



## Thematic Content Analysis of the Roles of Social Workers During the Covid-19 Pandemic in South Africa

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v6i8.1467>

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### **Abstract**

Social workers were expected to play a role during the COVID-19 pandemic despite the uniqueness and newness of the pandemic. It is from this background that the researcher developed a hunch to analyse the roles of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. This study adopted the non-empirical research method wherein existing literature was reviewed. The researcher reviewed and analysed documents on the social workers roles from search engines such as EBSCOhost, google scholar and ProQuest. The inductive Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) was used to analyse the collected data. Finding of this study revealed that social workers played important roles of being educators, case managers, brokers and counsellors wherein some of their key responsibilities was to educate individuals, families and communities and link them with resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recommendations are also provided in this study.

**Keywords:** *COVID-19; Social Workers; Pandemic; Roles*

### **Introduction**

Social work has been playing a tremendous role in times of human emergencies and natural disasters; however, the COVID-19 pandemic came as a novel kind of experience for social work professionals and organizations (Harrikari, Romakkaniemi, Tiitinen and Ovaskainen, 2021). The outbreak of coronavirus disease came unexpectedly and shocked many professionals including social workers. It must be noted that in the social work practice, professionals have dealt with other natural disasters, human emergencies, and pandemics, however, the COVID-19 pandemic was a totally new and unique virus which made it very difficult for them to address it. In the same breath, Dominelli, Harrikari, Mooney, Leskosek, and Tsunoda (2020) avow that due to the uniqueness of the COVID-19 pandemic, the status of the social work profession in responding to emergencies varied in countries starting with the first wave of the pandemic. It was inevitable for various countries to implement preventative measures such as

lockdown. In ensuring that individuals, families, and communities are capacitated to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the services of social workers were required for effective intervention. This is in line with Cooper and Briggs (2014) who posit that social workers play a fundamental role in disaster response, recovery, and disaster preparedness as well as planning for future occurrences. The researcher is of the view that amid pandemics such as the COVID-19, social work services are essential and mandatory to mitigate and respond to the social, emotional and mental impact of the pandemics on individuals, families and communities. In the same wavelength, Brinkerhoff (2014) avows that appropriate and adequate professional social work services are mandatory in the outbreak of emergencies and pandemics. It is from the above background, that this study sought to analyse the roles of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study adopted the non-empirical research method wherein existing literature was reviewed. A narrative literature review was adopted as a research design due to its ability to identify and synthesize different books and journal articles about a chosen topic (Bruce, Beuthin, Sheilds, Molzahn, & Schick-Makaroff, 2016). Secondary data was sourced from research engines such as Google scholar, EBSCOhost and ProQuest that focused on the topic in question. For purposes of relevancy, data collection was restricted to the years 2002 to 2022 and the data collection was determined by data saturation (Maluleke, 2020; Mokwena & Maluleke, 2020). The data was analysed thematically using inductive Thematic Content Analysis (TCA).

The introduction presented the background social work practice and COVID-19 pandemic. The introduction also described the objective of the study which was to analyse the roles of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The following sections are discussed in the article. Firstly, the reviewed relevant existing literature on social work practice admit pandemics. Secondly, coping theory is also discussed as an underpinning theoretical framework, this was done to indicate how the theory offers a thorough analysis of the roles of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. Thirdly, the adopted methodology comprising a research paradigm and approach, research design, sampling procedures, data collection methods and data analysis is discussed. The paper also discusses the findings of the study. Conclusion and recommendations of the study are provided.

## ***Literature Review***

### **Hybrid Social Work Practice During the Covid-19 Pandemic**

The services of social workers are mostly free in many parts of the world which makes it easier for individuals who are living within the poverty line. Social work services were accessible to many individuals and families that are living in poverty and that cannot pay medical bills when hospitalized during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chitereka, 2010). In the same breath, Walter-McCabe (2020) postulates that alternative mechanisms such as online communications with clients were used to ensure access to social services for all disadvantaged groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. New work procedures were introduced in some instances to ensure the provision of social services during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Dominelli, 2021). However, Abor and Abor (2020) argue that some individuals and families could not easily access the services of social workers due to some restrictions and other barriers such as lack of technological devices for some of the services that were offered online. The social work experience in responding to the SARs epidemics demonstrated that the interruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will interrupt social work practice as it is known and demand the reshaping of the usual ways of working as stated by Gearing, Saini and McNeill (2007). According to Cooner, Beddoe, Ferguson and Joy (2020), there has been engagements on the impact of digitalization of society and social media platforms in the social work Practice. Thus, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a move to digital social work which involved rapid and sometimes difficult transition due to lack of leadership in technology,

digital innovation, and related research as well as theory (Megele & Buzzi, 2020). Boyd and Folke (2011), further state that in the event of pandemics such as the COVID-19 pandemic professionals such as social workers are forced to adopt new ways of responding to the challenges that emanates from the pandemics. This was a similar case with the COVID-19 Pandemic wherein some social work services moved to online as echoed by Harrikari et.al. (2021). In addition, social work professionals were forced to make new arrangements and innovative ways of providing care to those who are in need (Dominelli, et.al., 2020). Like many other professionals, social workers were also expected to offer services during the difficult times of the novel corona virus, which posed a risk on their well-being and health. Thus, the workload of social workers, well-being and resilience should be a primary concern during pandemics as stated by McFadden, Campbell, and Taylor (2015) and Rapeli, Cuadra, Dahlberg, Eydal, Hvinden, Ómarsdóttir, and Salonen (2018).

## ***Theoretical Framework***

### **Coping Theory**

This theory was found by Lazarus and Folkman in 1984. The underlying view of this theory is to offer lenses to understand how people cope with stressful situations by analysing the strength and weakness of individuals and families (Biggs, Brough & Drummond, 2017). Biggs, Brough and Drummond further described coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts of managing specific external and internal demands that are brought by stressful events and conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Individuals, families and social workers were forced by the COVID-19 pandemic to cope with its conditions. According to Masselink and Lazarus (2020) when the environment requires people to deal with its demand or challenges such as natural disasters, cognitive and behavioural efforts are required to respond effectively. Therefore, this provided guidance to the researcher to understand how individuals, families and social workers coped with the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nolen-Hoeksema (2012) avers that personal and situational factors have an influence on a person's ability to cope in that it can influence an outcome to be either effective or ineffective. In other words, the personal and situational factors such as the personal and work lives of social workers, the family setting and their individual strength influences how they cope and execute their roles during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## ***Methodology***

This study adopted the non-empirical research method wherein existing literature was reviewed. The researcher reviewed and analysed documents on social workers roles and literature on COVID-19 pandemic. A narrative literature review was adopted as a research design due to its ability to identify and synthesize different books and journal articles about a chosen topic (Bruce, Beuthin, Sheilds, Molzahn, & Schick-Makaroff, 2016). Considering this, the researcher gathered secondary data from various journals using a purposive sampling technique since there are promenade papers on the COVID-19 Pandemic and natural disaster legislations. This secondary data was sourced from research engines such as Google scholar, EBSCOhost and ProQuest that focused on the topic in question. For purposes of relevancy, data collection was restricted to the years 2002 to 2023 and the data collection was determined by data saturation (Maluleke, 2020; Mokwena & Maluleke, 2020). The use of secondary data was motivated by Creswell (2014) who avows that researcher may collect data from qualitative documents such as accredited journals, internet sources and public documents. Furthermore, Matthews and Ross (2010) confirm that collected data can be qualitative in nature, for example, it may allow the researcher to determine the ideas that are expressed in a document or the underlying approach of a document. Moreover, the search was limited to work on the COVID-19 Pandemic in South Africa and the roles of

social workers. The data was analysed thematically using inductive Thematic Content Analysis (TCA). This method allowed the researcher to identify, analyse and report patterns within the data set, allowing for the descriptive organisation of the data in a way that facilitates the interpretation of various aspects as O'Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) avers.

## ***Findings and Discussions***

### **The Following Themes Emerged**

#### **Theme 1: The Role of Social Workers as Educators**

It was not an easy task for social workers to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in South Africa as social work training in most institutions in the country do not have intense curriculum to prepare social workers to deal with all types of pandemics as stated by Cooper and Briggs (2014), except that social workers apply the generic skills to mitigate such problems. COVID-19 pandemic affected many individuals and families in many ways such as creating stigma and discrimination on the infected and survivors of the pandemic which required social workers to play an extraordinary role of removing such stigmas and discriminations through education (Amadasun, 2020). Thus, it can be noted that the role of social workers as educators was key in the protection of individuals and families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Amadasun (2020), social work as a practice-based profession had important roles to play during the COVID-19 pandemic such as promoting change and development as well as restoring social functioning in families and communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers were amongst the important societal educators who dealt with the distribution of factual information to dispel myths and fears about the pandemic and further reached out to agencies to assist with preparedness, ensured inclusive planning efforts and advocated to governments for increased support on individuals, families and communities (Brown, 2020). On the other hand, some individuals became prone to wrong information about the COVID-19 pandemic which was clarified by professionals such as social workers as stated by Tabong and Segtub (2021).

#### **Theme 2: The Role of Social Workers as Counsellors**

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa made it unavoidable for social workers to play the role of protecting individuals, families, and communities by offering social services such as counselling and emotional support. In the same breath, Rosoff (2008) posits that in the event of pandemics and disasters, social workers are bound to adequately plan and provide the best and most compassionate care. This was evident when social workers contributed to the response of the COVID-19 pandemic by offering counselling yielding great coping results for some individuals, families and communities (Dominelli, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental health of many individuals in the society requiring services of social workers to respond to.

According to Wang, Pan, Wan, Tan, Xu, McIntyre, Choo, Tran, Ho, Sharma and Ho (2020) and Xiang, Yang, Li, Zhang, Zhang, Cheung and Ng (2020), social workers had to provide mental health supporting strategies that are required during the COVID-19 pandemic for the purposes of assisting individuals to change lifestyles and re-adapt to conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed social workers to ensure access to needed services for individuals who were infected by providing counselling and organising ways of overcoming mental health issues caused by isolation and quarantine through counselling (Brown, 2020). The researcher regard counselling as an important process as it offers support and empowerment. This is in line with Hough (2010) who argues that counselling is significant for providing relationships that are based on support, principles of empowerment, confidentiality, and

identification of resources. In the same breath, Dako-Gyeke, Boateng and Mills (2018) posit that social workers have skills and competencies to provide counselling that they use to deal with the emotional and social consequences of pandemics. It can be noted that social workers had to play the role of counsellors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Theme 3: The Role of Social Workers as Brokers**

Individuals, families and communities benefited from the key brokering role played by social workers of monitoring policies such as mental health policies which focused on the care and treatment strategies of clients in mental health facilities (Usher, Durkin & Bhullar, 2020). Social work practice is applauded around the globe for its vital role of protecting vulnerable groups in the society. During the COVID-19 pandemic some individuals, families and communities became vulnerable to the pandemic wherein their urgent needs were covered by social workers as alluded averred by Redondo-Sama, Matulic, Munté-Pascual, and de Vicente (2020). Social workers ensured that individuals and families get services by collaborating with relevant stakeholders and as collaboration of stakeholders was key for the resilience of individuals and families as alluded by the World Health Organization (2020).

Social workers were also instrumental by swiftly identifying and coordinating the community-based resources to advance related social interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuring the development and organisation of communities. It can be noted that social work practice is important during pandemics such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In the same breath, Walter-McCabe (2020) posit that social work contribution was important in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic by supporting individuals and communities. The response of social workers to the COVID-19 pandemic was also in accordance with policies which is why social workers were seen being involved in policy decisions and social aspects that concerned the health of individuals and families during the pandemic (Miller & Lee, 2020; Truell, 2020). Fronek, Common, Rotabi and Statham (2019) avows that social services are provided by many sectors such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) before and post pandemics. Social workers played the role of ensuring the reach to services by clients during the pandemic. Sunil (2022) believe that social workers are competent enough to provide social services during pandemics due to the nature of the education they receive. In other words, social workers were and are still key in the provision of social services due to their competence in delivery services and helping the vulnerable groups during disasters.

According to Gillespie and Danso (2010), Social workers during disasters such as floods and COVID-19 play a crucial role of coordinating the provision of social services to mitigate the negative impact of disasters on vulnerable people. Zakour (2000) posits that the roles such as brokering and mediating by social workers to the government is important in offering social services during pandemics. Due to the increased pressure that was brought by COVID-19 pandemic on healthcare facilities, social workers had a role of making referrals of patients to other institutions for further care, more especially those that required the services that do not fall within the scope of social work (Abor & Abor, 2020).

### **Theme 4: The Role of Social Workers as Case Managers**

Green (2017) argues that social workers engage in case management which permit them to integrate healthcare and social support services by assessing individuals' needs and preference to promote healthcare amid pandemics. Lancet (2020) report that during, and post pandemics such as the COVID-19 individuals and families are left battling with physical and health problems which requires social workers to deal with. This shows the importance of social workers in the restoration of hope in individuals and families during pandemics. Social workers restored the functioning of families and empowered individuals to respond to issues such as mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dutton, Grissom & Herbstreit, 2020). According to Kropf and Jones (2014), social workers during pandemics help determine the course of action of communities and help to predict the consequences of various situations.



Dauti, Dhëmbo, Bejko and Allmuça (2020) state that social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic were expected to be involved in the promotion of social support, community participation and engaging in the spaces where decisions are made regarding social policies and programs. In the same breath, Ersing (2020) states that social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic were seen organizing and distributing resources such as food and clothes to vulnerable individuals and families. One of the crucial roles executed by social workers is offering professional skills, competencies, and knowledge in the health arena to assist individuals, families as well as communities (National Association of Social Workers, 2020). This was also key during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Bern-Klug and Beaulieu (2020), social workers were able to use their skills and competencies to offer services to individuals, families and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. It must be noted that social workers complemented the support that was provided by doctors and nurses by being at the forefront of monitoring and providing evidence-based strategies to people with COVID-19 and their families to mitigate adverse outcomes (Reigada, Romao, Coelho, Lourenco, Pires, Alves & Ramos, 2020).

In addition, studies show that social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic were skilled and competent to plan for care and management of cases as well as contributing to the policy development (Bern-Klug & Beaulieu, 2020; Walter-McCabe, 2020). Shevellar and Westoby (2014) argues that social workers during disaster situations, are expected to alleviate the effects of community crises, and organize communities for post disaster recovery. According to Brinkerhoff (2014), Social workers are essential during pandemics and disasters as they offer adequate and appropriate social services in the outbreak of pandemics and other emergencies. The COVID-19 pandemic in the social work practice has intensified the need for responding to the social and health needs of clients, however social workers have attended to these needs (Agwu and Okoye, 2021).

Social workers like many other professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic needed resources and support to deliver social services effectively and efficiently to clients. This is supported by Bern-Klug and Beaulieu (2020) who avow that resources are essential and needed for social workers to respond to challenges of clients. According to Truell (2020) and Miller and Lee (2020), social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic ensured the provision of social services by practicing at the micro, meso, macro levels. The COVID-19 pandemic affected also the elderly in various families requiring social workers to explore leveraging on and promoting kinship care and support practices as alternative strategies for protection of such vulnerable group as stated by Cudjoe and Abdullah (2020). Thus, it can be noted that the role of social workers as case managers is imperative during natural disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

Social work plays a very crucial role in managing natural disasters such as COVID-19. This paper reflected on the role of social workers in the COVID-19 outbreak, where it was revealed that social workers played a significant role such as enhancing the well-being of individuals and helping them to meet their needs. As a reflection on the practice of social work during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was revealed that a hybrid social work practice was used by some social workers to reach out to clients who could not be accessed due to isolation as a measure that was used to curb the coronavirus disease. It is from the findings of the study that the following recommendations are developed:

- Digital social work should be promoted in South Africa to help in cases where contact and physical practice cannot be possible.
- The government of South Africa should hire more social workers which will also help during natural disasters.

### ***Acknowledgement***

The author has read and agreed to the content of the manuscript.

### ***Author Contribution***

The author has contributed to all the sections of the manuscript.

**Ethical issues/Informed Consent Statement:** The study did not involve humans or animals as secondary data was used. However, the researcher took the following into account to ensure ethicality: University of Limpopo research ethics policies and exercising honesty in terms of acknowledging ‘all’ sources used in this study, aided by the list of references and avoiding of plagiarism.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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