



Psychosocial challenges faced by mortuary workers. A case of a funeral assurance company in Harare.

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Abstract

The study interrogated psychosocial challenges faced by mortuary workers working in a Funeral Assurance Company. This was motivated by the need to establish the psychosocial challenges faced by mortuary workers, which has been a neglected area in the archives of research. The study used a qualitative research approach to interrogate the issues underpinning the research thrust. On that plane, the researcher used semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires as data collection tools. The study is centred around the minimal concern of both society and industry on the psychosocial challenges of mortuary workers. The study established that mortuary workers suffer psychosocial challenges as a result of challenges that emanate from their working environment. Psychological challenges spill into the social interactions of mortuary workers. Therefore, there is a need for intervention towards the mitigation of the psychosocial challenges of mortuary workers. In light of such a complexity of issues. Furthermore, the findings of the study and conclusion arrived at enhanced the proffering of recommendations upon which a model of intervention was coined.

Key Words: Mortuary workers, Funeral Assurance Company, psychosocial, stress, trauma, mental health.

1. Introduction

Death is an ever-present cultural phenomenon and burying the dead is a primary cultural universal activity. It is a societal norm that has perpetuated the role of the funeral director and the necessity of someone to lead the bereaved through the end-of-life process. This work-line reflects the widespread social taboos that surround death and the manipulation of dead bodies, (Mridula, 2016). The Profession category deals with work-related risks and job demands every day that affect health and well-being. Very few studies have been done to assess how the psychological factors of the funeral context can impact burnout levels. Other mental health issues such as depression, death anxiety and post-primary and secondary traumatic stress disorder are common in the lives of these employees. The growing recognition of the importance of careers in the corpse handling industry to society was noticed at a global scale according to Brysiewicz (2014), after conducting a study in Canada. Harrawood, et al. (2009) did research in the USA and explained the need to appreciate the unique nature of corpse handlers' daily work encounters which has also received considerable critical attention. The literature from the study conducted



in Canada by Durand and Galarneau (2021) shed more light on the psychological problems which Funeral Service Workers are experiencing. The consideration of mortuary workers as essential workers who also need social security could be missed. Major researches done in Europe have interests related specifically to the well-being of individuals who have close contact with dead human bodies on a regular basis (Boeckers, et al., 2010), for example, considered mortuary workers as being at high risk of developing Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) due to their daily encounters with corpses. An extensive number of studies have been published on the lived experiences of mortuary corpse handlers. Aspects explored in these studies have included emergency and disaster situations as well as the use of humour for coping, perceived stigma, death anxiety, coping, stress, and spirituality in relation to corpse handling (Szkil, 2016; Simone, 2011). The explored studies inform the researcher on critical issues pertaining to the psychosocial challenges of mortuary workers. Psychosocial challenges expounded in the covered studies give this research a view which affirms the need for attending to the psychosocial support of mortuary workers.

The global understanding of death varies but more critical to this study are the psychosocial challenges endured by mortuary workers. Goldenhar, et al, (2001) opines that funeral service workers endure a combination of classic health stressors, unique funeral-industry stressors and stressors associated with working in non-traditional occupations. Furthermore, Mridula, (2016) states that the subculture of mortuary workers globally involves working with the dead. From such experiences, mortuary workers endure psychological distress resulting in the use of maladaptive coping mechanisms and substance abuse. On a critical note, society discriminates against mortuary workers who are viewed as unclean. The funeral service working profession is demeaned against other professions in various sectors, (Mridula, 2016). In that vein, mortuary workers as handlers of dead corpses are discriminated against and in some cases associated with enjoying business due to the death of human beings. According to, Guidetti, et al., (2021) the funeral services sector is largely a neglected sector even in the aspects of occupational health issues that affect the quality of life. Funeral services workers further endure stigma consciousness, supervisor incivility and work-to-family spill over.

In an African context, death is mostly associated with spirituals and some rules and procedures are said to be followed or otherwise, it will be a taboo or cause of misfortunes. At funeral homes, some of the rules are difficult to follow since most of the procedures are done without the presence of relatives. In Ghana, they did research studies and their results had shown that mortuary employees also experience death anxiety since they spend most of their time handling dead bodies. Poor economies in most African countries also result in poor maintenance of some critical facilities and the burden is left to the mortuary employees who directly interfere with those facilities (Wright, & Fullerton, 2011). Mortuary employees in the African context end up improvising during the execution of their duties. Such improvisations have a negative effect because proper handling and preparation of dead bodies is bypassed leaving the mortuary worker exposed to risks.

In Zimbabwe, we have a number of Funeral Assurance Companies providing death-care services to the locals. Those companies employ people to work in the mortuaries and handle the dead bodies of people who were on the



funeral policy cover. Due to the economic challenges, most of them employ a limited number of staff and as a result, the mortuary workers have a high frequency of coming into contact with dead bodies. Some of the places to be reached for burial are difficult to access due to several factors including a lack of proper roads and wild animals in the area. Due to this, the psychology of such workers is vulnerable (Simone, 2011). The vulnerability of mortuary workers emanates from their exposure to decomposing bodies, savaged bodies and accident-damaged corpses.

The psychological vulnerability of Funeral Assurance companies' employees is manifest in various ways. The psychosocial manifestations in the form of traumatic stress disorder, depression, stigma consciousness, compassion fatigue, burning out, distress and death anxiety are evident among Funeral Assurance company workers, especially those working in the mortuary. According to Mridula, (2016), mortuary workers endure psychological challenges like stress, depression and mental health-related issues. These challenges impede mortuary workers' communication with other employees and society at large. However, there is minimal concern from society on ways to handle the psychological issues pertaining to mortuary workers. This study was influenced by the need to raise a voice of concern towards mitigating psychological challenges facing mortuary workers.

The research was guided by the following research questions:

What are the psychological challenges that Funeral Assurance Company (FAC) mortuary employees are experiencing?

What are the social effects of working in a funeral home or mortuary?

What are the coping mechanisms used to mitigate the psychosocial challenges of mortuary workers?

2. Materials and methods

Research Approach and Design

A qualitative research approach was used which is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The qualitative research approach presents quality data in the form of a descriptive and analytical statement. Hanock et al, (2009) explain that qualitative research concerns itself with meanings of how particular people make proper sense of the world. It further encompasses how participants experience events from their perspectives. The qualitative research approach also enhanced the researcher's abilities towards extracting primary data from the population and the case that was under study. The case study research design was used. The case study research design was of particular importance as the researcher wished to gain more in-depth knowledge on the subject enacted (Matewe, et al, 2021).

Population and Sampling Strategies

The population used for this research was composed of employees from two known funeral homes in Harare, Zimbabwe. The Researcher targeted 15 participants since some were not willing to take part. The researcher employed the non-probability purposive sampling technique. Using the non-probability purposive sampling the researcher managed to sample a population made up of participants who are familiar with mortuary work-related



issues under investigation. Purposive sampling is the dominant strategy in qualitative research because it enables the researcher to extract relevant primary data from the participants, (Hoepfi, 1997). The non-probability aspect gave every participant an equal chance to contribute relevant data for the research. However, the selected population participated in the research under purely qualitative research instruments or data collection tools. The purposive sampling method was convenient and selection was done with ease, given the narrowly relevant population. Those who had served for more than a year were eligible to participate in the research.

Instruments

Open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews were used as data collection techniques. These techniques allowed the researcher to solicit more knowledge on the subject area under study.

Data analysis and interpretation

The research adopted thematic analysis as a method to analyse the data. According to Matewe & Samson (2021), if themes are not identified by researchers, the whole phenomenon under question will be pointless, as the utilization of data is not maximized. The main thrust in the thematic analysis is the identification of themes that is the different patterns within data which are crucial and these themes are then used in addressing the fulcrum of the research (Matewe & Samson, 2021).

3 Results and findings

Mortuary workers endure psychosocial challenges in a myriad of ways. These psychosocial challenges have been attributed to quite a number of issues as shall be presented in the collected data. On a clearer plane psychological challenges trigger social issues for mortuary workers in human society. However, the psychological challenges that mortuary workers continue to grapple with can be attributed to the stigma associated with handling and preparing dead bodies.

PARTICIPANT A opined that,

“the psychological effects of working in a mortuary emanate mostly from the stigma developed around working with dead people and general beliefs associated with dead people.”

The view of the participant is underpinned by the perception that death is viewed as a taboo in the African milieu and Zimbabwe is not an exception. In light of that perception, mortuary workers are stigmatised thereby psychologically affecting them.

PARTICIPANT A further averred that,

“Sometimes when I try to interact with people they shun me like as if I manufacture death and carry it wherever I go. Their fear and association of death with taboo make them label me as contaminated by a taboo.”



Questionnaire responses showed that mortuary workers are affected by their working environment psychological stress-related issues arise. These issues arise due to suffering stigma and enduring other unbecoming conditions related to their work. The conditions in a mortuary generate stress stimulants in a mortuary worker. The stress stimulation emanates from death in the form of working with both the dead and those grieving over their dead loved ones.

PARTICIPANT B shared that,

“our work is a complex one. On a daily basis, you work with both the dead and their grieving relatives. I am also human and do not want to be associated with anyone dead. Introspecting on the experiences of the dead and the way their relatives mourn emotionally affects me.”

The researcher observed that the degree of cognitive function among some mortuary workers manifests stress-related challenges. In essence, in the middle of the interview, one participant easily lost concentration and I had to reawaken him. It became visible to me that stress was haunting the participant. Such effects of stress were visible in observed thoughts, judgement, problem-solving and perceptions.

PARTICIPANT B averred that:

“indeed mortuary workers observed, have psychological challenges in the form of post-traumatic stress, occupational stress, elevated stress among other stresses.”

Human resource always try their best to contain such stresses among the mortuary workers. This remedies the business trajectory as clients need good customer care whenever they come to attend to their deceased fellow.

PARTICIPANT C opined that:

“the risks for symptoms related to post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological sequelae are in the form of psychological challenges which include loneliness, anxiety, fear, grief, depression, neglect, abuse, self-care issues, loss of confidence and lack of social and support networks.”

The symptoms of stress disorder shared by participant C, triggered more observation among the participants. The researcher observed that, some of the mortuary workers indeed have post-traumatic stress disorders. However, they continue to be exposed to immense distressing experiences.

PARTICIPANT D was of the view that:

“I had challenges during my first day working this side. I was actually afraid of seeing dead bodies. Sometimes I couldn't sleep thinking of what had happened during the day and all the visuals coming back to consciousness”.

Immense distressing experiences of incessant facing pain and death have negative psychological effects on mortuary workers. Furthermore, fear of handling dead bodies especially for first-timers when they see accident-deformed bodies, anxiety and personalising death as if the grieving and the deceased are part of their family or friends have a psychological effect among mortuary workers.



With those psychological challenges affecting a mortuary worker, the researcher observed that depression develops. Depressed mortuary workers hallucinate and at times manifest aspects of absent-mindedness even during interview interactions with the researcher. Some novices were gripped with fear of death due to working with dead bodies in a deformed state due to accidents and this continues to flashback into the mind for a period of time.

PARTICIPANT A maintained that:

“Whenever we have trainees and new working personnel in our department we face challenges. Some of them complain about having nightmares at home due to mental replays of mortuary experiences. Others would even panic in the mortuary whenever a corpse shakes due to a change of temperatures during preparation for burial.”

The psychological challenges shared by the participants also enlightened both the researcher and participants on the social effects of working in a funeral home or mortuary.

According to PARTICIPANT E,

“in one way or the other every mortuary worker is affected by working under the morgue conditions.”

However, some may hide their psychological challenges from the wider society. Society has diverse assumptions about mortuary workers and the tricky part is that mortuary workers are privy to these assumptions. In that vein, the ways in which mortuary workers psychologically handle or respond to the assumptions of society differs. This is premised on the view that human beings in their diverse psychological stamina present their psychological challenges differently.

PARTICIPANT E bemoaned that,

“Whenever I prepare a baby corpse it reminds me of my two babies that I lost at the infancy stage. Sometimes I end up crying alone in the morgue. The memories continue to affect me at work.”

The emotional trauma and psychological breakdown experiences from the recorded data indicate that mortuary workers are humans in need of help. Delays in helping these special groups of people culminate in them developing coping mechanisms which are a threat to their psychological stamina. This may depend on individual coping mechanisms used and individual adjustments.

PARTICIPANT F also echoed the same sentiments observed by the researcher during interviews.

“some people have their way of dealing with psychological problems. In that case, some are affected while others are not.”

In the same vein PARTICIPANT, G argued that,

“Not every mortuary worker is psychologically affected by working in the morgue. However, most of them are affected and it can be visibly manifest to the gaze of other humans. Out of the psychological shocks visible episodes can be observed when the



affected mortuary workers interact with other people. In most cases, such interactions are characterised by difficulties in flow and consistency of conversations.”

Mortuary workers look stressed. Furthermore, they suffer depression, a variety of intense emotions, loss of dignity and swinging behavioural challenges. These were sentiments from questionnaires and observed phenomena which were in agreement with participant feedback.

Social withdrawal can also come in resulting in one encountering nightmares and it results in social withdrawal from the assumption that everyone is talking negatively about my mortuary work. Affected mortuary workers withdraw from family and friends. That culminates in solo operations in relation to other people. Furthermore, unsociable tendencies manifest immensely.

PARTICIPANT H was of the view that:

“Visibility of psychological challenges differs in their magnitude as humans differ in their personalities.”

However, psychological challenges in mortuary workers are exacerbated due to continual exposure to death, the dead and dissatisfactory remuneration for such a sacrificial vocation.

Seeing and handling dead bodies of different people, age groups and some in various scary deformed conditions contributes to the psychological breakdown of mortuary workers. In essence, such an experience is not ordinary and cannot be easily copied by mortuary workers. From questionnaire responses isolation, aggression, stigma, substance abuse, the sight of deformity angry emotional and cognitive repercussions and low psychological resilience are the observable social effects among people working in a mortuary.

Questionnaire responses also revealed that the coping mechanisms used to mitigate psychosocial challenges of mortuary workers include the use of maladaptive coping mechanisms e.g. substance abuse, and compensatory behaviours among others. Some use resilience through experience, education and peer support. On the same note, others talk to their caring families or other workmates about issues affecting them during the execution of their duties in the mortuary. Constructively others have access to professional support to counsel them.

4. Discussion of Findings

Psychological challenges that mortuary employees experience

Mortuary workers have been studied and the researcher discovered numerous psychological challenges affecting this population. The psychological challenges affecting mortuary workers culminate into behavioural deviance. According to Guidetti, et al, (2021), the psychological distressful challenges affecting mortuary workers influences maladaptive coping mechanisms like substance abuse, anger challenges, and social withdrawals, among others. The issues from Guidetti et al (2021), in the literature review, were in agreement with what PARTICIPANT B averred during data collection. PARTICIPANT B echoed that indeed mortuary workers have psychological challenges in the form of post-traumatic stress, occupational stress, and elevated stress among other stresses. These psychological challenges develop as a result of working in a mortuary emanate mostly from the stigma



developed around working with dead people and general beliefs associated with dead people, (PARTICIPANT A). However, Goldenhar, et al, (2001) further maintains that mortuary workers endure a combination of classic health stressors, unique funeral-industry stressors and stressors associated with working in non-traditional occupations. To a greater extent, mortuary workers suffer psychological challenges. This then implies that even those who do not show signs of any of the psychological challenges may be potential future victims or have coped with their work. Psychological challenges from the victims who work in mortuaries affect their interaction with other people and wider society. Such a combination of challenges culminates into psychosocial challenges among mortuary workers. Indeed, the psychological challenges of mortuary workers have social effects in the workplace and community at large. Both secondary literature and data collected from the participants were in agreement on the perspective that indeed mortuary workers suffer psychosocial challenges.

Social effects of working in a funeral home (mortuary).

From the issues presented in the above theme and collected data it has been proven that there is indeed a population of mortuary workers who suffer psychological challenges. These psychological challenges have social effects as was alluded to in the literature review. Social effects emanating from psychological challenges due to working in a mortuary are post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological sequel are in the form of loneliness, anxiety, fear, grief, depression, neglect, abuse, self-care issues, loss of confidence and lack of social and support networks as alluded to by PARTICIPANT C. Furthermore, due to psychological challenges mortuary workers in society suffer social rejection can influence emotion, cognition and even both mental and physical health. Due to social rejection victims become aggressive and can turn to violence. It also increases anger, anxiety, depression, jealousy, and sadness, reduces performance on difficult intellectual tasks and can contribute to poor impulse control. Psychologists emphasise that people who suffer rejection have poor sleep quality, and their immune systems do not function as well as those of people with social connections, (Meir, 2012). In such an unstable psychological condition social enhancers such as communication, collaboration, healthy relationships, independence, and freedom among others are impeded. PARTICIPANT D further alluded that due to incessant exposure to death and the dead mortuary workers will behave strangely in society. Deviant behaviours which also affects healthy social networks are some of the social effects of concern among mortuary workers. The study locates psychosocial challenges in mortuary workers from the discussed social effects. However, when a mortuary worker realises the social effects due to his/her psychological challenges. One resorts to coping mechanisms.

Coping mechanisms used to mitigate psychosocial challenges of mortuary workers

Mortuary workers when realise that they have developed psychological challenges which are socially affecting them. They develop coping mechanisms towards mitigation of the psychological challenges. Questionnaire responses revealed that coping mechanisms in the form of using maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance abuse, compensatory behaviours, and social withdrawal among others are used by mortuary workers. Others use resilience through experience, education, peer support, and talking to their caring families or other



workmates on issues affecting them during the execution of their duties in the mortuary and seeking counselling services. These coping mechanisms applicably build from the Kubler-Ross model's five stages which include denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, (Davies, (2004). The stages proposed the Kubler-Ross model further enabled this study to identify coping mechanisms as revealed in participants. According to Flynn et al, (2014,) coping mechanisms among mortuary workers can also be identified in the form of distancing, sharing, personal growth, and avoiding personalising experiences of job execution in the mortuary. Stroebe et al, (2017) further emphasise the Lazarus and Folkmann model which uses the cognitive stress theory for general coping after a live event or psychologically challenging experiences. Adaptive coping in the cognitive stress theory includes emotion-problem-focused coping, confrontation-avoidance, and positive psychological states vs rumination. PARTICIPANT H enabled the researcher to locate the cognitive aspects explicated by the Lazarus and Folkmann model in the coping mechanisms of mortuary workers. Cognitive stress management coping mechanisms such as substance abuse, compensatory behaviour, social withdrawal and individual reservation tendencies are inevitable among affected mortuary workers. In light of the coping mechanisms the study developed an insight into the remedy for psychosocial challenges among mortuary workers. Indeed mortuary workers suffer from psychosocial challenges and they reflect on the need for coping mechanisms towards developing solutions. For that perspective recommendations shall be proffered by the study. However, the study is not immune of limitations.

5. Conclusions

The study found that mortuary workers suffer from psychosocial challenges. These psycho-social challenges are in the form of depression, stigma consciousness, compassion fatigue, burning out, distress and death anxiety post-traumatic stress, occupational stress, and elevated stress among other stresses. From the findings, the researcher also discovered that mortuary workers' psychological challenges have social effects. These social effects are in the form of loneliness, anxiety, fear, grief, depression, neglect, abuse, self-care issues, loss of confidence and lack of social and support networks. Further increasing anger, anxiety, depression, jealousy, and sadness, reduces performance on difficult intellectual tasks and can contribute to poor impulse control. Due to the psychosocial challenges mortuary workers develop coping mechanisms. These coping mechanisms include substance abuse, compensatory behaviour, social withdrawal and individual reservation tendencies. Furthermore, other coping mechanisms include the use of resilience through experience, education, peer support, talking to their caring families or other workmates on issues affecting them during the execution of their duties in the mortuary and seeking counselling services. From the presented summation the researcher drew conclusions.

The researcher concludes that mortuary workers suffer psychosocial challenges. However, the challenges are diverse among mortuary workers. In the same vein, some mortuary workers suffer psychosocial challenges but try to conceal the issues from the view of other people. The psychological challenges which mortuary workers endure also culminate into social challenges. The researcher drew the context of psychosocial challenges from psychological challenges and social challenges. In light of that perspective, the researcher concludes that



psychological challenges among mortuary workers have a social effect. The social effect is located in both the workplace and wider community. Due to the relational strains perpetrated by psychosocial challenges among mortuary workers. The researcher concludes that coping mechanisms are inevitable among affected mortuary workers. However, the coping mechanisms can be identified in both positive and negative forms.

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