodology. The data analysis strategy is subsequently discussed, followed by the ethical procedures that were followed. A summary concludes the section.

Research Design

The social work practice problem at the center of this study was a lack of understanding on the impact of social support and its relation to burnout of social workers responders to natural disasters. The following research question guided this qualitative study: What was the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout?

A generic qualitative research design was used to gain insight into the central research phenomenon. For the purposes of this research, the central research phenomenon was understanding the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. A generic qualitative research design facilitates an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon (Park & Park, 2016). The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. Among qualitative research designs, a generic qualitative design was determined

to be the most appropriate due to the nature of the central research phenomenon. The design of the study aligns with the purpose in that the generic qualitative approach is rooted in interpretation, construction, and developing meaning from participants' experiences (Kahlke, 2014; Park & Park, 2016). Basic qualitative research studies are implicitly interpretive, descriptive, and rooted in social constructivism, allowing participants' perspectives to remain at the forefront throughout implementation of the methodology (Kahlke, 2014).

For the purposes of this study, burnout was described as a mental and physical exhaustion depleting the responder's ability to provide effective services to survivors (Doherty et al., 2020). Social support was the provision of assistance directed at sustaining wellbeing and minimizing psychological, social, and biological stressors. Dayal De Prewitt and Richards (2019) explained that social support is an array of systems directed at supporting, improving, and enhancing positive mental health outcomes among human services and social work professionals.

Methodology

The methodology chosen for this study was a generic qualitative research design. The following subsections includes information pertaining to the data collection, study participants, and instrumentation. These procedures are described in-depth and were adjusted to reflect any procedural changes that were applied after the proposal stage of the project.

Data

Data were collected through semistructured interviews with participants. Semistructured interviews are useful for gaining in-depth understanding of participants' social work practices and perspectives (Park & Park, 2016). A semistructured interview approach gives researchers the ability to administer the same set of questions consistently to all participants, but also to ask pertinent follow-up questions to gather more detailed information. The interview guide contained questions directed at identifying indicators of burnout. The interview guide also contained questions designed to probe the availability and use of the social support provided to social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria. Throughout the open-ended questions and interview process, emphasis was directed at understanding the role of social support, and its relation to burnout. I took detailed notes throughout the research process to make the subsequent data analysis process easier and more insightful.

Participants

The target population for this research were social workers who worked through and personally experienced the crisis of Hurricane Maria. A purposive sampling strategy is the most appropriate when a study requires insights about a specific target population with certain characteristics, as it helps to ensure the data collected will be directly relevant to the study purpose and research questions (Etikan, et al., 2016). The following selection criteria were used to select eligible participants: (a) being licensed to practice social work in Puerto Rico, (b) holding a master's degree in social work practice, and (c) having lived through the experience of providing social work practice to clients in Puerto

Rico directly after the impact of Hurricane Maria. Participants selected based on these criteria were expected to have direct knowledge about the practices of social workers who provided services, in addition to the challenges social workers faced while providing services during and after Hurricane Maria.

Qualitative research, such as this study, includes a smaller sample size than quantitative research (Park & Park, 2016). In most cases, qualitative data is intended to be rich and thick in detail, rather than focusing on quantifiable results based on a large sample size. Whereas most researchers contend that the number of interviews needed to reach data saturation is highly contextual and depends on factors such as the study purpose and sample characteristics (Dekel et al., 2016; Scales & Brown, 2020), others, such as Guest et al. (2006), have noted that as few as six interviews can be sufficient to reach data saturation. Data saturation in qualitative studies is the point at which little or no new information is gathered to address the research questions (Guest et al., 2020). Because the goal was to produce in-depth interview data that would be supplemented by additional notes due to the homogenous nature of the research sample, and based on my access to participants, 12 interviews were anticipated to be a sufficient number to reach data saturation. If data saturation was not reached according to guidelines presented by Guest et al. (2006) after all participants had been interviewed, recruitment of additional participants or collection of additional forms of data that are congruent with thematic analysis would have been implemented.

Instrumentation

The data collection process involved the administration of semistructured interviews. I used an interview guide to conduct one-on-one interviews and took notes during the interview process. This approach shared detailed insight into the social work practices and perspectives of participants that were directly relevant to the purpose of the study (Park & Park, 2016). I developed the semistructured interview guide to ensure its relevance to the central research questions and purpose of the study. Castillo-Montoya's (2016) interview protocol refinement (IPR) framework was used to develop and refine the interview questions to ensure their relevance and validity. The IPR framework consists of four phases: (a) ensuring the alignment of interview questions, (b) construction of an inquiry-based conversation, (c) gathering interview protocol feedback, and (d) piloting the protocol (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). See Appendix A for the interview guide used for this study.

Data Analysis

After the recorded interview data were transcribed, I used a thematic analysis approach to code and analyze the data. Data were assigned codes and categorized accordingly before being organized into themes per techniques developed by Braun and Clarke (2015). The six-step approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2015) consists of the following steps: (a) becoming familiar with the data through reading and rereading the data set, (b) developing an initial set of codes, (c) searching for relevant themes among the initial codes, (d) reviewing and refining themes for relevance, (e) naming and defining the finalized set of themes, and (f) writing up the results of the analysis process

in a research report or other document. I used my notes during the final step of the analysis process to contextualize participants' responses and the developed themes. This process resulted in the identification of themes, patterns, and their significance within the context of the study and theoretical framework.

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to whether or not the data is a true representation of the phenomenon being observed (Cope, 2014). Credibility refers to how the findings reflect the truth (Amankwaa, 2016). In an effort to ensure trustworthiness, I applied member checks to enhance credibility by assuring that the range of the different realities were conveying the feelings and tones of the participants experiences. Other strategies like reflexive journaling were also applied to broaden the credibility by safeguarding that I did not filter the data through preconceived biases. Cope (2014) explained that in qualitative research, *transferability* refers to how the findings of the study can be applied in another contexts. In order to enhance transferability, the application of thick and rich descriptions of the participants inputs, reviewing and carefully crafting the questions to obtain as clear and precise replication of the research phenomenon may enhance the applicability of the findings to other populations which might also be exposed to burnout. *Dependability* refers to how well the findings of a qualitative research can be repeated (Cope, 2014). In order to enhance dependability, I secured an audit trail entailing the authenticity and consistency of all documents utilized during the study process and outlining the timeline with planned dates for each activity.

To improve accuracy, and organization, the data analysis software NVivo was used throughout the thematic analysis process. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis

software that can be used to categorize, color code, annotate, navigate, and identify patterns within large segments of textual data. NVivo helped to organize the data and streamline the process of coding the data and identifying relevant themes using software features.

Ethical Procedures

All research involving human participants requires careful ethical considerations and protocols (Park & Park, 2016). After obtaining approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) # 09-06-23-0724952, I utilized social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and email to post the basic qualitative study flyer which explained that the study sought master's degree social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria. The flyer also contained information pertaining to the requirements to form part of the study which included being 18 years of age or older, a master's degree in social work, had to be fully licensed to practice social work, and have had provided social work services in Puerto Rico after the impact of Hurricane Maria. The participants who responded to the flyer were sent a consent form that stated the voluntary nature of the research and contained information about the risks and benefits of being part of the study, which could include the minor discomfort that can be encountered in daily life by sharing sensitive information.

If the participants agreed to participate, they were required to email me the statement "I Agree" which would indicate their consent to the requirements and agreements on the consent form. After receiving the "I Agree" statement pertaining to the consent form, I explained that participants had the right to leave the research at any time.

I informed all participants that all data were protected, and that the privacy of all participants was assured by keeping the identity of all participants confidential within the limits of the law. I informed all participants that the study would not contain or use any personal information or identifying content for any purposes outside of this research project. I also informed all participants that the study would not contain or include names or anything else that could identify any participant in the study reports. Codes were utilized in place of names, which also enhanced the confidentiality of each participant. All participants were informed that the data would be kept in a password-protected computer file for a period of 5 years, as required by Walden University.

Summary

In summation, this generic qualitative study is intended to address the current lack of understanding in reference to the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. A basic qualitative research design and methodology was used to gain insight into participants' experiences regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. I interviewed the participants using a semistructured approach and took notes and observations throughout the process. Thematic analysis was used to code and analyze the data through categorization based on relevant patterns and themes, and NVivo facilitated the analysis process. Section 3 provides details about the findings of the study.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

Introduction

The focus of this generic qualitative study was to explore the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. Ten social workers were interviewed through semistructured interviews. I used an interview guide to conduct one-on-one interviews and took notes during the interview process. The following research question guided this qualitative study: What was the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout? Section 3 includes a summary of the data analysis techniques and concludes with a presentation of the findings.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were collected during the month of September, 2023. For the collection of data to address the research question of this study, a total of 40 participants responded. Out of the 40, 10 participants met the selection criteria or inclusion criteria and were selected to take part in this study. Most potential participants were withdrawn because they were not licensed to practice social work in Puerto Rico, did not have a master's degree in social work, and/or had not lived through the experience of providing social work practice to clients in Puerto Rico directly after the impact of Hurricane Maria. The sample provided a diverse group of respondents that included four men and six women, as well as diverse age and ethnicity. Table 1 summarizes the participants' demographic information, including their age, gender, ethnicity, and highest degree.

Table 1*Participants' Demographic Information*

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Highest degree in social work
Participant 1	F	30–39	Hispanic	Master's
Participant 2	M	20–29	Hispanic	Master's
Participant 3	F	20–29	White/Hispanic	Master's
Participant 4	M	40–49	Hispanic	DSW
Participant 5	F	30–39	Hispanic	PhD
Participant 6	M	30–39	Hispanic	Master's
Participant 7	F	50–63	White/Hispanic	Master's
Participant 8	M	40–49	White/Hispanic	Master's
Participant 9	F	30–39	Black/Hispanic	Master's
Participant 10	F	40–49	Hispanic	Master's

Note. This table shows the ethnicity, gender, and age of the participants. All participants were licensed to practice social work in Puerto Rico.

Data Analysis Procedures

In this study, I analyzed transcripts of the 10 individual interviews using NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software. The procedure for the analysis of data that was applied to the data was Braun et al. (2015) inductive, thematic method. This procedure comprised six phases: (a) familiarization, (b) generation of initial codes, (c) grouping codes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining final themes, and (f) producing results (Braun et al., 2015). The initial phase of the analysis entailed familiarization with the data. I read and reread the data in full. Furthermore, handwritten notes were made regarding points of potential analytical interest, including repeated phrases, ideas, and keywords, from which codes might be developed in the second phase of the thematic analysis.

In the second phase of the analysis, the initial codes were generated. I clustered various excerpts from the interview transcripts into codes that expressed similar

meanings. Those codes were then labeled with descriptive phrases indicating the meaning of the data assigned to them. For instance, Participant 4 spoke about having a connection, saying, “I used my connection to my people,” and Participant 2 spoke about being connected to her people, saying, “Although I live alone, I always tried not to be lonely. I connected to my people. That really helped!” Both of these responses demonstrated that the participants utilized the connection they had to their people for social support, which helped to avoid burnout, so both responses were assigned to the same code, labeled “Importance of external help and human connections” (see Table 3). In total, 259 response excerpts were assigned to 25 codes. Table 2 shows the initial codes and the number of response excerpts assigned to each (i.e., the code frequencies).

Table 2*Initial Code Frequencies*

Initial code	Code frequency in interviews
Social workers need to be knowledgeable of the resources within their own communities	7
Social workers should remain grounded on ethical and social work practices	5
Social workers should use a support system	3
Specific training and workshops on natural disasters and preparation can help avoid burnout	12
Staying focused and practicing self-care can help social workers avoid burnout	11
Communication barrier and transportation a challenge	15
Lack of cash was a challenge	3
Lack of running water, food or electricity a challenge	9
Living far away from the job and being unable to contact family was a challenge	6
Creating groups of social workers to help each other would have been helpful	4
Resources were needed but were unavailable	14
Social work organizations should have helped and supported their members	3
Therapeutic, mental health services, and clinical services were needed but were scarce	7
Forms of social support centered on connection to colleagues, friends, and neighbors	8
Forms of support include connecting with neighbors and peers and other people, and practicing self-care	10
Forms of support include help from employers and church resources	4
Peers supporting each other during that time and having good relationship with peers, which was good social support	11
The utility of individual such as being organized, staying busy, reading, positive self-talk and setting boundaries to avoid burnout	19
Setting limits and boundaries helped to avoid burnout	7
Social work organizations did not support social workers and did not seek to prevent burnout among SW	43
Felt fear, sadness, frustration and desperate during providing services and cried	17
Felt nervous, hopeless, and tired all the time	9
Used connection to their people for social support helped to avoid burnout	10
Social support from friends, family, employer, and Narcotics Anonymous groups was vital	10
Social support of neighbors, co-workers, mayor, and church was vital	12

Note. This table demonstrates the initial codes and number of response excerpts assigned

to each code.

The third phase of thematic analysis entails grouping codes to form themes. When different codes indicated different aspects of the same broader, overarching idea, I identified them as related and clustered them to create a theme. For instance, the three codes, “Support of community leaders and people who knew how to access government services was vital,” “Good relationship with colleagues was vital social support,” and “Social support of neighbors, co-workers, mayor, and the church was vital,” were grouped into the theme titled “Importance of external help and human connections.” Moreover, the two codes, “Setting limits and boundaries helped to avoid burnout” and “The utility of individual strategies such as being organized, staying busy, reading, positive self-talk and setting boundaries to avoid burnout” were grouped into a second theme titled “The utility of individual strategies to avoid burnout” because they indicated that the social workers implemented their own strategies, including being organized, reading, staying busy, positive self-talk, and setting limits. In total, the 25 initial codes were clustered into five themes.

The fourth phase of the thematic analysis consisted of reviewing the themes. I cross-checked the themes against one another to ensure that the ideas they represented did not overlap. In addition, I compared the themes to the original data to ensure they indicated patterns in the participants’ responses. In the fifth phase, the themes were named and defined (Braun et al., 2015). Theme definitions are provided in the Findings subsection of Section 3. The sixth phase entailed presenting the results by writing Section 3 of this study (Braun et al., 2015). As a preliminary overview of the results, Table 3 shows how the initial codes were grouped to form the finalized themes.

Table 3*Grouping of Codes Into Finalized Themes*

Themes followed by initial codes clustered to identify each theme	Theme frequency in interviews
<p>Theme 1: Importance of external help and human connections</p> <p>Forms of support include help from employers and church resources</p> <p>Forms of social support centered on connection to colleagues, friends, and neighbors</p> <p>Support of community leaders was vital</p> <p>Good relationship with colleagues was vital social support</p> <p>Forms of support include connecting with other people, and practicing self-care</p>	44
<p>Theme 2: The utility of individual strategies to avoid burnout</p> <p>Setting limits and boundaries helped to avoid burnout</p> <p>The utility of individual strategies such as being organized, staying busy, reading, positive self-talk and setting boundaries to avoid burnout</p>	26
<p>Theme 3: Social work organizations did not provide social support</p> <p>Social work organizations did not support social workers</p> <p>Social work organizations should have helped and supported their members</p>	67
<p>Theme 4: Therapeutic services were unavailable.</p> <p>Therapeutic, mental health services and clinical services were needed but were scarce</p> <p>Resources were needed but were unavailable</p> <p>Felt nervous, hopeless, and tired all the time</p> <p>Experienced physical and mental exhaustion</p> <p>Felt fear, sadness, frustration and desperate during providing services and cried</p>	24
<p>Theme 5: The importance of being knowledgeable of community resources to promote social support.</p> <p>Be knowledgeable of the resources within their own communities</p> <p>Remain grounded on ethical and social work practices, use a support system</p> <p>Staying focused and practicing self-care can help social workers avoid burnout</p>	32

Note. This table shows how codes were grouped to form finalized themes.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the truthfulness, authenticity, and quality of findings. Four main criteria that are often utilized in judging the soundness of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Morrow, 2005). These four elements correspond, respectively, to the quantitative constructs of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. The following subsection discusses how each component of trustworthiness was established in the current research.

Credibility

Credibility is the initial criterion that a researcher needs to establish in a qualitative study. It is considered as the bedrock of findings that are trustworthy and reliable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this research, I employed the member-checking procedure to establish credibility. Through member checks, I returned the data to the 10 participants so as to cross-check the initial data collection and data analysis. In other words, I shared the transcripts with the participants for respondent validation so that the participants could verify that the data collected from them are accurate and resonate with their experiences. After the identification of themes and grouping the themes into codes, I contacted the participants via digital call and cross-checked to confirm whether each code aligned with their experiences. Each of them verified the accuracy of the data gathered from them. In this way, credibility was established.

Transferability

The second major component of trustworthiness, transferability, is the degree to which the findings and interpretation obtained from a particular qualitative research could

be applied to other settings and or contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the current study, I established transferability through the extensive and rich descriptions of the participants' views and experiences. The participants consisted of social workers who worked through and personally experienced the crisis of Hurricane Maria. By gathering data from them through one-on-one semistructured interviews, I could gain and present an in-depth understanding of the social workers' use of social support during Hurricane Maria and its impact on well-being.

Dependability

Dependability is used to demonstrate or measure the reliability and consistency of the study results. It refers to the extent to which the procedures in a study can be replicated in the same research context to get the same results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability primarily focuses on whether the same results would be attained if the same study is conducted twice (Morrow, 2005). For this study, dependability was established such that if another person wanted to replicate it, they would have sufficient information from this dissertation, to do so and get similar findings as this study did. Detailed descriptions of the study procedures have been provided in Section 2 of this project study, and will enable the readers, if necessary, to verify the integrity of those procedures by replicating the study. The chairperson and committee member also enhanced dependability by revising and ensuring that I was consistent in the application of an empirical process. Furthermore, I used an audit trail to enhance dependability. This was a document that outlined the timeline of all activities performed in this study and dates they were conducted. That document was kept by me.

Confirmability

The final criterion of trustworthiness is confirmability. It broadly refers to the extent to which other people could corroborate the results of a qualitative study (Amin et al., 2020). It denotes the findings being free from bias, that is, the research being neutral and not influenced in any way by the researcher's biases or assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I enhanced confirmability by keeping a reflexive journal.

Limitations

A few limitations were encountered when conducting the study. This research was transferable but not generalizable; hence, the findings may not be applicable to certain situations although they could be applied to other settings. This being a qualitative study, it is, by design, not aiming for generalizability. The sample size was small, which posed a limitation for generalizability. Nonetheless, it can be replicated because other scholars might want to see if there are similar themes in other contexts. The lack of generalizability was a limitation.

There are several other potential limitations. For example, the amount of time for gathering and analyzing the data was rather short, and such time constraints might have opened up the process for possible researcher bias and errors. Data were collected over a period of about 6 weeks. I needed to record any potentially helpful data methodically to preserve the research's quality. Moreover, unknown biases might have affected the final results and provided a biased description of how social workers described their experiences of the role of social support and its relation to burnout. There may have been unknown biases due to my personal connections to Puerto Rico. These could include my

having lived in Puerto Rico and having family and friends on the island. The time that has passed since Hurricane Maria was also a limitation. For example, Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico in September of 2017, and the passage of time between the impact of Hurricane Maria and this study may have impacted participants' memories of the event. Additionally, the social workers' descriptions of their experiences are all that were used for this study. Therefore, these descriptions are limited to the trustworthiness of the participants. Moreover, I did not specifically look for individuals who did feel supported during the crisis. Including such people might have resulted in somewhat different study results or outcomes.

Findings

This generic qualitative study focused on exploring the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. The sample was composed of six women and four men between the ages of 29 and 63. All participants had a master's degree in social work. However, two participants had doctoral degrees. All participants were fully licensed to practice social work, and all participants provided social work services in Puerto Rico after the impact of Hurricane Maria. This sub-section of Section 3 provides the presentation of results. The findings are presented in detail. In total, five themes that helped to address the research question emerged from the data. The results of the data analysis are organized by themes (see Table 4).

Table 4*Research Question and the Corresponding Themes*

Research question	Themes used to address the research question
What was the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout?	Theme 1: Importance of external help and human connections. Theme 2: The utility of individual strategies to avoid burnout. Theme 3: The lack of social support provided by social work organizations. Theme 4: The unavailability of therapeutic services. Theme 5: The importance of being knowledgeable of community resources to promote social support.

Note. This table demonstrates the themes that addressed the research question.

Theme 1: Importance of External Help and Human Connections

Data supporting this theme were drawn from all 10 individual interviews. The finding indicated that according to the participants, the forms of social support that they used comprised assistance from churches and employers, and connecting with friends, family, colleagues or co-workers, and neighbors, which helped to avoid burnout. Participant 7 talked about connection to others, noting, “My form of social support was centered on connection. Connection to my coworkers, neighbors, and friends.” Similarly, Participant 9 stated,

I have a great group of neighbors who all got together to support each other every time there was a challenge. The first month nobody had electricity, so all the neighbors would get together and support each other. We were together as a community.

Participant 9 also said “Connecting to my peers.” Participant 10 spoke about obtaining social support from the employer, stating, “Since I lost all of my windows, the house survived because it was constructed in cement. I received economic help from my

employer “COSSMA. They really supported their employees economically.” Participant 4 talked about using church resources for social support, saying,

I focused on crisis interventions. I utilized many of the church resources available in the nearby towns to locate food and clothing for the people in need. There were so many! It’s sad, but the faith-based organizations did more for us than our own Board of Social Work Professionals who we pay to remain licensed! It still makes me angry.

Participant 3 also mentioned that “A church group visited communities and gave me canned soup; at least someone cared.” Speaking about the social support that was vital in supporting them in their role, Participant 7 noted that, “a good relationship with your coworkers is very important. ... I had a great relationship with my peers at work, that helped.” Participant 2 spoke about getting support from friends and the groups of Narcotics Anonymous, stating,

Mainly I was supported by the groups of Narcotics Anonymous, and my close friends. I frequently go to NA meetings and refer clients to the groups. By doing this, I received support from many resourceful people, and it gave me the opportunity to connect, and ventilate frustrations in a safe place. You would be surprised but many members are very bright and have skills in many trades.

Participant 4 noted, “What kept me going was my family.” Participant 5 talked about support from the employer, noting,

The support that was granted me that really made a difference was that my employer gave me the opportunity to report to work at a location that was close to

my house. My place of work was in San Juan, but there was a clinic in Carolina, the town I live in, that was in walking distance from my house, so if the need arose, I could walk to work! Thank God I was granted that support, because if that had not happened, it would have been very complicated for me to travel to San Juan because of the shortage of gasoline, and the inaccessible streets.

Similarly, Participant 9 indicated,

During that time, I was supported by the agency that employed me. They were very understanding and provided me extra time to get my situation stable. The agency understood the situation of the clients, but also, they understood the challenges the employees were facing, for example, I was one of the employees who lived the furthest away, so they granted me an extra week off to get situated. My coworkers were also a great support.

Participant 3 talked about receiving support from neighbors and mayor:

The support I received was from my neighbors, and it is sad to say, none of them are social workers. I received water relief from the town mayor, almost 2 weeks after the impact of Hurricane Maria. My neighbors, and my faith in God kept me alive. My neighbors were golden.

Participant 10 indicated, “Vital support for me was the support of community leaders and people who knew how to access services offered by the government.”

Theme 2: The Utility of Individual Strategies to Avoid Burnout

Data supporting this theme were drawn from eight out of 10 individual interviews. The findings show that, according to the participants, they found ways to

practice instrumental, and informational social support through implementing their own strategies to help avoid burnout. These strategies include being organized, reading books, staying busy, having positive self-talk, and setting limits and boundaries. Participant 3 stated,

I had to implement my own strategies. There was no one there; at times like that you only have yourself. I prayed, planned my day, stayed busy, and held on as best I could. I had to ration the water and food and only ate the necessary because there was no security of where the next plate of food would come from.

Similarly, Participant 5 indicated the following:

There was not one thing in particular, but I used the practice of organizing myself, and planning the things that I had to complete. Every day was a challenge, so no matter how I felt, I continued moving forward and checking off the things that I needed to do on a daily basis. I used the strategy of being organized. I had days to get water, and days to pick up ice, and days to conduct sanitation, I had a structure that always gave me a direction in which to focus on. That really helped me.

Participant 6 talked about organizing herself as well as setting boundaries and limits, noting, “Setting limits and boundaries and creating a clear organized structure from where to serve.” Participant 7 talked about staying busy and using positive self-talk, stating,

During that time, I stayed busy and always had something to do. Another strategy I applied was positive self-talk focused on leaving the island. Focusing on leaving the life I had in San Juan and moving to Massachusetts made me focus in other

things in order to plan. I was able to leave Puerto Rico 30 days after the impact of Hurricane Maria, so it was relatively quick.

Participant 9 spoke about reading, saying,

During that time, I took advantage of not having internet, so I focused on reading. I read books like the autobiography of Steve Jobs, and the autobiography of Keith Richards the guitar player from the Rolling Stones. I had always wanted to finish those books, and I finally had the perfect opportunity to do it.

Theme 3: The Lack of Social Support provided by Social Work Organizations

Data supporting this theme were drawn from all 10 individual interviews. Because of the wide spread nature of social work organizations, participants were asked explicitly about their role in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. The finding demonstrated that, as per the social workers, social work organizations did not provide social support to social workers and did not seek to prevent burnout among social workers, which resulted in the social workers experiencing burnout. Social work organizations are professional organizations that help social workers, for instance the NASW, American Clinical Social Work Association (ACSWA), and the National Association of Perinatal Social Workers (NAPSW). All active social workers in Puerto Rico are required to be members of these organizations. When asked how social work organizations supported social workers working in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria, Participant 1 noted, “Null, they were not present! If they helped somebody, I was never informed. I always pay the board, but they never showed up!” This participant also stated, “I’ll tell you again, I did not receive

any help from them. The social workers who work with me did not receive any help from them.” Similarly, Participant 10 mentioned,

They did not do anything! It is sad to say, but I did not even receive a text. I do want to give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they tried to communicate, but there were no lines of communication active. I had many challenges, but they did not help me at all.

Likewise, Participant 2 noted,

No way, there was no support from any social work organizations. There was not even an action plan after the impact. Till this day there are many people resented with the Board of Social workers, who are quick to charge their fee, but are absent when we need them. It is not nice to say it, but social work organizations were invisible.

Participant 4 mentioned, “I expected more from them. It was like they disappeared, and it was every man and woman for themselves. After so many years of supporting my professional board, I simply expected more efforts from them.” Participant 6 shared,

I think it would have been good if the Board of Social Work from Puerto Rico had offered training and workshops on burnout and how to avoid it, or maybe even a space to share our experiences and hardships. Maybe weekly or even monthly meetings to calibrate social workers in the field by helping us through guidance and information. I mean, I say it because I witnessed other professional boards, like nursing, psychology, teacher and counseling boards, step in and assist their

members, however, it is very sad that I saw nothing, and felt no support from mine, and we are behavior specialist!

The study findings reveal an opportunity for social work organizations to recalibrate their approaches during natural disasters and to strengthen their connections with social workers in Puerto Rico. This includes establishing effective communication channels to address the emotional needs of social workers. Effective communication channels could consider the hiring of social workers outside of the island who could activate resources inaccessible to social workers on the island during a natural event such as Hurricane Maria. Social work organization can also consider the creation of forums and process groups that are activated in specific areas during a natural disaster to support and aid social work practitioners in the frontline. Another avenue social work organizations could take into account is the formulating comprehensive action plans for disaster response to ensure that social workers receive the instrumental, informational, and emotional support they need during challenging post-disaster scenarios. By actively prioritizing organizational support, social work institutions can create an environment that enhances the well-being of their personnel, aligning with the study's findings.

Theme 4: The Unavailability of Therapeutic Services

Data supporting this theme were drawn from seven individual interviews. The finding showed that, according to the social workers, therapeutic services, mental health services, clinical services, and a basic resource such as gasoline, were unavailable when they were providing social work services in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. As per

the social workers, these would have been helpful in preventing burnout. Participant 9 noted,

I think that therapeutic and clinical services were scarce! There were places that did not have any services available. This magnified Social Work caseloads, because I had to tend to my clients, plus other clients in dire need of help. There were many people without medications, and psychotropic meds are vital for the mental health patients! We had to try to mitigate that need too! It was a nightmare!

Similarly, Participant 2 stated,

I would have benefitted by having clinical, and mental health services. During that time, there were only medical services for extreme cases. At times I felt like crying, but held it in, because people look to me for peace and guidance. I would have loved to have had access to mental health and emotional social work groups. I think that has to be organized as part of a contingency plan.

According to Participant 9, “Clinical and social services were needed everywhere during that time. ... I was limited based on the resources we had.” Participant 3 reported,

We also needed to have our own resources so that we could be an effective part of the solution. You see, without any of these things, the most brilliant social worker was reduced to a victim of the storm like everybody else!

Participant 6 spoke about gasoline, expressing how the lack of gasoline limited mobility and therefore access to therapeutic services:

I think that maybe something as simple as being able to access gasoline. I mean, to see clients! In order to access the rural areas, I needed my car. I literally had to spend my Sunday hunting for a gas station that had gas, and then practically camping there in the long lines to access gasoline. 4 hours in a line on a Sunday, to get a limited amount of gas just to be able to see clients during the week, was very challenging.

Mental health services would have been needed because the participants reported that they experienced burnout and other mental health issues at the time. Participant 1 talked about symptoms of burnout, stating, “Physical and mental exhaustion! It was awful, I only made it because we all worked together as a team.” Similarly, Participant 8 mentioned, “Mentally, emotionally, the constant needs and desperation of the clients, seeing them without food or water, seeing so many people cry, that really affects you, I swear I felt that I could not go on!” Participant 10 reported, “I felt sadness, frustration, and I felt desperate. I would ask myself, how could I possibly help somebody if I was suffering the same losses?” Participant 4 noted,

I practically ran on fight and flight mode all the time. On top of that I continued working and witnessing the horror of seeing elderly people near starvation because their relatives could not reach them. I swear, I cried every night. The worst part was that I cried alone, because I did not want my two children to be affected. Come daylight, I immersed myself into the work, simply to not feel my own sadness.

Participant 5 reported,

I don't know what I was feeling during that time, but let me tell you that I felt fear, and sadness. I heard so many necessities, I was aware that elderly people lost their homes after so many years of sacrifice, I heard of so many people suffering from hunger, and not having access to water. All of those experience that I witnessed and became aware of, provoked a feeling of heaviness in my chest. It was an ongoing sadness and realization that I was powerless.

Participant 8 noted,

I would have to say that I was burnt out mentally, I felt tired, sad, and hopeless. Seeing the needs of so many and witnessing entire families sleeping outside after losing their homes really took a toll on me. During that time, I felt extremely sad.

Theme 5: The Importance of Being Knowledgeable of Community Resources to Promote Social Support

Data supporting this theme were drawn from all 10 individual interviews.

According to the participants, the finding indicated that being knowledgeable of resources within their own communities and using a social support system can help social workers in post-disaster contexts avoid burnout.

Participant 1 talked about the need for social workers to be knowledgeable of the resources within their own communities that can offer social support and help prevent burnout, which is important because knowing about the types of resources within their own community might make that person more focused on the resources to use to avoid burnout. Specifically, this participant stated:

Overall, we need to be knowledgeable of the resources in our own communities! We don't know all of them. I for one received help from organizations, and non-profits I didn't even knew existed. Example, I was helped by the community foundation, I did not have a clue who they were till the hurricane! Today, I am always on the lookout and try to be better informed. That is vital, because if you are going to provide services, and you do not know about the available services, you cannot really be effective.

Participant 1 offered additional insight on this stating,

For example, "Fondos Unidos" (United Funds), gave us an electrical generator. Other entities gave us a space, way before our community center was repaired, they gave us a space so that we could provide services. The community foundation donated appliances for us to provide to our clients, the department of family affairs, and the Justice Department donated funds. We had to unite in order to overcome the disaster. There was no other way!

Participant 6 talked about having a support system, which helped with self-care:

To have and use a support system, even if it is to ventilate your thoughts, feelings, and frustration in a safe space. If you don't have a support system, establish one, nobody is going to do that for you. It could be a colleague, a neighbor, a family member, a close friend, or coworker, just make sure you have someone to run to. I cried during that time, but I had who sat with me during my challenges.

Speaking about advice that they would give to help fellow social workers working in post-disaster contexts to avoid burnout, Participant 1 talked about how having social

support and being knowledgeable of community resources is important in supporting the practices of self-care, noting, “Being knowledgeable of community resources helped me save time which I used to practice self-care. If I am not well, I cannot help others.”

Similarly, Participant 10 mentioned, “I would tell them to stay focused, and access your community resources. To practice self-care, and to never forget that you are human.”

Participant 2 stated, “I would tell them to not lose focus and to use the support they receive to practice self-care.” Participant 9 stated,

Know your community resources, use social support to outline and practice self-care and to be very careful with countertransference. We are always working with people and their suffering. At a time like that, we must really take time to take care of ourselves. It sounds selfish, but we cannot give what we do not have. It is also good to have a wellness routine, reading, exercise, motivational books, and having a spiritual life is very important when facing a disaster like Hurricane Maria. In order to be effective, you must be in a good condition to help.

One might imagine the degree of suffering during a natural disaster. However, the severity of Hurricane Maria went far beyond what I imagined. Going without food and water for days, individuals sleeping on the streets, not having access to outside communication, and the absence of mental health resources created challenges that go far beyond what I envisioned. The process of the participants sharing their stories was deeply moving, resulting in them shedding tears during their interviews. Another unexpected finding was the usefulness of basic techniques such as being organized and staying fused. Those who have not experienced a natural disaster such as Hurricane Maria might not

understand the lifesaving qualities of basic techniques for daily living. These included being organized, positive self-talk, reading, and having social support.

Summary

The social work practice problem involved the impact of social support and its relation to burnout of social worker responders to natural disasters. Regarding the purpose, the focus of this generic qualitative study was on social worker's use of social support during Hurricane Maria and its impact on well-being.

The research question was: *What was the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout?* Five themes emerged from the analyzed data that addressed this research question: (a) the importance of external help and human connections; (b) the utility of individual strategies to avoid burnout; (c) the lack of social support provided by social work organizations; (d) the unavailability of therapeutic services; and (e) being knowledgeable of community resources to promote social support. Section 4 will contain the research summary, implications, conclusions, and recommendations of the study based on these findings.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

Introduction

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the experience of social workers who responded to Hurricane Maria regarding the role of social support and its relation to burnout. The study was conducted to understand social workers' experiences regarding the impact of social support and its relation to burnout during Hurricane Maria. Social support is defined and perceived differently from person to person. In this study, social support is defined broadly as the certainty that others will understand your needs and provide instrumental, emotional, and informational aid to lessen the need (Dow & McDonald, 2003). In this study, a generic qualitative research design was applied. The main data source included 10 purposively selected social workers selected through purposive sampling and who met the study criteria to assure that the sample produced data relevant to the crisis response to Hurricane Maria.

Five themes emerged from the data that helped to address the guiding research question: (a) the importance of external help and human connections; (b) the utility of individual strategies to avoid burnout; (c) The lack of social support provided by social work organizations; (d) The unavailability of therapeutic services; and (e) the importance of being knowledgeable of community resources to promote social support.

The study's findings contribute to what we know about social work practice by exploring territory about social workers in Puerto Rico that heretofore has not been covered. There is little known about how to enhance social work response in some of the most difficult conditions. There have been no published studies that look specifically at

the nexus of social support, mental health and disaster response. Moreover, the study will help enhance the discipline of social work because it explores how to support the mental health of social work practitioners by looking at how social support plays a role during a natural disaster. The study's findings have implications for practice, policy, and research. The outcomes of this study have the potential to support social workers responding to natural disasters, helping them be stronger and resilient and thus able to assist those in most need of help. In the following portion of this study, the social work practice problem and its relation to the NASW code of ethics is discussed. I begin by presenting two of the primary values from the code identified in the study's 10 interview transcripts as vital for social workers who provided services to victims of Hurricane Maria. I then discuss how the NSAW Code of Ethics guides social work practice for disaster victims. I conclude by explaining how the findings of this study will impact social work practice, particularly in the area of professional ethics.

Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

The NASW Code of Ethics is a set of values, principal, and standards that guide social work practice (NASW, 2021). In line with the study findings, the latest updates to the NASW code of ethics consider the importance of professional self-care and a revision to cultural competence in an effort to broaden the guidance to social workers who navigate through a wide range of ethical dilemmas in the field (NASW, 2021). The study that was undertaken applies to professional ethics in social work practice, because the NASW code requires social workers to display good character, ethics, and integrity in their professional actions and decisions. The value pertaining to the importance of human

relationships was recurrent in the study findings. The importance of human relationships considers how social workers apply efforts to establish, strengthen, and maintain relationships among people to promote well-being (NASW, 2021). All 10 participants identified the importance of external help and human connections as a crucial factor that enhanced their ability to prevent burnout. The participants underscored the usefulness of human connections to maneuver through the hardships caused by the impact of Hurricane Maria while providing ethical social work services.

Another value that was identified in the study findings was the value of integrity. Integrity is defined in the Code of Ethics as the requirement for social workers to be aware of the profession's values, ethical standards, and mission in order to promote ethical practices (NASW, 2021). In the context of service provision during the catastrophe caused by Hurricane Maria, the study findings revealed that in order for social workers to continuously move forward, they had to organize themselves, apply positive self-talk, and constantly remind themselves of the professions' mission, values, and ethical standards. The value of integrity was necessary in order to endure the hardships and overcome the obstacles faced on a daily basis.

The values of the importance of human relationships and integrity were recurrent in the study findings as social workers who provided services to victims of Hurricane Maria were required to do so under extreme conditions while adhering to the principals that guide ethical social work practice. The study findings underscore the utility of individual strategies to combat factors such as burnout that would negatively influence social workers' ability to deliver social services during the impact of Hurricane Maria.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

Three key recommendations along with action steps emerged from the findings. The first one considers the importance of social workers to cultivate external help and human connections as a preventive measure against burnout. To expand on this recommendation, social workers should create strong ties with the community by actively gaining knowledge of community resources and by using this knowledge to create educational forums to broaden and sustain access to these resources during natural disasters. This could be accomplished through resource fairs hosted by the NASW. Social workers should build strong connections. For example, a hospital social worker could make it a goal to connect with and learn about one community resource per year. This recommendation can also be extrapolated to include collaboration and emergency planning with faith-based institutions to magnify the reach of instrumental and emotional support.

At the individual level, it is also critical that social workers foster supportive relationships with colleagues, maintain open communication with family and friends, and strengthen ties with neighbors, as these connections proved to be vital in enhancing the resilience of social workers during Hurricane Maria. Connections with family and friends can be sustained through the use of scheduled in-person, phone, or virtual gatherings. Connections with colleagues and neighbors can be strengthened by structuring monthly meetings to address specific needs and plans for their resolution. Puerto Rico has community centers throughout the island, “Centros Comunales”. Hosting neighborhood

meetings at the community center is useful for neighbors to connect with each other and gain a deeper sense of community.

The second recommendation is directed at addressing the need for coping strategies to mitigate burnout, suggesting that the development of training programs for social workers should include routine drills, organizational skills, and self-help techniques. These training initiatives should also equip social workers with knowledge about the usefulness of community resources and their effectiveness in creating time and space to practice self-care, emphasizing the need for organizations to provide specialized training for disaster scenarios. This recommendation is a direct product of the study findings. All participants spoke about the importance of self-care practices and having specialized training. Expanding on this, the recommendation suggests that organizations should actively encourage social workers to engage in self-care practices, prioritize mental and emotional well-being, and participate in specialized training programs. This includes enhancing awareness of community resources and disaster response protocols. By instilling a culture of self-care and continuous learning, organizations can better support social workers during challenging post-disaster situations, aligning with the insights derived from the study's theme. One participant expressed the need to learn about single-session intervention and crisis resolution. Building on this recommendation, such programs should focus on equipping social workers with personalized coping strategies.

The findings from the study infer that these specialized trainings may also be enhanced by including organizational skills like reading as a therapeutic activity,

maintaining a busy but manageable schedule, fostering positive self-talk, and setting limits on workload and responsibilities. The effectiveness of these self-implemented coping mechanisms emerged as crucial during the challenging aftermath of Hurricane Maria, underscoring the importance of training initiatives on proactive coping strategies in sustaining social workers' well-being.

The third recommendation is a call for social work organizations to provide the necessary support to mitigate burnout among their personnel. This recommendation emerged directly from the narratives of all 10 participants who underscored that social work organizations were absent. All 10 participants reported feeling disappointed because they noticed other professional organizations, such as The Board of Nurse Examiners, The Puerto Rico Psychologist Examining Board, and the Puerto Rico LPC Board of Examiners of Professional Counselors of Puerto Rico, that stepped in and supported their members during hurricane Maria. When questioned about how social work organizations could have supported, one participant affirmed that social work organizations could have provided informational or emotional support. There are a number of ways that the Board of Social Work from Puerto Rico could help in the future. For example, they could offer training and workshops on burnout and how to avoid it during a natural disaster. They could also provide a space to share experiences and hardships. Social work organizations could also call on their NASW members outside of Puerto Rico to provide instrumental support through donations and accessing member expertise, such as telehealth, to provide support for social workers on the island. Social work organizations can also create weekly or even monthly meetings to calibrate social

workers in the field by helping them through guidance and information. Lastly, social work organizations could create forums among their members to unite in advocating for robust support systems. There was a strong need during and after the hurricane for therapeutic and mental health services. Creating a well-equipped infrastructure that may include emergency telehealth services based outside of Puerto Rico and preestablished meeting locations to support social workers in their critical roles, particularly in the aftermath of a disaster, is essential to managing caseloads and preventing burnout. Through their collective resources, social work organizations could advocate for strengthening these systems to be able to operate during a natural disaster.

As I am an independently licensed social work practitioner, the study findings have impacted my practice in a positive way. Through the process of conducting this study, I have been reminded of my own humanity. Through the qualitative data obtained through each interview, I have gained applicable insight to mitigate the needs produced by a natural disaster. Most of all, I have gained hope through the possibility of sustaining effective social work practice through the establishment of strong ties with my colleagues, family, friends, and neighbors.

Transferability to the field of Clinical Social Work

The findings from this study are transferable to the clinical social work field. Although the results cannot be generalized, the key themes that emerged from the study can apply to other scenarios. This means that the thick and rich descriptions retrieved from the sample can be extrapolated and used in similar events by clinical social workers in the field. From a clinical perspective, the emphasis on personalized coping strategies

and the significance of social support suggests a need for individual social work efforts to cultivate strong ties with colleagues, family, friends, and neighbors. These connections proved to have a positive impact on burnout, and were crucial for social workers' resilience and well-being during and after Hurricane Maria.

Usefulness to the Broader Field

The study impacts several areas of the broader field of social work. The first area focuses on the opportunities for transformative changes within social work organizations, including tailored training and comprehensive action plans. The second area the study impacts is the policy level. The study findings reveal that advocating for accessible therapeutic services and reinforcing support systems within social work organizations aligns with the broader goal of creating a resilient and sustainable framework for disaster response in the field of social work. These findings, therefore, have the potential to inform and shape practices, research endeavors, and policies in the broader social work landscape. These strategies include the development of training that considers personalized coping mechanisms, the provision of organizational support, and the promotion of accessible therapeutic services. The findings of this study extend their usefulness beyond individual practice to broader implications for the entire field of social work.

Limitations and Impact on Usefulness

While the study provides invaluable insights, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations to contextualize the findings. The small sample size and the specific focus on Hurricane Maria may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts.

Practitioners should approach the findings with an awareness of these limitations, recognizing that the insights are grounded in the experiences of a particular group of social workers responding to a specific disaster. The trustworthiness measures of this study, including the thick and rich descriptions obtained from the sample and member checking, improve the reliability and validity of the reported findings. Understanding these limitations helps practitioners recognize the specific boundaries of the study. Recognition of these boundaries promotes a careful and nuanced application of the findings to similar situations.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research avenues can be explored to deepen our understanding of social workers' experiences in disaster response. One promising direction is to investigate the experiences of social workers in different disaster contexts. Comparisons across diverse disaster scenarios could reveal commonalities and distinctions. These commonalities and distinctions can provide a more comprehensive understanding of social workers' challenges and coping strategies.

A second research direction is the investigation of the impact of tailored training programs and organizational support on social workers' well-being in the context of disaster response. This line of inquiry holds the potential to inform the development of effective training strategies that address the unique challenges faced by social workers during and after disasters. Brooks et al.'s (2019) research emphasized the crucial role of training in enhancing social workers' confidence and reducing stress. Future studies can build on this foundation to explore specific elements of training that prove most

beneficial, ensuring that social workers are adequately equipped to navigate the complexities of disaster response.

Dissemination of Information

Efficient dissemination of the study's findings is crucial for maximizing their impact. One effective approach is to present the study at professional conferences, such as Puerto Rico's Social Work Annual Symposium to provide a platform for in-depth discussions and networking opportunities with practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. Other venues include digital platforms like the Social Work Podcast, Learn on the Go: The Community Care Podcast, and the NASW Social Work Talks Podcast. This engagement ensures that the findings reach a diverse audience within the social work community. Additionally, publishing the study in reputable social work journals like *The New Social Worker Magazine*, enhances accessibility and visibility. Sharing the insights through scholarly publications contributes to ongoing academic discourse and informs best practices within the field. Strategically disseminating the information through these channels can extend beyond its immediate scope. An extended scope can foster advancements in knowledge and practices related to disaster response in the field of social work.

Implications for Social Change

Micro Social Work

The findings of this study underscore the pivotal role of external help and human connections in mitigating burnout among social workers responding to disasters, particularly Hurricane Maria. The research reveals that diverse social support networks,

encompassing employers, community leaders, faith-based institutions, colleagues, family, friends, and neighbors, play a crucial role in enhancing individual resilience. The findings of the study underscored that personal and professional connections created the time and space to practice self-care. The study also highlights the benefits rooted in external connections, which are essential for individual well-being. This aligns with the micro-level recommendation to encourage social workers to proactively cultivate diverse support networks. A positive social change at the micro level stems from fortifying external connections to enhance the resilience and wellbeing of social work responders to natural disasters.

Mezzo and Macro Social Work

The implications extend to the mezzo level, emphasizing the need for organizational support and intervention strategies within social work institutions. The study findings brought to light the need for social work organizations to recalibrate and reestablish their connections with social workers to plan and prepare for disaster scenarios. At the macro level, the study emphasizes the importance of policy and systemic interventions. The study identifies the need for macro social workers to advocate for policies that prioritize competency services for disaster victims. The focus on designing public policies that address social support interventions during disasters corresponds to the macro-level recommendation to inform policy discussions. The potential impact at the mezzo and macro levels considers the multifaceted challenges highlighted in the current study. A comprehensive approach to organizational and policy

perspectives can guide the development of interventions that foster a supportive environment for social workers.

As an advanced social work practitioner, these findings have profound implications for the micro approach to disaster response and the safeguarding of social workers' well-being. The study findings underscored the pivotal role of external help and human connections in preventing burnout. The findings uncovered the need for a proactive cultivation of robust support networks and highlight the value of social support networks in averting burnout. The potential impact for positive social change starts with advanced social work practice by reinforcing the understanding that a strong support network is imperative in navigating the complexities inherent in disaster response situations. Incorporating this insight involves prioritizing the establishment and maintenance of such networks as an integral part of disaster response strategies. By applying the recommendations and action steps that emanate from this study, more resilient frontline social workers will be better equipped to help themselves as well as the people they serve.

Summary

In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, this study aimed to unravel the experiences of social workers navigating the aftermath of this devastating event. Five themes emerged from the study (a) the importance of external help and human connections; (b) The utility of individual strategies to avoid burnout; (c) the lack of social support provided by social work organizations; (d) the unavailability of therapeutic services; and (e) the importance of being knowledgeable of community resources to promote social support.

Hurricane Maria served as a stark reminder of the irreplaceable value of external connections in nurturing the well-being of social workers. The practical recommendations emanating from this research encourage the cultivation of external support, development of coping strategies, advocacy for engagement of professional organizations, organizational backing, ensuring accessibility to therapeutic services provision, and prioritizing self-care practice, all of which comprise a comprehensive roadmap. This roadmap leads us in the direction of hope because it grants us the opportunity to ensure the survival of social work responders to similar natural disasters.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide in English and Spanish

Interview Guide

1. What social work services did you provide during Hurricane Maria?
2. What social support was vital in supporting you in your role? Explain why.
3. Did you experience symptoms of burnout during or after providing services to Hurricane Maria survivors? If so, what were those symptoms? If not, how did you cope to avoid burnout?
4. What social support strategies were implemented if any to avoid burnout?
5. Describe any personal barriers and challenges you encountered providing social work services after Hurricane Maria.
6. Based on your experience, how did social work organizations support social workers working in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria?
7. Based on your experience, how did social work organizations seek to prevent burnout among social workers working in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria?
8. What forms of support, if any, did you utilize during the process of providing services for survivors during and after Hurricane Maria?
9. What forms of social work practices, services, and/or treatment, if any, were unavailable but may have assisted you during the process of providing services for survivors during and after Hurricane Maria that could've prevented burnout?
10. What advice would you give to help fellow social workers working in post-disaster contexts to avoid burnout?

Guía de Entrevista

1. ¿Cuáles servicios de trabajo social usted proveyó durante el Huracán María?
2. ¿Cuáles tipos de apoyo social fueron vitales para el cumplimiento de tu rol? Explique por qué.
3. ¿Experimentó síntomas de agotamiento durante o después de prestar servicios a los sobrevivientes del Huracán María? Si es así, ¿cuales fueron esos síntomas? ¿Si no, como logro evitar el agotamiento?
4. ¿Cuáles estrategias de apoyo social usted implemento para evitar el agotamiento?
5. Describa cualquier barrera personal o reto que usted enfrentó durante la prestación de servicios después del Huracán María.
6. Basándose en su experiencia, ¿Cómo apoyaron las organizaciones de trabajo social a los trabajadores sociales en Puerto Rico después del Huracán María?
7. Basándose en su experiencia, ¿Cómo intentaron las organizaciones de trabajo social prevenir el agotamiento entre los trabajadores sociales que trabajaron en Puerto Rico después del Huracán María?
8. ¿Cuáles formas de apoyo social, si alguna, utilizaste durante el proceso de proveer servicios a los sobrevivientes durante y después del Huracán María?
9. ¿Cuáles formas de practicas de trabajo social, servicios o tratamientos, si alguna, no estaban disponibles, pero que hubiesen asistido previniendo el agotamiento durante el proceso de proveerle servicio a los sobrevivientes durante y después del Huracán María?
10. ¿Qué consejo darías a los compañeros trabajadores sociales que laboran en el contexto luego de un desastre para evitar el agotamiento?

Appendix B: Recruitment and Data Collection Log

Date_____ contacted the Board of Social Workers (Puerto Rico).

Date_____ Sent promotional flyer for posting and circulation to the Board of Social Workers (Puerto Rico).

Date_____ Posted promotional flyer on social platforms, (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter).

Date_____ Sent Consent forms to participant #001.

Date_____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #001.

Date_____ Interview #001 was conducted: Interview start time_____, Interview end time_____.

Date_____ Sent Consent forms to participant #002.

Date_____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #002.

Date_____ Interview #002 was conducted: Interview start time_____, Interview end time_____.

Date_____ Sent Consent forms to participant #003.

Date_____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #003.

Date_____ Interview #003 was conducted: Interview start time_____, Interview end time_____.

Date_____ Sent Consent forms to participant #004.

Date_____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #004.

Date_____ Interview #004 was conducted: Interview start time_____, Interview end time_____.

Date_____ Sent Consent forms to participant #005.

Date_____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #005.

Date_____ Interview #005 was conducted: Interview start time_____,
Interview end time_____.

Date_____ Sent Consent forms to participant #006.

Date_____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #006.

Date_____ Interview #006 was conducted: Interview start time_____,
Interview end time_____.

Date_____ Sent Consent forms to participant #007.

Date_____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #007.

Date_____ Interview #007 was conducted: Interview start time_____,
Interview end time_____.

Date_____ Sent Consent forms to participant #008.

Date_____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #008.

Date_____ Interview #008 was conducted: Interview start time_____,
Interview end time_____.

Date_____ Sent Consent forms to participant #009.

Date_____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #009.

Date_____ Interview #009 was conducted: Interview start time_____,
Interview end time_____.

Date_____ Sent Consent forms to participant #010.

Date_____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #010.

Date_____ Interview #010 was conducted: Interview start time_____,
Interview end time_____.

Date_____ Sent Consent forms to participant #011.

Date_____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #011.

Date_____ Interview #011 was conducted: Interview start time_____,
Interview end time_____.

Date _____ Sent Consent forms to participant #012.

Date _____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #012.

Date _____ Interview #012 was conducted: Interview start time _____,
Interview end time _____.

Date _____ Sent Consent forms to participant #013.

Date _____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #013.

Date _____ Interview #013 was conducted: Interview start time _____,
Interview end time _____.

Date _____ Sent Consent forms to participant #014.

Date _____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #014.

Date _____ Interview #014 was conducted: Interview start time _____,
Interview end time _____.

Date _____ Sent Consent forms to participant #015.

Date _____ Sent email establishing the date and time of interview #015.

Date _____ Interview #015 was conducted: Interview start time _____,
Interview end time _____.

Date _____ Transcribed all interviews.

Date _____ Revised transcripts, and recordings, for accuracy.

Date _____ Shared cleaned dataset with committee for feedback.

Date _____ Incorporated committee's feedback.