

**Referring cases to designated child protection organisations: The experiences
of social workers in Pretoria**

by

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ABSTRACT

Referring cases to designated child protection organisations: The experiences of social workers in Pretoria

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The referral process is crucial in the obligations of social workers regarding the protection of children. Nonetheless, the experiences of social workers in Pretoria, South Africa, concerning the referral of cases to designated child protection organisations (DCPOs) have not been extensively researched. The socio-economic circumstances in Gauteng, marked by inequalities, income disparities, and scarce resources, pose significant challenges for child protection services, further complicated by systemic inefficiencies and administrative hurdles.

This study aimed to explore and describe the experiences of social workers in Pretoria in referring cases to designated child protection organisations. A qualitative research approach was selected to thoroughly explore the personal experiences and perspectives of the participants. The research utilised a phenomenological design to explore the core of social workers' experiences, emphasising their feelings, thoughts, and methods in managing the referral process. Interviews were carried out using non-probability, purposive sampling, and six participants were recruited to collect rich and valuable data. Thematic analysis was used to find common patterns and themes, ensuring trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The researcher made sure to uphold ethical principles, such as voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and the commitment to avoid harm.

The key findings stemmed from the research question: "What are the experiences of social workers in Pretoria referring cases to designated child protection organisations?" Participants shared that they encountered various difficulties, such as

inconsistencies in referral protocols, overwhelming caseloads, insufficient resources like transport and technology, and limited collaboration with other stakeholders. The weight of these challenges, combined with fragmented feedback systems, makes their roles even more complicated. In the face of challenges, social workers showed remarkable strength and creativity in tackling these problems, using innovative methods to safeguard the welfare of children.

The findings indicate that addressing these problems calls for significant changes. The recommendations seek to improve resource allocation so that social workers have the tools and assistance to effectively perform their duties. Minimising delays and preserving reliability depend on consistent referral procedures and better agency communication. Development of better training courses that provide social workers with the required knowledge and abilities would help them to properly uphold legislative frameworks and community dynamics. A united and efficient child protection system depends on improved cooperation among government agencies, NGOs, and community partners. Ultimately, creating a nurturing atmosphere that emphasises the well-being of social workers is essential for reducing burnout and maintaining their effectiveness in their roles.

This study contributes to the ongoing conversation about social work practice in South Africa, offering a detailed insight into the everyday challenges encountered by social workers in Gauteng and specifically, Pretoria. The findings of this study indicate that systemic challenges greatly hinder social workers from making effective referrals to the appropriate child protection organisations.

KEY WORDS:

Designated child protection organisation

Designated child protection services

Referring

Social worker

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CYCWs	Child and Youth Care Workers
DCPO	Designated Child Protection Organisations
DSD	Department of Social Development
FACT	Forensic Assessment Consultation and Training
FCG	Foster Child Grant
GST	General Systems Theory
NAPC	National Plan of Action for Children
NPO	Non-Profit Organisations
SACSSP	South African Council for Social Service Professionals
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals

CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Violence against children is prevalent in South Africa (Lake & Jamieson, 2016:1168). According to community-based studies, at least 55% of children have been physically harmed by family members, educators, or relatives (Meinck, Cluver, Boyes & Loening-Voysey, 2016:910); 35-45% have been witnesses to domestic violence; and corporal punishment is still common, with nearly 58% of parents using physical punishment and 33% using a belt or stick (Lake & Jamieson, 2016:1169). According to a 2016 national prevalence study, child abuse and neglect is a huge problem in South Africa. 35.4% of South African children have been sexually abused, with 42% of children experiencing some type of maltreatment (Artz, Burton, Ward, Leoschut, Phyfer, Kassanjee, & Le Mottee, 2016:11). According to a more recent UNICEF study, 243 children in South Africa were murdered between April and June 2022, with 1,670 suffering serious bodily harm (Petla, 2022). Children's cognitive and psychological development suffers long-term consequences from violence, including trauma, feeling anxious or depressed, poor attachment, failure to reach their potential, and violent, antisocial, or self-destructive behaviours (Pinheiro, 2006:55).

The majority of violence against children goes unreported (Lake & Jamieson, 2016:1169), and when it does, protection organisations are ineffective (Artz et al., 2016:69). According to Lake and Jamieson (2016:1168), social services are strained thin. The national government, international organisations such as UNICEF, and non-governmental organisations have all recognised the critical need for integrated health, social, police, and criminal justice services to assist victims of child abuse (UNICEF South Africa, 2013).

The high rates of violence against children indicate the child protection system's urgent need to respond (Strydom, Schiller, & Orme, 2020:383). Many children continue to live in harmful situations, prolonging negative development cycles and putting additional load on the childcare and protection systems (Department of Social Development [DSD], 2019:45-46). Immediate interventions and critical examination must be carried out since child abuse violates children's rights and impedes their socio-emotional development (Strydom et al., 2020:383).

Effective referral procedures are critical to identifying and assisting vulnerable children (Roelen, Long & Edström, 2012:2). To ensure that children and their families receive equitable services, it is critical to foster cooperative relationships between the public sector, such as the Department of Social Development, the Department of Health, and the Department of Basic Education, and the private sector, such as social workers in private practice (DSD, 2013:16-20).

Van Niekerk and Matthias (2019:239) conducted research on social workers' experiences in child protection agencies. They discovered that the interaction between the volunteer sector and non-profit organisations (NPOs) and DSD is fraught with friction and injustice. Jamieson et al. (2017) identified that many professions do not function effectively together, and that the child protection system's response is ineffective. Furthermore, Vorback (2016:3) suggested that task confusion, overlapping obligations, and a lack of training, among other factors, contributed to a lack of consistency when dealing with child custody challenges.

The connection between social workers operating outside the realm of child protection and those associated with child protection agencies remains unclear, especially with instances involving children needing care and protection. Given the statistics on child maltreatment in South Africa, it is essential to comprehend how these processes are integral to the child protection system. This study intends to explore and describe the experiences of social workers in referring cases to designated child protection organisations (DCPOs), addressing a notable gap in existing research.

The following key concepts are defined to ensure clarity and interpretation:

A social worker: refers to a qualified social worker who may work with people one-on-one or in groups to improve society, strengthen interpersonal connections, boost community cohesion, and fight for equitable treatment of all people (DSD, 2020:10). In the context of this study, social worker will refer to all social workers registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professionals (SACSSP).

Referring: is the activity of becoming aware of a problem with a family or child, determining that something has to be done about it, and reporting that problem to the appropriate authority (Roelen et al., 2012:3). In the context of this study, referring is the process of reporting a concern to a designated child protection organisation.

A designated child protection organisation: is an organisation that has been legally authorised to provide certain child protection services under section 105 of the Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007 (Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007; Children's Amendment Act No. 17 of 2022). This study will explore the experiences of referring to such organisations.

Designated child protection services: Section 105 of the Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007 references designated child protection services. Usually, groups that are mandated to safeguard children carry out these services (Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007).

1.2 RATIONALE AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

A thorough review of the available literature revealed that little is known about the experiences of social workers when referring cases to child protection organisations. The authors Dlamini and Sewpaul (2015:476) evaluated the experiences of social workers within a branch of DSD in the Ethekekwini region in South Africa and found that poor collaboration exists within the organisation. Furthermore, the authors Van Niekerk and Matthias (2019:239) note that tension and a lack of collaboration exist between DSD and NPOs. Van Niekerk and Matthias (2019:251) stated that according to participant narratives in their research, there are several gaps in service coordination and integration that lead to disparities in service delivery to children, families, and communities. The child protection system lacks a clear overarching structure of implementation and integration between directorates within the DSD, levels of government, and sectors involved in the provision of CPS. A lack of intersectoral protocols defining the roles of each sector further compromises CPS. However, these studies do not consider the experiences of social workers from outside of child protection organisations having to collaborate with social workers within these organisations, specifically during the referral process and which referral process is crucial for the safety and well-being of children.

This study will provide insight into understanding the experiences of social workers when referring to designated child protection organisations to make recommendations for strengthening the referral mechanisms and collaboration between both parties. Therefore, the research question this study pursued to answer was: "What are the

experiences of social workers in Pretoria when referring cases to designated child protection organisations?”

1.3 GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of social workers in Pretoria when referring cases to designated child protection organisations.

The following objectives had to be achieved to meet this goal:

- To explore and describe the experiences, both good and bad, that Pretoria social workers have when referring children to designated child protection organisations.
- To explore and describe the referral procedure utilised to send cases to Pretoria's designated child protection organisations.
- To explore and describe the steps social workers take if referrals fail to be successful.
- To formulate practical recommendations aimed at strengthening referral systems within Pretoria's designated child protection organisations.

1.4 OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH METHODS

Interpretivism deems that humans build knowledge as they understand their experiences of and in the world, rejecting the objectivist view that knowledge is merely there to be categorised and gathered (Constantino, 2008; Pascale, 2011). Pascale (2011:23) highlights the interpretivist belief that, to comprehend a situation, researchers must understand the meanings the circumstances hold for the participants, not just their actions. This study employed an interpretivist epistemology, which fits the viewpoint that social reality is constructed by individual experiences, perceptions, and values modified by cultural and interpersonal interactions (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022:421).

Interpretivist research recognises the subjective contributions of participants as their experiences and stories help to define the social environment under exploration (Rehman & Alaharti, 2016). This approach allows the researcher to dive into participants' perceptions, emotions, and beliefs to get a comprehensive grasp of their lived reality and experiences (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

The interpretivist paradigm was used to explore the experiences of social workers when referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria by carrying out semi-structured interviews with the participants. A deeper understanding of the phenomenon and the importance assigned to it by the participants through the transcription of the interviews (Nieuwenhuis, 2020:67).

Influenced by an interpretivist lens, the proposed study necessitated a qualitative research approach. A qualitative study encompasses many theoretical foundations. However, there is considerable agreement on some characteristic traits (Nieuwenhuis, 2020:56). As the qualitative research approach usually utilises a dual medium purpose, the purposes were thus to describe and explore. According to Polit and Beck in Hunter, McCallum, and Howes (2019), exploratory research is intended to shed light on how a phenomenon manifests itself and is particularly beneficial in revealing the complete nature of a little-known phenomenon.

Thus, a research study based on an exploratory design entails that the researcher explores a topic with limited coverage within the literature and allows the interviewees to develop new knowledge. As for the descriptive purpose, it can be said that it is the conversion of the findings into words and meaning. Descriptive research was applied to the purpose of this study.

The phenomenological case study research design was used as the researcher explored the experiences that social workers have when referring children who need care and protection to a child protection organisation. This approach required the researcher to “bracket or suspend” their judgement while conducting the interviews (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:201) in order to make sure that participants’ experiences were captured as accurately and objectively as possible.

The study population consisted of six social workers in Gauteng, specifically Pretoria, who have experience referring cases to designated child protection organisations. The researcher used purposive sampling in order to select participants relevant to specific elements of interest to the research (Strydom & Delpont, 2011:392).

The researcher approached the Forensic Assessment Consultation and Training (FACT) Network to assist in recruiting participants for the research study. FACT consists of the following: Training and Professional Development; Assessment and Therapy Centre; School-Based Training and Support; Community Responsibility and

Engagement; and Social Work Internship. FACT Network provided written permission that they would be assisting in recruiting participants for the study. FACT Network was provided with an infographic of the research study, which the administrators of FACT Network distributed to potential participants via email. The researcher's details were made available so that potential participants were able to contact the researcher directly if they were interested in participating. Research participants were selected in relation to the following sampling criteria:

- Participants have to be qualified social workers registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP).
- Must hold a minimum of a Bachelor's degree in Social Work (BSW).
- The participants should not be part of designated child protection organisations (DCPOs).
- Must be currently practicing in Gauteng, specifically in Pretoria.
- At least two years of experience referring cases to designated child protection organisations is required of participants.
- Must have experience dealing with complex child protection cases.
- Must have a strong ethical background and be comfortable discussing sensitive child protection cases.
- Must be fluent in English for effective participation in interviews.

The sample comprised six participants. In qualitative research, interviews, whether conducted with individuals or groups, are unquestionably the most prevalent form of data collection (Rubin and Babbie, 2016:168). This study used a semi-structured one-on-one interview schedule that let participants communicate their viewpoints, beliefs, and opinions without being influenced by the researcher's philosophies (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:108).

Data was collected in a single interview with the social workers in Pretoria who experience referring cases to designated child protection services (Makofane & Shirindi, 2018:38). The objectives and processes of the research study were explained to the participants. The interviews were carried out both in person and via secure online platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet, where confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. The interviews with the participants were audio recorded with the written permission of the participants. Data was accumulated from the volunteered,

co-operative, and consenting participants, i.e., social workers in Pretoria who work outside of DCPOs and refer cases to designated child protection organisations in the Gauteng area.

Discovering, analysing, and summarising themes in data is possible through the use of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006:06). Thematic analysis was used to examine the data using the transcriptions from the semi-structured interviews with participants.

Proving trustworthiness is necessary in qualitative research to ensure the reliability and validity of data analysis, findings, and recommendations correctly representing the participants' experiences (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:143). In qualitative research, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility are essential indicators of trustworthiness (Schurink, Schurink & Fouche, 2021:391; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015:278).

In order to verify the data quality of qualitative research, the researcher applied the concept of trustworthiness to develop detailed descriptions and interpretations of the social workers' experiences when referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria (Korstjens & Moser 2018:121; Sousa 2014:211).

A pilot study is described by Rubin and Babbie (2016:196) as well as Strydom (2021:236) as a means of testing and verifying an instrument on a small number of participants. Before data collection, the researcher interviewed one participant for the pilot study. The pilot study allowed the researcher to ascertain whether any modifications to the interview guide are necessary (Strydom, 2021:387; Makofane & Shirindi, 2018:41). The data collected from the pilot test interview were rich and relevant, and no changes were made to the data collection instrument. Therefore, the pilot test interview was included in the main research study findings.

Rubin and Babbie (2016:80) define ethics as adhering to the code of ethics established by a particular profession or organisation. The ethical considerations for research include avoiding harm, informed consent, voluntary involvement, no deceit towards participants, and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality governed this study (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:122).

Pursuing a Master's degree in Social Work (Play Therapy) (Play-based interventions), postgraduate students created this study as part of a group-theme research project

containing these goals and objectives. For every particular study, however, a sample of individuals was chosen from a location the researcher decided upon. They gathered and examined the data on their own and wrote up the final research report individually.

1.5 CHAPTER OUTLINE

The research will be structured as follows:

Chapter 1: General Introduction

The initial chapter presents an overview and context of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The second chapter contains a literature review that leads to the knowledge gap. The theoretical framework that supports the study will also be discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology, Empirical Findings, and Interpretation

Part A of Chapter three provides a detailed outline of the research design and methodology employed during the research. Furthermore, the ethical considerations are also discussed. Part B of the chapter delves into the empirical findings and interpretation thereof.

Chapter 4: Key Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The key findings are presented in this chapter as well as conclusions regarding the data of the research study and the recommendations made.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Social workers meet the task of dealing with intricate systemic obstacles, such as institutional discrepancies, shortage of resources, and cultural customs, all while meeting their legal obligations. This review discusses the challenges and offers insights on enhancing child protection strategies in South Africa. The chapter will close with the theoretical framework used to understand the research.

2.2 OVERVIEW OF CHILD PROTECTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

The South African child protection system is characterised by poor handling of reported cases and a lack of sufficient action by service providers (Jamieson et al., 2017). DSD (2019:47) found that most social workers were cautious to testify against parents who are violent to their children. Additionally, there are significant delays in service provision. Nearly 10% of assessments take place longer than a year after a report has been made, failure to remove or delayed removal of children is a common occurrence, investigations take a long time to complete, and few cases of reported child abuse are brought before the children's court (DSD, 2019:47).

Social workers in Gauteng, where socio-economic disparities exacerbate the difficulties in providing consistent and effective child protection services, encounter various challenges, including institutional, infrastructure, human resources, and legal complications. Institutional obstacles include varied regulations and procedures between jurisdictions, while infrastructural constraints, such as insufficient resources and facilities, impede the efficacy of social workers (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015:339-344). High caseloads, inadequate training, and high turnover rates among social workers all contribute to the difficulty of implementing child protection services (Schmid, 2012:20-21; Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2017:470–474). We still need to understand the relationship between social workers practising outside the scope of child protection and those affiliated with child protection organisations, particularly regarding the referral process for children needing care and protection. Considering the statistics on child abuse and neglect in South Africa, it is imperative to understand the mechanisms that form part of the child protection system.

2.3 CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IN GAUTENG

After over twenty years of democracy, South Africa struggles with impoverishment, inequality, joblessness, and lack of food (Statistics South Africa, 2013a:22). Gauteng's socioeconomic climate overlaps positive and negative aspects, influenced by its status as South Africa's economic core. Despite its youthful population, the province has considerable poverty, economic disparities, and unemployment. Historical and cultural considerations intensify these challenges, making implementing social services and child protection measures more difficult. Deep-seated distrust in communities and recurrent civil unrest exacerbate the problems that social workers face, making it difficult to aid vulnerable persons in a region where progress coexists with significant inequities.

Poverty and income inequality are major concerns in Gauteng. From 14.8% in 2012 to 22.6% in 2022, the percentage of individuals living in poverty has grown. Those living below the lower-bound poverty line increased from 24.1% in 2011 to 34.9% in 2022. The Gini coefficient, which measures income inequality, remains high, reflecting serious discrepancies throughout the province (Gauteng Treasury, 2024:40–41). Development in the City of Tshwane has grown at varying speeds for various races and locations. Impoverished geographical areas have fallen behind in terms of service delivery and resident safety when compared to medium and upper-class suburbs (Chatindiara, 2019:3). These apparent discrepancies exacerbate social disputes and create environments where social workers must traverse a complicated web of issues.

Between 2011 and 2022, Gauteng's availability of basic infrastructure services improved. For example, access to formal housing increased from 79.8% to 88.5%, while access to electricity increased from 87.4% to 93.2% over the same period. However, access to piped water and waste collection services decreased (Gauteng Treasury, 2024:41-42). Although some of these advances are positive, there are still families in particular locations that are experiencing extra stress due to the limited provision of basic services. In the City of Tshwane, informal settlements have proliferated rapidly. Central Pretoria has been the focus of drug and alcohol misuse and has seen a significant increase in street dwellers (Chatindiara, 2019:3). These variables often enhance children's susceptibility, increasing the risk of abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

The sociopolitical milieu of Gauteng, marked by regular protests and civil disturbance, significantly complicates social workers' tasks. Largely, the majority of South Africans are dissatisfied with the government's performance in protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children (Ndoma & Siachiwena, 2023:9). Using a situational study of protest injuries in Gauteng, Richardson, Xaba, Mhlanga, and Tladi (2022) underlined the impact of sociopolitical uncertainty on community dynamics. Socioeconomic complaints, including discontent with service delivery, drive protests that disturb social services and endanger vulnerable children, therefore complicating the child protection landscape in the community (Richardson et al., 2022:63).

Efforts to build social cohesion in Gauteng face significant hurdles due to lingering historical segregation and ongoing inequality, which directly impact how well social services, like child protection, function especially in areas with less racial diversity (Ballard, Hamann, Joseph & Mkhize, 2019:12). Social workers confront substantial challenges as a consequence of the low level of trust in communities, with just 14% of people having confidence in their neighbours. This lack of trust makes it difficult to build strong community support networks, which are critical for child safety (Ballard et al., 2019:57). Negative opinions of migrants and LGBTQ+ persons provide an additional difficulty for social workers, who must navigate stereotypes while helping these populations (Ballard et al., 2019:89-95).

2.5 LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

This section highlights South Africa's robust laws and policies that meet local and global standards to protect children's rights. Significant national laws comprise of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, Chapter 2, The Bill of Rights, the Children's Act, and several other acts that address matters such as human rights and child protection. These laws are designed to protect children from maltreatment, ensuring they are safe from abuse, neglect, and exploitation while also promoting their overall well-being and assisting them in accessing fundamental services.

Even with a strong framework, implementing these laws is a struggle. Especially in rural regions, because of insufficient infrastructure, resources, and collaboration among government agencies. This section also underlines how South Africa's laws correspond with global standards.

2.5.1 NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The pillar of the child protection system is the highest law in the country, which is the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Section 28 of the Constitution makes it clear that children have the right to care, safety, and access to basic services. The Constitution serves as the groundwork of child protection initiatives in South Africa, requiring the state to take legal action to ensure the preservation of these rights (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, section 28). Furthermore, section 29 of the Constitution states that all people, including children, have the right to a basic education and further education (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, section 29).

The Children's Act No. 38 of 2005 and its first and second amendments, the Children's Amendment Act No. 41 of 2007, Children's Amendment Act No. 17 of 2022 are central to the legal framework governing child protection in South Africa. These acts outline the responsibilities of parents, guardians, and the state in protecting children from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The rights establish legal requirements for child protection services, including foster care, adoption, and managing child protection cases (Children's Act 38 of 2005, Chapter 9, section 150; Children's Amendment Act, 2007; Children's Amendment Act No. 17 of 2022). Specifically, these laws define "a child in need of care and protection" and require reporting to assigned social workers, who investigate and present their findings to the Children's Court (Sesoko, 2018:263).

The Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007 clarifies the roles of DCPOs, which include ensuring that children are safe and secure, conducting assessments, and starting protective measures. It also improves the procedures for handling cases of child abuse, neglect, and protection. Section 110 of the Act mandates social workers to report any suspicion of maltreatment to a DCPO, the DSD, or the police, who, after that, are in charge of acting correctly (Children's Amendment Act No. 41 of 2007).

The Children's Amendment Act, 2022 (Act No. 17 of 2022) clarifies the roles of DCPOs further; they are tasked with overseeing cluster foster care schemes (Section 1), investigating and referring cases of children requiring care and protection (Sections 155(2) and 160), and are obligated to undergo registration, monitoring, and quality assurance by the provincial Department of Social Development (Sections 105(6), 183,

and 186(3) (Republic of South Africa, 2023); Children's Amendment Act, 2022 (Act No. 17 of 2022).

More Acts that fall under the Department of Social Development include The Probation Services Act No. 116 of 1991, which makes programs available that combat crime and ensure assistance to children who are involved in criminal activities (Probation Services Act No. 116 of 1991). The Social Assistance Act No. 13 of 2004 provides social grants for children of indigent families and children who suffer from severe disabilities, securing the child's right to social security (Social Assistance Act No. 13 of 2004). The Social Services Profession Act No. 110 of 1978 provides for the regulation of the social services profession to ensure that services rendered to children are qualitatively effective (The Social Services Profession Act No. 110 of 1978).

The White Paper on Social Welfare (1997) outlines the core policy for a developmental approach to social welfare in South Africa. It strongly focuses on children's rights and well-being, shaping how social services are delivered and promoting integrated, community-based approaches to child protection. This policy has been crucial in guiding the strategies used by social workers and other key players in facing child protection issues (DSD, 1997). The White Paper on Families (2012) states that resilient and helpful families are critical to the enhancement of children and society. It also acknowledges that South Africa has a diverse scope of families, and that the government must prioritise assisting them for the families to realise their development potential (NCCPP, 2019:118).

The National Plan of Action for Children (NPAC) offers a strategic framework combining several initiatives and policies to enhance children's well-being. By encouraging collaboration across several tiers of government and civil society, this plan guarantees a coordinated approach to child safety, therefore matching national efforts with international obligations (National Plan of Action for Children, 2012:16).

2.5.2 IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES OF LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

Despite South Africa's comprehensive legislative framework for child protection, significant challenges hinder its effective implementation.

Rooted in the concepts of potential human development, engagement, and community ownership, the developmental social welfare approach in South Africa has had great difficulties in implementation since the White Paper on Social Welfare was released in

1997 (RSA, 1997). The White Paper on Social Welfare (1997) stipulated that all social services should be provided using a developmental social welfare approach model, even though there was no guidance on how to conduct child protection services within this framework (Herselman, Schiller, & Tanga 2023:69). Social workers in the Eastern Cape frequently lack a clear knowledge of this approach, according to Herselman et al., (2023:73), which results in an overworked and poorly organised child protection system.

One of the big challenges in implementing the developmental social welfare approach is the rising levels of violence against children, which often leads to the need for thorough risk assessments and, in many cases, statutory services (UNICEF, 2020). A review by Courtenay and Hansungule (2014) of South Africa's Child Justice Act found that only 23% of police officers have been trained on the Act. This lack of training is a big roadblock to properly handling cases involving children in conflict with the law. Without proper training, there has been a heavy reliance on arrest rather than exploring alternative ways to ensure a child's attendance at preliminary investigations, exposing a serious gap in the system (Courtenay & Hansungule, 2014:161).

Moreover, the enforcement of child protection laws like the Children's Act of 2005 is uneven across different provinces. Meel (2020:638) highlights the implementation challenges in the Mthatha region in the Eastern Cape, where high levels of poverty and crime exacerbate the risks to children and complicate the application of legal protections.

Additionally, the funding crisis faced by NPOs has persisted, and many organisations struggle to maintain their operations due to insufficient and inconsistent government funding. This financial strain limits their capacity to meet the increasing demand for services and to comply with the standards set out in the law (Courtenay & Hansungule, 2014:199).

Even though there are many regulations and policies in place, they are not always carried out effectively. One of the main reasons for this is that several accountable departments and governmental levels have neglected to match the overall national child care and protection policies with their laws, policies, strategic and yearly performance goals, and supporting monitoring and evaluation plans. Therefore, the

high-level national political obligation to child care and protection is not translated into effective sectoral programs by the government (NCCPP, 2019:47).

A shortage of suitably qualified social service practitioners, including social workers, social auxiliary workers, child and adolescent care providers, and community development practitioners, seriously hampers service delivery. Although the Children's Act recognises the requirement of a multidisciplinary approach to offer integrated services, the lack of qualified professionals still impedes efficient application (Courtenay & Hansungule, 2014:179). This is exacerbated by more general structural problems, including poor professional development for social workers. Lombard (2010:140) emphasises the difficulties in applying the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) policy, pointing out that inadequate resources and opposition to changes impede the professional development of social workers, influencing their capacity to effectively apply child protection legislation.

On the issue of foster care, the Civil Society Briefing on Foster Care indicates that South Africa currently has an incapacity in terms of reaching many orphans (Civil Society Briefing on Foster Care, 2015:2). Out of the 1.5 million orphans registered and waiting to benefit from the Foster Child Grant (FCG), not more than 500,000 children are receiving it. The system is under extreme pressure; lapsed grants and backlogs are being processed. However, this has proven to be slow, indicating a conclusion that it would take more than 20 years before reaching the remaining orphans. This indicates that many children will have grown up without the necessary support. There was a serious backlog of processing new applications for fostering care, lost files, inadequate budgets for mandatory cases, and long waiting times for families. This has exerted an added burden on families that are already below the poverty line, with many children being deprived of their right to social assistance (Civil Society Briefing on Foster Care, 2015:2).

This foster care crisis prompted the High Court to intervene, suspending foster care orders and directing the Department of Social Development to institute a "comprehensive legal solution" by December 2014. The many extensions filed and confirmed for final amendments to relevant acts only operated in 2022 and 2023. The legal solution involved the Social Assistance Amendment Act 16 of 2020 and the Children's Amendment Act 17 of 2022. The Social Assistance Amendment Act came

with an extended Child Support Grant (CSG Top-Up) for orphans and abandoned children in families. The Children's Amendment Act aimed to classify children in need of absorption into the formal foster care system as well as those in need only of financial support and services while remaining in kinship care. However, some gaps remain, especially concerning the recognition and support of kinship carers. There is no formal process that screens the children for kinship care, which could identify who needs extra support in providing services. National and international legislation interprets the absence of such a process as a violation of these children's rights (Kruger 2024:26).

2.5.3 INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

South Africa's child protection efforts are further strengthened by its commitment to several key international frameworks that set global standards for protecting children's rights.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted in 1989, is the most widely sanctioned human rights treaty in history. It requires affiliated countries, including South Africa, to safeguard children from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The UNCRC also guarantees children's rights to health, education, and sufficient living standards, establishing a global standard for child protection (UNCRC, 1989:12).

Adopted by the African Union in 1990, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) matches the UNCRC by addressing the specific social, economic, and cultural contexts of the children of Africa. The ACRWC underscores the responsibilities of African governments to protect children from dangerous practices, such as child labour, child marriage, and trafficking, reinforcing the importance of children's rights to life, protection, and development within an African context (African Union, 1999:14).

Further developing international child protection standards, the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2010) provide standards for the protection and well-being of children who do not have parental care. The UN Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography (2000) dictates that nations outlaw and prevent these crimes. Additionally, the Palermo Protocol requires governments to prevent trafficking, punish

criminals, and protect and help victims, including minors (United Nations, 2010; United Nations, 2000).

The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, was passed in the year 2000. The Protocol makes an effort to prevent and combat human trafficking, with an emphasis on women and children. The Protocol also protects and supports victims of trafficking with the strongest regard for their human rights. Additionally, it aims to foster co-operation among the country's parties (NCCPP, 2019:111).

The Declaration on Social and Legal Principles Concerning the Protection and Welfare of Children, with Special Reference to Foster Placement and Adoption Nationally and Internationally, was approved on December 3, 1986. This Protocol enforces children's rights to be cared for by their parents. It also underlines the need to maintain and enhance the relationship between the child and the parent. Foster care and adoptions are among the alternative care choices that should be taken into consideration as realistic only when parental care is not accessible or fit and all attempts to preserve the relationship have failed (NCCPP, 2019:111).

South Africa's commitment to child protection is also reflected in its adherence to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015. These goals include aims meant to eliminate all forms of violence directed against children and guarantee them access to justice, health, and education (United Nations, 2015). With an eye on child safety, health, and education, regional projects such as the Agenda 2063 and Agenda for Children 2040: Fostering an Africa Fit for Children define long-term objectives for the social and economic growth of Africa (African Union, 2015:9).

The SADC Minimum Package of Services for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children provides a regional framework for co-operation in addressing the needs of vulnerable children, particularly those affected by HIV/AIDS, ensuring that their rights and needs are focused on (SADC, 2011).

2.6 ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN CHILD PROTECTION

The role social workers play in child protection, as well as their broader obligations to advance social welfare and protect disadvantaged groups in South Africa, are covered in the following section. The Children's Act and its revisions require social workers to

document and handle cases of child abuse, therefore guaranteeing the required protection and support for children. Furthermore, underlined in this part are their legal obligations. Additionally, compromising their capacity to deliver suitable child protection services includes underfunding, heavy caseloads, limited resources, and bureaucratic inefficiencies that social workers deal with.

2.6.1 RESPONSIBILITIES AND DUTIES OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Under a variety of laws, regulations, and systems, South African social workers oversee advancing social welfare and protecting vulnerable individuals. Wanting to improve the social functioning of individuals, families, and communities, social workers use casework, group work, and community work. These strategies help social workers manage social needs and challenges at many levels. For instance, casework involves using certain skills to assist individual clients in overcoming personal difficulties; group work enables groups to achieve common goals by means of planned processes. Similarly, community programs support social cohesion and stability within societies (Social Work Act, 1978, Section 1).

Apart from these obligations, social workers oversee social auxiliary workers, evaluate and address social dysfunction, and perform ongoing research to improve social work methods. These responsibilities ensure that social workers not only solve present social issues but also enable the field to develop continuously (Social Work Act, 1978, Section 2).

Those who specialise in child protection have extra tasks required to preserve the wellbeing and rights of the children. To advise necessary therapies, their duties include evaluating situations of child trauma, abuse, neglect, exploitation, and abandonment. Following these evaluations, social workers might set up foster placements or temporary or alternative care when children cannot remain in their current environment, or provide psychiatric therapy and counselling. They also provide reports, conduct investigations ordered by children's courts, and suggest the best course of action for the welfare of the child. To handle child-care challenges, social workers also assist foster care and adoption programs, court-ordered mediation, and they often draft parenting plans in cases of parental separation (Children's Amendment Act, 2007, Chapters 7, 12, 13).

Social workers are required under the Children's Amendment Act of 2007 to report cases of abuse, neglect, or abandonment to designated child protection organisations or provincial offices of social development. This legal obligation guarantees quick identification and transfer of children in need of care and protection to the appropriate agencies or authorities. Once a case is confirmed, social workers start further processes for the child's safety that can call for referrals to specialist providers such as treatment, counselling, or alternative care arrangements. Children's Amendment Act, 2007, Chapter 7 enables social workers to additionally recommend other professionals or organisations for extra assistance, like mediation or family reconstruction services.

2.6.2 CHALLENGES FACED BY SOCIAL WORKERS

Underfunding is a big problem influencing not just the availability of resources but also the capacity to provide adequate services (Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019:239). The startling degree of child maltreatment in the country (Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019:239) demonstrates the underfunding and non-profit organisation (NGO) overload. Despite their registration and subsidy, the Department of Social Development often delays payments to NGOs, therefore influencing their work (Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019:239).

High caseloads and insufficient resources are common problems that social workers face; they lead to feelings of oppression and a lack of autonomy (Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2017: 470–474). Social workers employed by DSD and NPOs voice discontent with inadequate resources and the extensive expectations put on them. Their political environment also influences their position, often compromising the quality and reputation of the services they provide. Social workers often must negotiate outside political constraints, which might affect their capacity to act independently and give the children priority (Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2017:474).

Empirical research reveals significant delays in child protection system service delivery. According to the NCCPP (2019:47), many instances of child abuse do not progress to the Children's Court, and numerous assessments and investigations take over a year to complete. Social workers frequently hesitate to intervene against parents who abuse their children through violence. Therefore, there are aggravating system inefficiencies (NCCPP, 2019:47). Two of the main problems with the delays

are the inadequate treatment of reported cases and the absence of sufficient action from care providers. Jamieson et al. (2017) observe that the difficulties in properly executing these services compromise the whole legal and policy framework.

Many social workers operate in subpar settings that compromise their efficacy, and the resources that are at their disposal are frequently insufficient. Some employees whose workplaces have leaky roofs, no windows, and poor cleanliness suffer in morale and output quality. Further aggravating these difficulties is the scarcity of essential office supplies such as computers and printers, which causes delays and inefficiencies in service delivery (Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015:469).

Other significant challenges in social work organisations include bureaucratic control and hierarchical supervision. Management often oppresses social workers, discounting their ideas and views. For activities like house visits, many authorisations for similar duties cause delays and inefficiencies. This bureaucratic red tape restricts social workers' capacity to react fast to crises and provide immediate responses (Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015: 472; Zilberstein, Gau, Brown, Burton, & Hatcher, 2024:5).

Lastly, there is also an absence of coordination and cooperation among many spheres engaged in child protection. A lack of efficient communication and coordination across health, criminal justice, and child protection systems leads to shortcomings in safeguarding children and providing crisis assistance to families. The inadequate coordination of services results in gaps in care and protection, therefore exposing many children to vulnerability (Jamieson et al., 2017). The NPPCC (2019:47) underlines this point by claiming that both at the level of service delivery and at national policy and planning levels, coordination is lacking. The data very clearly points to an absence of these policies. The findings of a five-site study show the scope of the problem: 74% of child abuse cases reported to social services never find their way to the police for investigation. In 71% of the instances investigated, there was no evidence of an interagency referral from social services to the police or the other way round. Regarding referrals, the referral agency follows up either very little or not at all (NPPCC: 2019:47). Lack of referrals means those targeted do not receive treatment; unrehabilitated offenders still endanger children.

2.7 REFERRAL PROCESS IN CHILD PROTECTION

This section emphasises the importance of referrals in providing timely and appropriate assistance to individuals and families within the social welfare system. Outlining the systematic referral process from early contact to intervention emphasises social workers' legal obligations to report and address cases of child abuse and neglect. This section also addresses issues that may impede effective service delivery and impact the well-being of vulnerable children, such as institutional barriers, resource restrictions, and the need for greater professional collaboration.

2.7.1 REFERRALS WITHIN SOCIAL WELFARE

Conditions of social well-being when social needs are met, social challenges are successfully handled, and social opportunities are created to satisfy the needs of individuals, families, organisations, and communities are referred to as social welfare (DSD, 2013:12). Because it ensures that individuals get the services and support, they need, referrals are essential to the effectiveness of social welfare.

The goal of social welfare services is to help people meet their needs and reach their full potential. According to the DSD (2013:12), such services include prevention and promotion, social assistance and relief, protection, statutory social support, restorative, rehabilitative, and therapeutic ongoing care and reintegration, as well as aftercare services.

South Africa's social welfare system is based on the social developmental approach. The social developmental approach is a progressive approach to the dynamic interaction between numerous disciplinary fields, as well as socioeconomic development and health care, which employs a wide macro perspective to alleviate poverty and empower people. Social work has been recognised as an important factor in this process (Petersen & Pretorius, 2022:135).

The Framework measures developmental social welfare by looking at things like how well human rights are protected, how partnerships are used to provide services, how well socioeconomic programs are integrated, and how well micro- and macro-level differences in service delivery are closed. Through developmental social welfare (DSD, 2013:13), people, families, groups, and communities are urged to take an active role in the process of growth.

2.7.2 DEFINITION AND IMPORTANCE OF REFERRALS

According to the Children's Act 38 of 2005 and the Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007, social workers and other professionals are required to report and manage cases of child abuse and neglect. According to the Children's Act (Children's Act 38 of 2005, sec. 110; Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007, Section 150), anyone who has reasonable suspicion that a child is in need of care and protection is required to report this to the appropriate officials, such as any designated child protection organisation, for example the Department of Social Development.

In the context of social welfare, referrals occur when a social worker or other professional expresses concern about a person or family, decides that action is necessary, and then refers the person or family to the proper service provider for further help (DSD, 2013:27). The social welfare system relies heavily on this process to ensure that families and individuals receive timely and appropriate assistance.

Cross-sectoral and cross-departmental coordination is very important in social welfare referrals to guarantee that service users get the required interventions and support. The timely and suitable delivery of services depends on the effective referral systems that provide beneficiaries access to a variety of resources and services that satisfy their socioeconomic and developmental requirements (DSD, 2013:27).

Practitioners can initiate referrals directly or by informing families about the available resources for assistance. They could also come from the community or from other local service providers, including teachers (Roelen et al., 2012:3). Referrals may occur within the social welfare service delivery system that is, from one service or program to another or they can even occur outside the DSD to another department, like the Department of Health or the Department of Basic Education (DSD, 2013:39). Regarding referrals, social workers are seen as the crucial players in child protection (Roelen et al., 2012:16).

To ensure service users are sent to the appropriate service providers in a timely way, referral systems must be implemented. The development of referral records and processes is critical to the social welfare delivery system's efficacy (DSD, 2013:28). When the referral process is designed and implemented, it enhances the overall effectiveness of social welfare services and ensures that persons in need receive the treatment they seek as quickly as can be achieved (DSD, 2013: 38).

2.7.4 CHALLENGES IN THE REFERRAL PROCESS

Social workers in South Africa face numerous obstacles when referring cases to designated child protection organisations. These challenges, which encompass institutional, infrastructural, human resource, and legislative aspects, pose significant barriers to effective child protection services.

The primary institutional challenge is the absence of consistency among presiding officers handling Children's Court matters. Social workers experience different requirements in handling processes across various jurisdictions, resulting in confusion and inefficiency (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015:339). The challenges in applying the Children's Act 38 of 2005 also stem from social workers' attitudes, and social workers must work with inexperienced and uncooperative police officers. The presiding officers interpret the Children's Act 38 of 2005 differently, leading to a variety of expectations and demands. The unrealistic demands and expectations of presiding officers further complicate the referral process, requiring social workers to perform duties outside their area of expertise or assemble unnecessary documentation (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015:341).

Infrastructure restrictions frequently undermine social workers' effectiveness. Social workers typically lack access to basic resources such as computers, phones, fax machines, and transportation, making it difficult for them to do their duties effectively. For example, the lack of transport choices greatly impedes one critical component of their work: house visits (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015:342). Furthermore, these problems are made worse by a lack of suitable office space and drop-in locations, which makes it challenging to offer complete assistance to children and families in need (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015:344).

Two major human resource challenges affecting child protection services are a scarcity of social workers and a high workload. The number of cases that social workers must manage overwhelms them, prompting them to prioritise crisis response over prevention measures and delay reacting to disasters. This enormous workload limits the ability to provide every client with high-quality treatment and assistance (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015: 344). Skhosana, Schenck, and Botha (2014:224) argue that a shortage of social workers hinders timely and adequate service delivery. Long-term, more children may require protection as a result of social workers being obliged

to prioritise urgent circumstances over preventative and early intervention programs, owing to a lack of resources. Further damaging staff stability and continuity is the high turnover rate among social workers, which is typically caused by burnout and job dissatisfaction. Campbell and Holtzhausen (2020:3) argue that compassion fatigue, like burnout and job discontent, adds another layer of stress to social workers' interactions with emotionally challenging situations.

Despite its effectiveness, the legislative framework is usually underutilised. Legal and policy difficulties have developed since the Children's Act 38 of 2005, which superseded the Child Care Act 74 of 1983. The new law, which requires a court-based procedure to renew child placement, has added to the workload for social workers. Case processing has thus been significantly delayed (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015:335). Administrative and legislative constraints make it difficult for social workers to carry out their primary obligations, such as referring clients or removing children (Skhosana et al., 2014:226). The problem is exacerbated by inadequate legislative frameworks that typically disregard the practical components of social work (Skhosana et al., 2014:226). Moreover, the absence of clear and explicit instructions on specific sections of the Children's Act has resulted in misunderstandings and discrepancies in its execution, namely regarding the standards for identifying children who need care and security (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015:347).

The effectiveness of child protection services depends on skilled professionals working effectively in collaborative agencies. But working with other professions and organisations, social workers can face challenges from poor communication, misunderstandings, and conflicting goals. Eventually, the disorganisation in the referral process affects the delays and inefficiencies that compromise the well-being of children. Social workers claim that inadequate coordination across child protection organisations and poor communication worsen the challenges of providing services and support to vulnerable children and families (Schill, 2017:10–11; Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019:246). Moreover, social workers often run into challenges relating to poor cooperation and coordination between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government agencies. This lack of cooperation makes it very difficult to provide services with productivity and efficiency (Skhosana et al., 2014:225).

The duties and responsibilities of social service practitioners in both the public and private sectors are frequently unclear. Because there are no clear guidelines, employees may shift their jobs, resulting in inefficiencies and ambiguity (Skhosana et al., 2014:226).

Social workers, more often than not, lack the knowledge and resources required to handle the complexities of interprofessional collaboration. This lack of preparedness makes it difficult to create and maintain effective working relationships with other service providers (Seekamp, Ey, & Tsiros, 2023:9). Effective referrals depend on these ties.

Furthermore, inadequate training under the Children's Act 38 of 2005 hinders the use of child protection services, therefore undermining the trust of social workers in properly handling situations (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015: 345). Organisational regulations and the presumed coercive nature of child protection agencies might create obstacles to involving families. Policies that penalise non-attendance or demand numerous referrals might drive families away rather than promote their involvement in required services (Seekamp et al., 2023:6).

Successful referrals rely on building trust with families, which may require time for social workers. Many families need long-term support to build trust; short-term service approaches cannot meet this demand (Seekamp et al., 2023:9).

2.8 COLLABORATION WITHIN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

Inter-sectoral collaboration refers to the promotion and coordination of the activities of different sectors (Ramduny 1998). In South Africa, protecting children is a multifaceted endeavour that necessitates the collaboration of various stakeholders, such as government entities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), designated child protection organisations (DCPOs), and social workers. Responding to the multitude of needs of vulnerable children and guaranteeing their safety from abuse, neglect, and exploitation depend on effective cooperation among these agencies (Roelen & Sabates-Wheeler, 2012:295).

Emphasising the need for inter-sectoral and interdepartmental cooperation (DSD, 2013:27), the legal framework the Children's Act 38 of 2005 requires a cooperative approach to child safety. Still, the actual application of these collaborative tasks often presents formidable obstacles. The factors driving effective collaboration as well as

the players involved in the child protection system will be discussed. These components will provide a full understanding of how different organisations cooperate to protect children and the difficulties in this regard.

2.8.1 FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION WITH THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

One of the biggest underlying problems is that the child protection system does not have a unified plan or a full structure to follow. The Children's Act, which set up an initial inter-sectoral structure for planning and funding, was missing some specific clauses that would have made the system much more effective. This has led to a lack of consistency in protecting children and poor service delivery (Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019: 245). The Children's Institute also emphasises the poor implementation of otherwise strong laws and regulations, resulting in inadequate child protection (Jamieson et al., 2017).

Financial limitations significantly influence the cooperation between the Department of Social Development and non-profit organisations (NPOs). Financial constraints and lower pay compared to their colleagues in the DSD cause NPOs considerable difficulty in delivering services and keeping staff members (Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019:239). This financial reliance results in an unequal relationship wherein NPOs feel mistreated and abused, therefore compromising the possibility of real cooperation that can improve child protection services (Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019:244). Strydom, Schiller, and Orme (2020:383) underlined the difficulty of insufficient organisational funds. Less than 10% of the funds that the South African government has set aside is for service delivery; more than 90% is for social security (National Treasury, 2019; National Treasury, 2020). Although the issue of inadequate funds has been raised often, government authorities have not taken any action to solve it.

Child protection workers' insufficient training and capability further exacerbate the system's inefficacy. Many police officials, social workers, and other professionals engaged in child protection lack specific training in handling instances of child abuse and neglect. This deficiency results in delayed reactions and poor evaluations, therefore aggravating the vulnerabilities of at-risk children (NCCPP, 2019:85). Furthermore, as stated before, social workers and police show a clear resistance to

parents who use violence against their children, usually seeing such actions as reasonable discipline rather than abuse (NCCPP, 2019:48; Strydom et al., 2020:394).

The emphasis on quantitative results rather than the quality-of-service provision further complicates the situation. International donors and DSD reporting requirements emphasise the number of children reached at the expense of the quality of care. This discourages social workers from applying a developmental approach that responds to the fundamental needs of children and their families. (Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019:251). Thus, the focus on meeting quantitative targets instead of service coverage and quality renders child protection programs ineffective. Therefore, this approach fails to tackle the fundamental issues that children in need encounter and instead fosters a culture of crisis management due to the constant increase in demand beyond the service's capacity. This approach calls for immediate, short-term solutions rather than long-term preventative strategies that seek to address the root causes of child maltreatment (Strydom et al., 2020:394).

Another major challenge that acts as a limitation to effective child protection is poor intersectoral collaboration. The National Child Care and Protection Policy (2019) argues that the current system does not coordinate well with significant fields such as social services, criminal justice, and health. Many instances of abuse of children not being duly addressed are consequent upon this (NCCPP, 2019:48). For instance, social workers and child and youth care workers (CYCWS) fail to collaborate well. Lack of cooperation is based on weak communications, lack of transparency, and inadequate support from management, which compromises the effectiveness of social service delivery to children and youth in care centres (Mhizha & Nhedzi, 2023:176).

Particularly focussing on the cooperation between CYCWs and social workers, CYCWs assert that social workers often overlook to offer essential background information on the children, including medical history or previous trauma. Because of their lack of knowledge, CYCWs find it difficult to provide appropriate care; hence, situations wherein the child's well-being is inadvertently harmed might arise (Mhizha & Nhedzi, 2023:177–178).

Regarding the sharing of information, CYCWs and social workers have tension; social workers usually cite confidentiality as the rationale for keeping information. CYCWs

believe that their approach reduces their capacity to properly look after the children (Mhizha & Nhedzi, 2023:178–179).

From the literature it is clear that there are a lot of factors influencing effective collaboration with the child protection system which ultimately effects every sphere of social work which impacts the flow of the referral process.

2.9 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rooted in General Systems Theory (GST), this research explores referring cases to designated child protection organisations: the experiences of social workers in Pretoria.

One important void in the research is the lack of knowledge of how social workers outside of the child protection system manage referrals to DCPOs. This discrepancy emphasises the need to extensively explore connections within the child protection system and referral processes to identify barriers to effective protection and identify different alternatives. GST provides an appropriate framework for addressing these challenges. It emphasises how everything is interrelated; thus, changes in one part of a system may influence the whole system. The effectiveness of child welfare projects in the child protection system is shaped by the combined activities of government agencies, NGOs, and individual social workers. The research will also examine GST's history and how it relates to understanding these processes.

In the 1930s, Bertalanffy formalised GST, arguing that other fields could benefit from principles regulating biological systems. Contrasting with the standard closed-system models of the time, he proposed the idea of “open systems,” which maintain a dynamic equilibrium via relationships with their environment. (Bertalanffy, 1972:412). After World War II, the development of GST led to its application in various fields, such as the social sciences and cybernetics. It established a framework for understanding large systems by recognising common organisational patterns, leading to the formation of the Society for General Systems Research in the 1950s (Bertalanffy, 1972:413).

Emphasising the interrelations between system components, GST's all-encompassing approach enabled the development of more thorough models spanning many fields, from ecosystems to social structures (Bertalanffy, 1972:417). GST encourages looking at people as a whole within their surroundings and works best when many systems

connect and affect each other in different ways. It is used when contextual awareness of behaviour will result in the most effective practice interventions (Social Work License Map, 2015:1). Because it offered a coherent framework of practice encompassing psychological, sociological, and social policy points of view, GST was quite significant in social work throughout the 1970s (Walker, 2012:3).

Walker (2012:3) discovered that GST is useful in social work because it gives a framework for understanding the complicated and evolving relationships among people, families, communities, and larger societal systems. This approach is especially important in child protection, as social workers must navigate several interconnected systems for example, legal, health, education, and social services to guarantee children's safety and well-being (Walker, 2012:3). The systemic approach to child safety necessitates a collaborative response. South Africa's Child Protection programme is designed to be multidisciplinary, requiring interactions between professions and organisations.

2.9.1 APPLICATION OF GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY TO THE STUDY

In this study, an interview schedule was designed to align with the principles of GST to investigate social workers' experiences of referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria.

GST provides a whole framework for addressing the many aspects of child protection. By use of family dynamics, socioeconomic context, and community resources, GST enables social workers to see clients from the perspective of their greater surroundings (Walker, 2012:15). This comprehensive perspective is essential as it helps one to identify the fundamental causes of challenges and design interventions covering the complete ecosystem of a child's life including family, community, and social influences.

Within the framework of social work referrals, GST emphasises the interconnection and interdependence of all system aspects, thereby impacting not just the immediate family but also the larger community and service networks through the decisions and tasks that social workers do. To achieve optimal outcomes for children, effective cooperation across many stakeholders is extremely important (Heil, 2017:2; Walker, 2012:18). The interview schedule's section B looks into the nature of social workers' roles, the factors affecting referrals, and the processes followed. This section relates to GST's concept that child protection is a complicated system with many interacting

parts. Understanding these referral processes reveals how different elements of the system interact, which influences the overall efficacy of child protection measures (NPPCC, 2019:4; Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019:22).

GST stresses the importance of feedback loops and being able to change to keep a system in balance. Social workers must have knowledge regarding feedback loops in order to figure out what programs are working and what changes need to be made. Families, child protection groups, and other service providers' feedback helps to strengthen plans and make the referral process effective (Heil, 2017:2). Social workers can make their services more effective by adapting to the changing needs of families. This way, their services stay relevant and have a continuous impact. Protocols and collaboration are addressed in Section B of the interview questionnaire. This shows that GST puts a lot of importance on feedback loops and being able to change, which makes sure that treatments stay useful and effective (Heil, 2017:2).

Because child protection cases are naturally complicated and do not follow a linear pattern, the results are often hard to predict. GST addresses these problems by helping social workers plan for future problems and understand the effects of their actions within the system as a whole. This awareness guides the creation of thorough intervention and prevention plans have been made to meet the short-term and long-term needs of children and their families (Heil, 2017:2; Walker, 2012:20). The interview schedule's section C explored social workers' experiences referring cases to DCPOs, which supports GST's focus on the intricacy and unpredictability of these circumstances. By examining these experiences, the research aims to gain a better understanding of how social workers' actions affect children's well-being and the wider system. Having this understanding is essential to developing comprehensive and effective interventions (Heil, 2017:2; Walker, 2012:20).

The system for protecting children is very complicated. It includes social workers, child protection agencies, non-profits, the Department of Social Development, and the legislation established by the Children's Act 38 of 2005 and the Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007 (Children's Act 38 of 2005; Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007). All these components work together to make a web of connections that has a big impact on how well child safety measures work (NPPCC, 2019:4; Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019:22). Section E solicited suggestions for enhancing the referral system and

fostering effective collaboration between social workers and DCPOs. GST's focus on the need for communication and cooperation among stakeholders to lower fragmentation in service delivery and guarantee consideration of every component of a child's environment resonates in every aspect (Jamieson et al., 2017:04).

General Systems Theory (GST) provided an essentially solid theoretical framework for understanding the complex and interrelated nature of child protection in Gauteng and specifically, Pretoria. With a focus on the referral process to child protection organisations, this research aims to improve current knowledge by exploring the experiences of social workers within this systemic framework. The research aims to provide an insightful overview of potential improvements to Gauteng's child protection system by investigating the obstacles and successes faced by social workers.

2.10 CONCLUSION

With an eye on the experiences of social workers in referring cases to designated child protection organisations (DCPOs), the literature review offers a thorough analysis of the child protection system in Gauteng and Pretoria, South Africa. It highlights the many difficulties social workers deal with as well as the structural problems compromising the effectiveness of child protection services.

This study is motivated in large part by a clear discrepancy in previous studies on the experiences of social workers outside of child protection agencies, especially regarding referrals. Though these referrals are very important for maintaining children's welfare and safety, little research has been done on how social workers manage these processes.

The goal of this study is to explore and describe the experiences of social workers in Pretoria when referring cases to DCPOs. The objectives are to understand both the positive and negative experiences encountered during the referral process, to explore the specific procedures used, and to identify measures that social workers employ when referrals are unsuccessful. By focusing on these objectives, the study aims to promote the understanding of the referral process and offer insights that could inform improvements in practice and policy.

General Systems Theory is a fundamental theoretical framework for the study, as it offers a comprehensive perspective of the interaction among the many elements of the child safety system. The study's focus on these goals clarifies the referral process

and offers information that could guide policy and practice improvements. Emphasising the need for efficient collaboration and coordination among all stakeholders, GST underlines that changes in one area of the system may have far-reaching consequences for the whole system. By means of GST, the research intends to provide an understanding of how the activities of government agencies, social workers, and non-governmental organisations affect the general performance of child welfare operations. Understanding these systemic relationships is critical for identifying challenges to efficient service delivery and finding solutions to overcome them.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, EMPIRICAL FINDINGS, AND INTERPRETATION

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to explore and describe social workers' experiences in referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria. The research methodology used for the study, the empirical data, and the interpretation thereof are included in this chapter. The research methodology is described in Section A, and the research findings and interpretation are described in Section B.

SECTION A: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology implemented in this study will be discussed in this section.

3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

This study employs an interpretivist epistemology, which fits the perspective that social reality is created by subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings altered by cultural and interpersonal interactions (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022:421). The researcher became part of the environment of the participants (social workers) to learn how they generate meaning from their experiences, referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria (Nieuwenhuis, 2020:67).

The interpretative paradigm was used to explore social workers' experiences when referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria through six semi-structured interviews with participants. The transcription of the interviews provided the researcher with a better knowledge of the phenomenon and the value that the participants gave to it (Nieuwenhuis, 2020:67).

The proposed study, influenced by an interpretivist lens, necessitates a qualitative research approach. A qualitative study encompasses many theoretical foundations. However, there is considerable agreement on some characteristic traits (Nieuwenhuis, 2020:56). According to Polkinghorne (1989), as referenced in Maree (2020:59), qualitative research is characterised by its reliance on linguistic data rather than numerical data, employing a meaning-based analysis instead of statistical methods.

Qualitative researchers focus on how individuals arrange themselves and their environments, as well as how they interpret these experiences (Maree, 2020:59).

Polit and Beck in Hunter, McCallum, and Howes (2019) state that the qualitative research approach often serves a dual purpose: to describe and explore. Consequently, a research study employing an exploratory design necessitates that the researcher investigate a topic with scant literature coverage while also enabling the interviewees to contribute to the creation of new information. The descriptive goal includes describing and interpreting the findings. This proposed study necessitates the application of descriptive research. The results can guide social work services and decisions, proving beneficial in the future (Adler & Clark, 2015:360).

3.3 TYPE OF RESEARCH

Research that takes place in an unremarkable setting to solve particular problems of people, organisations, and/or industries is called applied research (Baimyrzaeva, 2018:06). Applied research was used in the study as it can be useful in the immediate future as it will suggest actions to take, to increase the knowledge of social workers when referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria (Adler & Clark, 2015:360).

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

A case study research design with a sub-type, namely the phenomenological design, was used as the researcher explored the experiences that social workers have when referring children who need care and protection to a child protection organisation.

This approach requires the researcher to put aside or remove their judgment while conducting the interviews (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:2015), to collect the participants' experiences as precisely and objectively as feasible. This phenomenon (the social worker's experiences) is a psychological phenomenon as the focus is on the description of their experiences. Once data from every participant have been gathered, a textural description of what the participants experienced as well as a structural description of how they experienced the phenomena will be integrated to portray an overall essence of the experience (Nieuwenhuizen, 2019:86). A textural description is a combination of the different textural elements and themes of each research participant while a structural description is an assimilation of all of the individual

structural accounts into a group description of the experience (Moustakas, 1994:180–181).

Positive aspects of conducting a phenomenological study:

The design is flexible and evolves right throughout the research process. The phenomenological design enabled the researcher to get an in-depth understanding of the phenomena (Fouche in Fouche, 2021:40).

As this study is exploratively in nature, it enabled the researcher to understand complex situations from the participant's point of view and, through inductive reasoning, create a theory from the data collected (Fouche in Fouche, 2021:42).

Negative aspects of conducting a phenomenological study:

The fact that the sample size is small could give a limited understanding of the broader phenomenon.

3.5 RESEARCH METHODS

In accordance with a qualitative case study design, this study used specific research methods, such as identifying and recruiting a study population and sampling from that community. After that, data was gathered and analysed. Before collecting main data, a pilot study was conducted to evaluate the data collection instrument (Singh, 2015:133,134).

3.5.1 Study population and sampling

This section will address the research study population and sampling methods applied in this study.

3.5.1.1 Study population

According to Makofane and Shirindi (2018:34) a population comprises all individuals who meet the specific requirements, whether broad or limited, that the researcher has established for research participants. Social workers who operate outside of DCPOs and who report cases to designated child protection organisations in the Pretoria region were the target group for the study.

3.5.1.2 Sampling techniques

The practice of selecting several individual cases from a broader population is known as sampling. By sampling, researchers seek to learn more about a broader group

without having to investigate every individual in the population (Strydom & Delpont, 2011:392). Sampling was useful since it meant that dense and rich data on the phenomenon could be obtained. Furthermore, the chosen method enabled the individuals to share similarities, which improved the results' transferability (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:93). Participants were identified and recruited in line with the research goal and research question as suggested by Leavy (2017:148).

The advantages of non-probability sampling are that it is suitable when time and financial resources are limited (Maree & Pietersen, 2020:19). Since the research project specifically aimed to provide insight into the experiences of social workers in referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria (Maree & Pietersen, 2020: 220; Makofane & Shirindi, 2018: 34), purposive sampling was used.

The Forensic Assessment Consultation and Training (FACT) Network was approached to aid in recruiting participants for the research study. FACT comprises the following: Training and Professional Development; Assessment and Therapy centre; School-Based Training and Support; Community Responsibility and Engagement; and Social Work Internship. The researcher gained written permission from FACT Network, which would help in recruiting participants for the research. The researcher provided FACT Network with an infographic detailing the research study, which the administrators of FACT Network distributed to potential participants via email. The researcher's details were made available in order for the potential participants to contact the researcher directly if they were interested in participating. Postgraduate students pursuing a master's degree in social work (play therapy) (play-based intervention) developed this study as a component of a group-themed research project with similar goals and objectives. However, participants were selected from an area of the researcher's choice for each study. They collected, analysed the data, and wrote up the research report on their own.

The participants of the research were selected with reference to the following sampling criteria:

- Participants have to be qualified social workers registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP).
- Must hold a minimum of a bachelor's degree in social work (BSW).

- The participants should not be part of designated child protection organisations (DCPOs).
- Must be currently practicing in Gauteng, specifically in Pretoria.
- At least two years of experience referring cases to designated child protection organisations is required of participants.
- Must have experience dealing with complex child protection cases.
- Must have a strong ethical background and be comfortable discussing sensitive child protection cases.
- Must be fluent in English for effective participation in interviews.

The sample consisted of six individuals, and interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached, at which point no new information or themes emerged, nor did the data collection process yield any new insights (Makofane & Shirindi, 2018:34). Data saturation was achieved when five participants had been interviewed. However, the researcher continued to interview one more participant to guarantee data saturation. A total of six interviews, including the pilot study, were conducted.

3.5.2 Data collection

According to Wagner et al. (2012:269), data collection is the process of acquiring information in order to answer the study's research question. In qualitative research, interviews, whether conducted with individuals or groups, are unquestionably the most prevalent form of data collection (Rubin and Babbie, 2016:168).

This study's data were collected via interviews. The goal of conducting interviews was to acquire thorough descriptive data that would allow the researcher to better understand how participants created their understandings and views of social reality (Nieuwenhuis, 2020:108).

This study used a semi-structured one-on-one interview schedule, allowing participants to express their own opinions, feelings, beliefs, and ideas without being influenced by the researcher's prejudices (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:108). Furthermore, this enabled the researcher to explore or clarify as needed. This led to extensive research (Maree, 2019:110). The research study's nature, objectives, and methods were disclosed to the participants. The researcher made arrangements with the research participants using the contact information supplied (telephone or email) to meet and give them information on the manner and aim of the study, as well as to permit formal

research data collection via interviews. They were given informed consent forms to fill out and sign, as well as information on the research study and the context of the research question that would be explored. The interviews were held in person in settings that provided confidentiality and privacy, or via a secure online platform like Google Meet or Zoom. The interviews with the participants were audio recorded with their explicit consent.

Data was collected from the volunteered, willing, and consenting participants, i.e., social workers who work in settings outside of DCPOs and who refer cases to designated child protection organisations in the Pretoria area.

3.5.3 Data analysis

According to Maree (2020:42-43), researchers in the interpretive paradigm opt for inductive data analysis, which entails using criteria from the literature to aid in the planning of the data analysis and allowing words and themes to emerge from the data itself. This is necessary because the data generation and instruments must be created in accordance with the criteria. Another essential aspect of data analysis is the selection of the appropriate format for data presentation, such as direct statements, graphs, or tables (Maree, 2020:43).

The researcher applied thematic analysis to examine the data based on the transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews with participants. In qualitative research, thematic analysis is a technique that lets researchers organise and assess vast volumes of data methodically. It is a search for themes able to encapsulate stories found inside data sets. Careful reading and rereading the transcribed material help one to identify themes (King, 2004; Rice & Ezzy, 1999). Thematic data analysis allowed the researcher to identify, analyse, organise, describe, and report themes found within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data analysis was guided by the steps of data analysis suggested by Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, and Braun (2017:13-25). The researcher interpreted the experiences of social workers in referring cases to designated child protection services in Pretoria (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017:2).

The researcher applied the following steps in the thematic analysis to analyse data (Nowell et al., 2017:4-11; Terry, Hayfield, Clarke & Braun, 2017:13-25; Dawadi, 2020:64-70):

Phase 1: Familiarise yourself with the data

Familiarisation provided the researcher with an entry point into analysis; it was a way of engaging with, and obtaining insight into, what often appeared to be an overwhelming mass of data (Willig & Rogers, 2017:23). As the name suggests, the first part starts with researchers' getting to know their data. This phase helps them to determine the kind and frequency of themes that the data might provide. The phase is indeed crucial as it guides the subsequent actions the researcher might have to do to properly evaluate the data (Dawadi, 2020:64). Initially, all interviews were fully transcribed to ascertain the participants' responses to the semi-structured interview questions in this study. A thorough rereading of the transcript was conducted to perceive the transcripts as independent entities (Denscombe, 2007:77) and to mitigate the impact of the researcher's preexisting knowledge and expertise in the domain of social work. All important information was highlighted when reviewing the transcripts (Dawadi, 2020:64). The main objective of reviewing the data comprehensively was to become entirely immersed in the dataset and identify early areas of interest (Chamberlain, 2015). Consequently, this stage provided the researcher with a comprehensive understanding of the content's depth and breadth. The researcher was able to link the dataset with literature on the experiences of social workers when referring cases to child protection organisations in Pretoria and devise codes for generating themes by comprehending the dataset (Terry et al., 2017:13). The researcher recorded and archived the data collected through interviews to confirm the validity and adequacy of data analysis and interpretation, and to provide an audit trail (Nowell et al., 2017:5).

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Coding is the systematic and comprehensive creation of meaningful labels for specific sections of a dataset that are relevant to the research question (Willig & Rogers, 2017:23). The researcher allocated codes which are concise words that effectively communicated the fundamental information in the transcripts, to segments of the data-laden transcripts (Terry et al., 2017:14). All transcripts were coded after many thorough readings (Dawadi, 2020:65). This systematic coding method highlighted data components pertinent to the experiences of social workers in Pretoria when referring cases to designated child protection organisations (Terry et al., 2017:14). Following

the compilation of codes that delineated the experiences of social workers in Pretoria about case referrals to designated child protection organisations, the researcher formulated themes to address the research question.

Phase 3: Searching for themes

The primary goal of this phase was to identify connections and trends within and throughout the full data collection (Chamberlain, 2015). Examining the codes can help one understand how several codes may be used to create an overarching theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006:10). In other words, this step's primary emphasis was on theme analysis rather than code analysis. As Brown and Clarke (2006:10) describe, a theme captures something noteworthy about the data in relation to the research topic and suggests some level of organised response or meaning within the data set. Throughout the theme-generation process, the researcher organised comparable codes to better grasp a coherent component of the data and its relevance to the research topic (Terry et al., 2017:15). The researcher identified comparable traits and interactions throughout the dataset using the produced codes to develop potential themes (Terry et al., 2017:18).

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

At this stage, all of the themes were purposefully combined in order to enhance the previously classified concepts and present them in a more logical manner. According to Braun and Clarke (2006:11), themes should be evaluated for internal homogeneity (unity and consistency) as well as outward heterogeneity (themes' differences). At this point, the researcher examined the coded data extracts for each topic to see if any patterns arose that created a cohesive pattern (Nowell et al., 2017:9). The researcher triangulated the validity of each topic using the dataset of recorded interviews to establish if the themes mirrored the experiences of social workers in Pretoria when reporting cases to designated child protection organisations (Nowell et al., 2017).

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

This phase started with the goal of tailoring and defining the themes, that is, establishing the core of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall), and deciding what part of the data each theme captures (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 92). Braun and Clarke (2006) contend that a theme cannot be too diversified and complicated.

The researcher therefore reviewed the gathered data extracts for every theme once more and compiled them into a logical and consistent framework. Examining every theme closely, the researcher found the narrative each one communicated (Nowell et al., 2017:10). Once the researcher had developed appropriate themes that addressed the research question, she began the interpretative process to represent the experiences of social workers in Pretoria when referring cases to designated child protection organisations (Nowell et al., 2017:10; Terry et al., 2017:22). Short explanations of each themes helped the researcher assess if it addressed the research question and provided sufficient information (Terry et al., 2017:22).

Phase 6: Producing the report

The final stage of the research study was to prepare a report outlining the results. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme analysis report must persuade readers of the study's worth and validity. Therefore, a great effort was made to present sufficient evidence and specific examples and/or extracts that could capture the core of the point the researcher was stressing, so conveying a succinct, coherent, and logical account of the story that the data represented throughout and within themes (Dawadi, 2020:70). To better understand social workers' experiences referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria, the researcher utilised short, direct quotes from the raw data (Nowell et al., 2017:10).

3.5.4 Data quality

In qualitative research, establishing trustworthiness is crucial to guarantee the validity and reliability of data analysis, conclusions, and recommendations that fairly depict the experiences of the participants (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:143). In qualitative research, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility are considered essential indicators of trustworthiness (Schurink, Schurink & Fouche, 2021:391; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015:278). Data quality assures the dataset's credibility and validity. Data verification is a procedure for determining the correctness of study findings (Creswell, 2014:251). To ensure the data quality of qualitative research, the researcher used the concept of trustworthiness to create detailed descriptions and interpretations of social workers' experiences when referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria (Korstjens & Moser, 2018:121; Sousa, 2014:211). The following served as standards and actions to enhance the trustworthiness of the data:

3.5.4.1 Credibility

Credibility reflects the integrity of data and respondents' opinions and interpretation (Cope, 2014; Enworo, 2023; Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016; Hanson et al., 2019:1017; Polit & Beck, 2012). Credibility determines if the results of the research fairly reflect the participants' initial points of view and are based on trustworthy knowledge gathered from their original data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018:121). Researchers gain credibility by engaging over time, observing consistently, and using triangulation (Ahmed, 2024:1). Persistent observation entails maintaining an open mind, acknowledging personal biases, and engaging in self-reflection throughout the study process, as the researcher did. Furthermore, triangulation, which includes the integration of many data sources or methodologies, aids in the validation of results and increases their credibility (Ahmed, 2024:1). The researcher used triangulation from the research in the literature review.

The researcher also established credibility by gathering information on the experiences of social workers in Pretoria when referring cases to designated child protection organisations (Anney 2014:9, Nieuwenhuis 2020:144). According to Nowell et al. (2017:3), peer debriefing provides for an external examination of the research process, potentially increasing the study's credibility. The researcher regularly attended debriefing sessions with other students who were also doing research on social workers' experiences when referring cases to designated child protection organisations. The researcher additionally examined and reviewed the data, analysing, theorising, and revising the ideas as needed until the final theory gave a depth of knowledge (Korstjens & Moser, 2018:122).

3.5.4.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which research results may be used in other settings or circumstances (Ahmed, 2024:2; Haq, Rasheed, Rashid & Akhter, 2023:169). By offering clear and complete explanations, researchers enable readers to assess how relevant the results are to comparable circumstances, hence boosting the study's transferability. The researcher assured transferability by thoroughly describing the research methodology (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:144). Please refer to Chapter 3 for more information.

3.5.4.3 Dependability

Polit & Beck (2012) define dependability as data consistency across comparable contexts (Polit & Beck, 2012; Cope, 2014; Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016; Hanson et al., 2019; Enworo, 2023). One research's findings are reliable if they are repeated in a similar population, environment, or location (Koch, 2006). Along with making sure that the research techniques are thoroughly documented, the researcher will guarantee the reliability and consistency of the research findings. To attain dependability, researchers can ensure that the study process is logical, traceable, and thoroughly recorded (Nowell et al., 2017:3). The researcher uses an audit trail in an effort to prove reliability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018:122). To make data organisation, correlation, and cross-referencing easier and to streamline the reporting of the research process, the researcher used audit trails, which comprised field notes, transcripts, raw data recordings, and a reflective notebook (Nowell et al., 2017:3).

3.5.4.4 Confirmability

According to Haq et al. (2023:159), the fourth criterion of trustworthiness, which is the researcher's level of objectivity during the study and interpretation process, is neutrality or confirmability. It included perspectives and motivational biases, as noted by Guba (1981). According to Polit and Beck (2012) and Cope (2014), some researchers used the word conformability to refer to data derived from feedback from participants rather than researcher judgments, views, and biases. To put it another way, confirmability is the process of establishing that the data's findings and interpretations are obtained from the data itself, rather than the researcher's experience (Anney, 2014:15). To assure confirmability, the researcher adhered to the methodological process for the confirmation of the results. To guarantee that the results could be confirmed, the researcher followed the methodical approach. The researcher also investigated the degree of neutrality and the extent to which the participant, rather than the research bias, motive, or interest, influenced the study's results. The researcher acknowledged her preconceptions, which helped to lessen biases (Kumar, 2011:185; Nieuwenhuis, 2019:145).

3.5.5 Pilot study

A pilot study is a tiny feasibility study that tests several components of the methods that will be used in a bigger, more rigorous, or confirmatory investigation. The primary goal of a pilot study is not to answer specific research questions, but to prevent

researchers from launching a comprehensive research project without adequate knowledge of the methods proposed; in essence, a pilot study is conducted to avoid the occurrence of a fatal flaw in a time- and money-consuming study (Lowe, 2019:119; Polit & Beck, 2017). Prior to data collection, the researcher conducted an interview with one of the pilot study participants. Pilot testing allows the researcher to find ethical solutions and practical obstacles that may impede the core research objective (Makofane & Shirindi, 2018: 41). Before beginning the primary research data collection process, the researcher ran a pilot test, interviewing a recruited social worker who satisfied the pilot study's inclusion criteria. The pilot test interview data were rich and relevant; thus, no changes were made to the data collection tool. Consequently, this data was included in the main research study findings.

3.5.6 Reflexivity

It is crucial to recognise that the researcher will bring her own experiences and skills to this process (Lietz et al., 2006:447). Reflexivity is a collection of ongoing, collaborative, and complex behaviours by which researchers self-consciously analyse, assess, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context impact the research processes (Olmos-Vega, Stalmeijer, Varpio & Kahlke, 2022:244). Researchers who participate in reflexivity have a variety of motivations, including neutralising the impact of their subjectivity, admitting it, explaining it, or capitalising on it (Gentles et al., 2014). These objectives provide several approaches for researchers to consider the links between their identity, setting, and research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022:244). Reflexive writing is one of the most well-known techniques of reflexivity. It encompasses types of documentation such as researcher memos, field notes, and other written or recorded thoughts that occur at any stage of the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022:245).

The researcher printed all the interviews so she could read and carefully review the transcripts, spotting the elements of the participants' comments that fit the phenomenon, and so labelled the several themes connected with the subject (Jackson, 2003:165).

3.5.7 Positionality

As the researcher conducted the study, I became acutely conscious of my positionality. This included my social status, being a social worker, and being a white

South African woman. The researcher's race, socioeconomic status, and class were all shared by the research participants. In order to minimise any personal biases, my supervisor and I spoke about these reflections.

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Rubin and Babbie (2016:80) define ethics as compliance with the ethical code provided by a certain profession or organisation. Multiple professions have established consensus on certain standards of behaviour (Rubin and Babbie, 2017:80). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) code of ethics delineates the ethical guidelines that regulate social work research (Rubin and Babbie, 2016:80). The researcher obtained approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria to perform this research project. Ethical approval was secured from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria (Refer to Appendix A). Participants in this study were obligated to sign the informed consent (Refer to Appendix E).

Leary (2012), as referenced in Fouche, Strydom, and Roestenburg (2021:118), underlines the significance of safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of human participants in social research. To provide this protection, the researcher's conduct and approach shall be directed by the following ethical principles:

3.6.1 Informed consent

Researchers must obtain the "voluntary informed consent" (BERA, 2004:6) of each participant before any data collection session. An informed consent letter must be dispatched to every participant. This letter should elucidate the primary aim and objective of the research, as well as the ethical considerations, including confidentiality and anonymity (Mirza, Bellalem & Mirza, 2023:443). The research study involved all participants voluntarily, with no obligation on them. Before participating in the research study, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form that included all pertinent information. The form included the conduct factors, the period of involvement, the research study's objective, potential advantages and downsides, potential hazards to participants, and the researcher's trustworthiness (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:122). Before beginning the data gathering procedure, participants signed consent documents. The University of Pretoria's online database retains research data for 10 years, as notified to participants.

3.6.2 Confidentiality and anonymity

Researchers should make every endeavour to safeguard the anonymity of the research participants and the privacy of data (Dane, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994). These two points must be addressed to participants and included in the researcher-participant agreement before performing data collecting sessions (Mirza et al., 2023:444). Confidentiality refers to the discrete handling of information (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:124). The researcher values the privacy and identification of the participants, and to that end, no identifying information will be provided. Anonymity requires that no one, including the researcher, be able to later identify any participant. As a result, any data analysis research report should avoid naming individuals (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:124).

However, the researcher's obtaining of information from participants, as well as knowledge of their names, will have an impact on anonymity in the study. As a result, the identities of the participants will not be included in the final report (Rubin and Babbie 2017:85). The researcher utilised pseudonyms rather than names to identify material in the final report, and the interviewer assured the participants that no names would appear in the final report (Rubin & Babbie, 2017:67). With the support of the University of Pretoria, all interview documentation, including audio recordings, will be maintained in a safeguarding cabinet for 10 years after the study.

3.6.3 Minimisation of harm

In this context, "harm" includes elements such as injury to one's body, psychological and social abuse, and even legal risk (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:119). Individuals recruited for research may have experienced emotions or past trauma; in these cases, appropriate methods of management, like providing support, recommending a break, or providing refreshments, are required (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:119). The researchers accounted for the potential disclosure of sensitive or dangerous information during data collection. It can be difficult to try and predict how this knowledge will affect the participant during or after an interview (Creswell, 2009:95). The researcher arranged for the participants to receive counselling from qualified a social worker at FACT network if any discomfort was experienced after the interview, but it was not necessary (see Appendix D).

3.6.4 No deception of participants

The study participants' explicit permission to participate was a crucial ethical requirement (Neuman, 2014:151; Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:123). The researcher thoroughly explained the study's aims and objectives, the duration of the participants' involvement and expected behaviour, the procedures followed, and any potential advantages and disadvantages that could have affected the participants (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:122). The researcher used an audio recorder to record the interview during data collection, and the participant provided written consent for the recording.

3.6.5 Voluntary participation

To get credible information from interviewees, no one should be pushed or encouraged to engage in the research investigation. Forcing participants implies that they are unwilling to share any information, but will participate for cash remuneration, which may result in the gathering of inaccurate information (Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023:102). Voluntary involvement was a basic premise of ethical research. The study did not need anybody to participate (Rubin and Babbie, 2017:85; Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:121). Participants were given an informed consent form in which they agreed to participate in the study willingly. The researcher also notified the participants that they might withdraw from the study at any moment without explanation (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:122).

3.6.6 No compensation of participants:

For the purpose of the proposed study, there was no compensation for the participants.

3.7 LIMITATIONS

The researcher points to the following limitations of the study:

Based on the small sample size and the study being based in one geographical area, Gauteng, Pretoria, the findings of the study cannot be generalised to all social workers' experiences when referring cases to designated child protection organisations in South Africa.

Given the nature of the research methods used to gather the data for this study, it may be plausible that some social workers choose to conceal information. If so, the research findings would have been affected.

All the participants were female, and therefore, it is not known what male social workers' experiences are when referring cases to DCPOs in Pretoria, Gauteng.

All the participants were Caucasian and thus from one ethnic group, and thus generalisability can be limited.

The research study was conducted with a sample of social workers, referring cases to DCPOs. As such, the study is only representative of a percentage of the social worker population.

Furthermore, because a purposive sample was used to choose the research sample, it is likely that the study's empirical findings are biased or not representative of the phenomena being examined because the study population may be too similar.

3.7 SECTION B1: BIOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Table 1 below provides a brief description of the biographical profiles of the participants. The demographic information of the participants encompassed their gender, age, ethnicity, home language, area of specialisation, years of experience in providing social work services, and employment. The researcher designated pseudonyms for the participants to uphold the ethical standards of the research and protect their privacy.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the participants

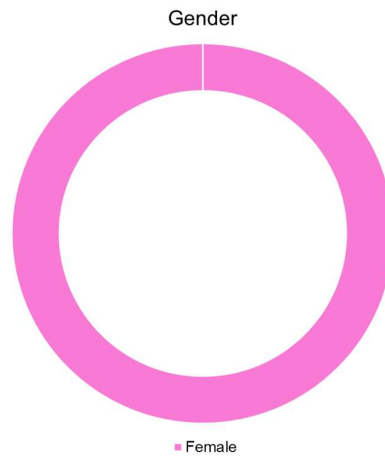
Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Home-Language	Ethnicity	Years of experience in Social Work	Area of specialisation	Employment
Participant 1	Female	51	Afrikaans	South-African White	29	Clinical Therapy	Private Practice
Participant 2	Female	39	Afrikaans	South-African White	15	Child Trauma Therapy	NPO
Participant 3	Female	28	Afrikaans	South-African White	5	Forensic Social Work services	NPO
Participant 4	Female	35	Afrikaans	South-African White	8	Clinical Social Work	Private Practice
Participant 5	Female	47	Afrikaans	South-African White	25	Community Development	NPO

Participant 6	Female	27	Afrikaans	South-African White	5	Community development	NPO
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3.7.1 Gender

Figure 1 indicates that six of the participants were female. According to Hicks (2015:471-473), social work is often seen as a female-dominated sector, despite the important contribution played by minority male social workers. Females dominated compared to men, which is consistent with the findings.

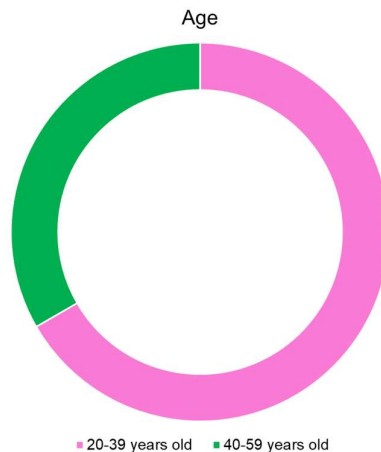
Figure 1: Gender of Participants



3.7.1.2 Age

Louw and Louw (2014:4) assert that the early adulthood developmental stage transpires between the ages of 20 and 39, while the middle adulthood developmental stage happens between the ages of 40 and 59. Figure 2 below illustrates that four individuals are in the early adult developmental phase, aged 20 to 39, whereas two individuals are in the intermediate stage of adult development, aged 40 to 59.

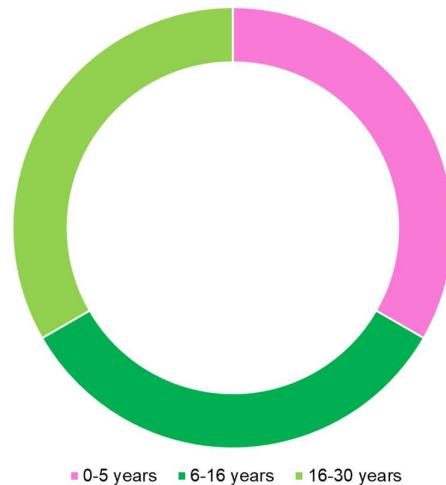
Figure 2: Ages of the participants per age category



3.7.1.3 Years of experience in Social Work

Participants indicated a considerable variation in their years of experience in social work. Figure 3 below demonstrates that two participants claimed five years of experience, one reported eight, another reported 15 years, one reported 25 years, and a fifth individual disclosed 29 years of experience in the field. Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2020) highlight that in qualitative research, the diversity among participants contributes to the richness and depth of the data, enabling a greater range of perspectives. The inclusion of both early-career and experienced professionals in this study provided a thorough overview of referral practices and systematic challenges at various stages of their careers.

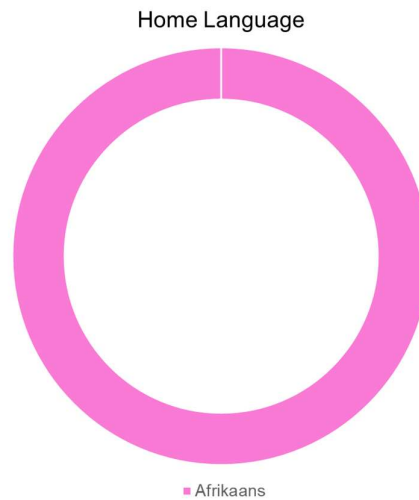
Figure 3: Years of experience in Social Work



3.7.1.4 Home Language

The researcher can conclude that, while only 7.7% of Gauteng's population primarily speaks Afrikaans (Statistics South Africa, 2023), all six social work participants in this study were Afrikaans-speaking. This indicates an over-representation of Afrikaans speakers in the sample, which may influence the findings through linguistic or cultural interpretations distinct from this group.

Figure 4: Home Language



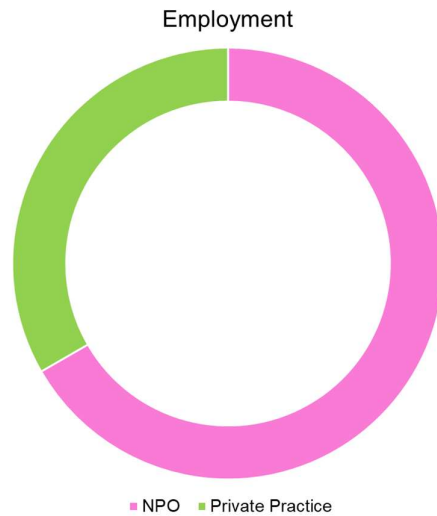
3.7.1.5 Area of specialisation

The researcher can describe the participants' areas of specialisation as diverse within the field of social work, each with unique expertise. One participant specialises in clinical therapy. The second participant specialises in child trauma therapy. The third participant specialises in forensic social work services. The fourth participant specialises in clinical social work. Two of the participants specialise in community development. The differences in participants' areas of expertise highlight the diverse nature of child protection work, where a range of skills from clinical therapy to community development are crucial for meeting the complex and interconnected needs of vulnerable children (UNICEF, 2019).

3.7.1.6 Employment

The researcher can describe the participants' employment settings as varied within the social work field. Four participants are employed by a non-profit organisation. Two of the participants work in private practice. The diversity in where participants work, spanning non-profit organisations to private practices, reflects the nature of the social work field, which functions across various sectors to address intricate social needs in both public and private areas (Earle, 2008).

Figure 5: Employment



3.8 SECTION B2: EMPIRICAL DATA AND INTERPRETATION

Section B2 displays the themes and subthemes from the semi-structured interview data. The researcher confirmed the data by making use of direct verbatim quotations from participants in each section, including narrative accounts. Where appropriate, the researcher interpreted themes from the theoretical framework that support this study and, where possible, controlled them with relevant literature. Each component includes narrative descriptions based on participant quotes to guarantee the data's credibility. Table 2 presents an overview of the themes and subthemes.

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes of the research findings

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Challenges in Referral Process	1.1 Contacting Child Protection Organisations
	1.2 Accessibility Problems
2. Impact on Well-being	2.1 Impact on Child Well-being
	2.2 Impact on Social Worker Well-being
3. Collaboration & Resources	3.1 Networking and Relationships
	3.2 Resource Gaps
4. Strategies for Unsuccessful Referrals	4.1 Escalation and Alternative Support
	4.2 Addressing Structural Gaps
5. Feedback and Accountability	5.1 Feedback Loops for Referrals

Theme 1: Challenges in Referral Process

According to social workers, poor communication and a lack of coordinated efforts among child protection agencies exacerbate difficulties in service provision and support for vulnerable children and families (Schiller, 2017:10-11; Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019:246). Van Niekerk and Matthias (2019:246) point out the lack of comprehensive strategies and collaborative protocols between the Department of Social Development (DSD) and non-profit organisations (NPOs), leading to disjointed service delivery and ambiguous referral processes.

The experiences of those involved in this study differed depending on their organisational environment, the resources at their disposal, and the intricacy of their situations. Nonetheless, a recurring theme surfaced regarding the importance of solid relationships between organisations and more transparent communication channels to effectively support child protection referrals (Strydom, Schiller & Orme, 2020:387; Roelen, Long & Edström, 2012:25).

Sub-theme 1.1 Contacting Child Protection Organisations

Participants Two and Three underlined the need to build trusting, solid relationships between specific agencies. Participant Three also stated that known contacts help improve the process in general. The findings of Roelen, Long, and Edström (2012:13) in their study indicate that informal personal relationships often involve formal mechanisms when dependable institutional structures are lacking. Participants said the Department of Social Development was more challenging. Participant Five highlighted the difficulties in pinpointing the right contacts, especially within larger organisations. The findings of Van Niekerk and Matthias (2019:250) demonstrate that DSD's internal coordination issues, along with ineffective communication with NPOs, frequently result in uncertainty, delays, or even a lack of action. Participant Six noted that organisations usually send her from one organisation to another because of the various regions they must refer to.

Three participants spoke with concern about the minimal interaction felt and the insufficient referral feedback. GST indicates the significance of feedback loops in creating systems to be flexible as things change (Heil, 2017:2). In practice, however, social workers often do not know what the results of their referrals are because they do not get feedback. This uncertainty supports GST's concept that systems lacking

feedback struggle to learn or evolve effectively. Without that input, it becomes difficult for practitioners to reflect meaningfully on their actions, let alone improve the quality or relevance of the services they provide.

Participant 1: "Others take a very long time to react or do not respond to referrals."

Participant 2: "We have built a really, really great relationship with SAVF Pretoria North." "...we've had some altercations with Department of Social Development social workers in the past..."

Participant 3: "...we have organisations we have good relationship with... the referral to those organisations are easier, and because we know the employees and we see them."

Participant 4: "So definitely finding the correct person. And the other challenging thing is finding the correct person in the correct area with the correct organisation."

Participant 5: "...the lack of communication back, lack of feedback...we don't have any contact details or any networking with other organisations."

Participant 6: "I have struggled reporting in... while reporting overall... Sometimes I don't get any response on phone lines, and sometimes I get sent from one child protection organisation to the other saying, 'Oh, that it's not our area', the other one saying, 'it's not our area.'"

Sub-theme 1.2 Accessibility Problems

Participants reported that direct contact with a specific social worker familiar with the case or organisation made recommendations considerably more effective. Without this, especially when referrals span regional boundaries, managing the referral process becomes much more difficult. The results align with Van Niekerk and Matthias (2019:250), highlighting the lack of established communication pathways and the irregular internal frameworks in statutory organisations, leading to incompetence and ambiguity.

In a similar vein, Roelen, Long, and Edström (2012:9) point out that unclear referral mandates and decentralised contact systems often lead to misdirected referrals and delays in child protection interventions. Participant 2 observed that statutory

authorities, such as the Department of Social Development, are frequently inaccessible and ineffective, with cases taking several years to resolve. This resonates with the observations made by Kuruppu, Forsdike, and Hegarty (2018:730), who note that referring professionals frequently experience feelings of neglect or lack of support from statutory agencies, especially in instances where follow-up is absent. Participants viewed statutory agencies as more challenging to approach, requiring significant follow-up and causing significant delays in pressing cases, compared to more responsive organisations such as certain organisations.

Participants Three and Six struggled with limited communication choices, including phone lines and email. These accessibility barriers reflect what Roelen, Long, and Edström (2012:10–12) describe as systemic failures in referral communication infrastructure, where social workers are frequently left without confirmation of receipt or updates on outcomes, ultimately leading to lost opportunities for timely child protection. Finding the right organisation or person to handle challenges outside their normal domains was a common problem for Participants One and Four. This observation aligns with findings by Kuruppu, Forsdike, and Hegarty (2018:730), who noted that professionals, particularly in situations where follow-up was lacking, often reported feeling overlooked or dismissed by statutory services. In many of these cases, poorly directed referrals appeared to contribute to missed opportunities for timely or effective support. Due to the frequent failure of follow-up attempts, Participant Five claimed that accessibility problems were often more common in large organisations.

GST suggests that a child protection system is composed of interdependent subsystems, whose ability to collaborate is essential for the system's overall effectiveness (Bertalanffy, 1972:417; Walker, 2012:3). In this context, several participants described difficulties in establishing contact across regional lines or with particular statutory agencies instances that point to weakened links within the system.

This theme offers further evidence of poor systemic integration. A risk that GST itself recognises as undermining effective system functioning (Walker, 2012:15). It is perhaps unsurprising that such fragmentation continues to pose challenges for frontline practitioners working across complex organisational boundaries.

Participant 1: It works well when you've got a social worker's name, okay, a specific social worker that you know will take the case seriously. Uh... If you don't have a contact person, it is very difficult. For instance, if a child is living in another area, another city, another town, it makes it more challenging.

Participant 2: "...and SAVF Pretoria North is a lot more mobile."

"...cases that we've reported to them where there was really harsh abuse going on, and we asked the department of social development to go and investigate. And then two years later, nothing happened, you know, so it is, I think I must say our frustration is really mostly with Department of Social Development."

Participant 3: "...there's no email address or uhm it's a landline and there's no answer to the phone, then it's very, very difficult to do a referral..."

Participant 4: "...I phone around, because that's the other thing that's quite difficult, is finding the correct channel to which you should refer, because if you refer to the wrong um kind of organisation in that suburb, then nothing happens."

Participant 5: "...your bigger cities and your bigger organisations, it's more difficult...I've got emails that I've sent them 10, 20 times and no feedback, not even a email saying thank you for the inquiry followed up, just ignoring it totally."

Participant 6: "Sometimes I don't even know whether they have investigated it or not, or whether they've received my email or not, and phone lines doesn't work."

Theme 2: Impact on Well-being

Participants commented on how the referral process affects social workers as well as the children in need of protection. Five individuals highlighted the negative implications on child well-being, whereas all participants noted how referral issues impacted their personal well-being as social workers. Many times, these challenges cause emotional stress, frustration, and powerlessness. These experiences were intensely influenced by the challenges of navigating disjointed systems, where inefficiencies and lack of

communication between agencies left children vulnerable and social workers feeling overwhelmed (Truter & Fouché, 2019:415; Wilson et al., 2020:5).

Sub-theme 2.1 Impact on Child Well-being

The inefficiencies and delays resulting from fragmentation in the referral process ultimately impact the welfare of children (Schiller, 2017:10-11). This statement corroborates the sentiments shared by the participants. Five participants emphasised the damage caused by delays and inefficiencies in the referral process, noting that these issues often left children vulnerable and in unsafe environments. One participant implied that the therapeutic process is less effective if a child is not safe.

This is consistent with the findings of Wilson et al. (2020:5), who indicate that children subjected to extended periods where there is delay feel overlooked, bewildered, and begin to lose faith in adults. One participant mentioned that the lack of timely support can lead children to distrust adults, and three participants mentioned that the children could suffer from long-term emotional and psychological effects.

These challenges are well documented in UK child protection reviews, which suggest that unresolved cases may leave children in situations that continue to affect their mental health, relationships, and educational outcomes (DfE, 2019:28). Roelen, Long, and Edström (2012:12) also point to this concern, observing that misdirected or delayed referrals can leave children without essential support and vulnerable to harm. It is clear that the ongoing effects of trauma, a lack of security, and limited access to therapeutic interventions can significantly influence long-term emotional well-being (Jessing & Cole-Mossman, 2020:53). This raises important questions about how systemic shortcomings are addressed in practice.

According to Walker (2012:05), “Change impacts and reverberates around the system in ways that are often unpredictable, for example in child protection interventions...” This confirms that changes such as delays in the referral process can harm a child's well-being and that these issues do not remain contained; instead, they ripple through interrelated aspects of a child's life. As a result, therapy sessions can be interrupted, school attendance may decline, and family stability is undermined. For instance, five participants reported distressing cases where children were left in dangerous or vulnerable circumstances due to the system's failure to respond promptly.

Participant 1: "So children just stop reporting, because nobody listens and nobody helps, and that leads to a lot of mental health issues later in life, where grown people will tell you, nobody—I spoke and I told my teacher, I told my therapist, I told my mother, I told everybody, and nobody ever listened."

Participant 2: "It's really, really difficult to help a child in therapy when they are not safe. You know, it's, it's, you know, you want to help a child to work through his trauma, but he goes home, back to the same issues that brought him here in the first place."

Participant 3: "...it's harmful to the child, and the child stay in need of care and protection."

Participant 4: "...So I think the pace at which things happen definitely has an effect on the child involved."

Participant 6: "...the longer that they are in the situation, the difficult, the more difficult it is for them, and it can impact their functioning negatively."

Sub-theme 2.2 Impact on Social Worker Well-being

Campbell & Holtzhausen (2020:3) state that the phenomena of compassion fatigue add a level of strain to social workers' experiences managing emotionally taxing situations. All participants expressed feelings of pessimism, frustration, and powerlessness, especially when confronted with bureaucratic obstacles or situations where recommendations were met with inaction. This reflects the emotional drain and weariness often observed in child protection roles (Truter & Fouché, 2019:451). Three participants described how their personal hardships resulted from challenges within the referral system. Such emotional stress often affected their general mental health and went beyond work hours. Truter and Fouché (2019:420) discovered that this spillover effect is prevalent among child protection workers in South Africa, with numerous individuals experiencing disrupted sleep, strained relationships, and anxiety due to unresolved cases. Three participants expressed a sense of powerlessness, citing their limited roles as social workers and their inability to contribute more to the children and their families.

Walker (2012:07) also acknowledges that social work practitioners face a lot of pressure at work which impacts their interpersonal relationships which in turn impacts

their well-being because to be a human being is also to be a system, and this ongoing imbalance frequently leaves social workers trapped in a cycle of uncertainty and worry, ultimately hampering their ability to respond effectively to the pressing needs of their clients.

In GST terms, when the system ignores feedback, it stops steering itself, and the stress slides down to the people on the bottom, the social workers. No wonder they feel drained and discouraged. Their fatigue is not a personal flaw; it is the symptom of a system that cannot maintain equilibrium (Walker, 2012:07).

Participant 1: "It leaves me quite frustrated and uhm sad and despondent."

Participant 2: " ...quite a terrible experience to realise that, you know, you try to, you try your best to make this child feel safe and secure and everything and and uhm when you have to...report...nothing happens. It really, it really worries you."

Participant 3: "When we have a bad referral like the one I use as an example. It's really bad because there's nothing you can do... So it's cases like that is ja it's not...not good for your well-being."

Participant 4: "If I'm constantly worried about a referral or a child I saw, then that comes home with me and affects my home life. So it's a difficult line to balance between, where do I stop?"

Participant 5: " I Think the people that's coming back to us the whole time, saying. 'I have not heard anything, they have not been here' and then we can't do anything, nothing."

Participant 6: "I definitely say it frustrates me, and I get frustrated quite a lot, and for me, I do want to protect that children, but I also have limitations when it comes to protecting children..."

Theme 3: Collaboration and Resources

Effective collaboration among professionals and agencies is critical to the success of child protection services. Nevertheless, social workers frequently encounter obstacles in collaboration with other professionals and agencies due to inadequate communication, a lack of trust, and varying priorities (Van Niekerk & Matthias,

2019:246). Participants echoed this sentiment of collaboration with specific organisations. Participants stated that to collaborate effectively, there must be strong connections and connections with organisations.

Social workers often have restricted access to essential materials such as telephones, computers, fax machines, and vehicles, which hinders their ability to perform their duties effectively (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015:342). Participants also pointed out the major resource shortages impeding the referral process. Four participants underlined problems with inadequate resources in child protection organisations, while five commented on concerns about collaboration and networking. Four participants felt it is considerably simpler if you know the organisation you are referring to.

Sub-theme 3.1 Networking and Relationships

Five participants underlined the need to build strong professional ties to improve the referral process. Participants with established networks, particularly in relation to NGOs, experienced more effective and efficient referrals. The absence of frequent connections with statutory agencies led to longer delays and less efficacy. Four of the participants reported that if they know the organisation they are referring to, then it is much easier, but they also stated that if they do not know the organisation or must refer to unknown areas, then it is very difficult.

Walker (2012:01) emphasises that collaborative working and partnership are a core principle of GST because healthy systems rely on strong connections between their parts. Participants described how having direct contact made referrals quicker, showing the value of these strong links. In contrast, when such connections were weak or missing, referrals were slower and more fragmented. Walker (2012:01) points out that there is a lot of literature and practice guidance around multi-disciplinary teams, but not a lot on how to use inter-agency working and collaboration in practice.

Participant 1: "...some organisations are better in their procedures and act quite swiftly. Others take a very long time to react or do not respond to referrals."

Participant 2: "We have built a really, really great relationship with SAVF Pretoria North, and I must say that relationship...is for the benefit of the children."

Participant 3: "...the referral to those organisations are easier, and because we know the employees and we see them."

Participant 4: "... so in general, when working with NGOs, the feedback is a lot more, interaction is a lot more positive. I found when I have to work with DSD, it's a lot slower...the experience is a lot worse DSD and in general government organisations."

Participant 5: "... if I contact SAVF in Carletonville, I know exactly I'm going to get assistance because I worked there before, and I know who's currently there."

Participant 6: "...if you don't necessarily have a personal relationship with them, nothing gets done."

Sub-theme 3.2 Resource Gaps

Five participants highlighted that the lack of resources in the child protection system frequently hinders timely referrals. The lack of social workers and overwhelming caseloads pose significant challenges for child protection services. The heavy workload restricts the capacity to deliver quality care and support to every client (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015:344). Subsequently, two participants raised the significant turnover rate in child protection organisations. Two participants mentioned high caseloads, and one participant noted the significant amount of paperwork involved in child protection organisations. Three participants highlighted the gaps in funding and resources within child protection organisations. Staffing issues, high caseloads, funding gaps, and limited access to specialised services are contributing to delays and frustrations. Social workers noted that insufficient resources can result in the neglect of urgent cases.

The participants' accounts of inadequate personnel, excessive caseloads, high turnover, limited administrative capacity, and financial deficits unequivocally illustrate how deficiencies in one segment of the system impede the referral process to Designated Child Protection Organisations (DCPOs). This accords with GST's argument that open systems depend on dynamic equilibrium maintained by appropriate flows of resources and effective feedback mechanisms (Bertalanffy, 1972:412).

When these resource shortages persist, as evidenced by participants' statements regarding staff resignations, unanswered calls, and administrative overload, the necessary feedback loops for a responsive and adaptable child safety system become increasingly ineffective. For example, Participant 3 said that DCPOs cannot be reached, and Participant 6 said that referrals cannot be processed quickly. This shows that the system is not communicating or responding well, which GST says could make the whole network unstable (Heil, 2017:2).

Participant 1: "... the NGOs they don't get their money...and they get this, all these referrals of all these cases. And I mean, it's not getting better, it's getting worse. So it's not accessible."

"...there's just too much paperwork. Social workers in the field, they have to do so much admin that they don't get to the ground route."

Participant 2: "...it's difficult these days because there's high staff turnover in the welfare sector..."

Participant 3: "...there's no email address, or uhm it's a landline and there's no answer to the phone, then it's very, very difficult to do a referral..."

"...it's not that, that easy, because there's not an office or there's not a telephone number or email address where you can reach someone, so then it's harder to get a hold of the organisation to do the referral."

Participant 5: "The challenge that we've got is that the social workers resign quickly. Yes. So three months ago, you spoke to Sannie, and when you speak to Sannie again, or ask for Sannie again, and she's not there anymore."

"I know that if you don't have a social worker in your office with who do you send out? if you don't have cars, if you don't have this?"

"...a lot of organisations that struggle financially, and that makes them so negative."

Participant 6: "...I also know that the caseload for child protection organisations are massive and that they don't necessarily have the capacity to investigate..."

"...we are just not enough social workers..."

Theme 4: Strategies for Unsuccessful Referrals

Social workers discussed different approaches they employ when referrals fail. All six participants mentioned utilising different methods to assist children and families when the formal referral process does not work, with four sharing specific strategies to tackle structural obstacles in the system.

Sub-theme 4.1 Alternative Resources/ Support

All six participants shared experiences of looking for different ways to assist children when a formal referral was postponed or not thoroughly investigated. Typical approaches involved collaborating with law enforcement, partnering with school counsellors, or reaching out to community organisations. Participant Two mentioned that their organisation aims to take preventative steps to prevent situations from escalating to the point of needing referrals. Two participants noted that they went straight to the Children's Court. Participant Four mentioned that they would connect with other child protection organisations. Likewise, Participant Five indicated they would contact the social workers' supervisors if necessary. Three participants shared that they connected with community resources like schools, churches, and nonprofit organisations in the area. Participant Six shared that they assist the family by providing resources. Although these methods can be useful, they frequently bring about difficulties.

According to Heil (2017:08), "Open systems are self-adapting through feedback loops and adaptation." This means that an open system must adapt to changes and feedback from its environment. The participants demonstrated adaptive behaviour by, for example, using community and private resources when the official channels were blocked.

Participant 1: " We can see if we can find another place that would help...or we find sponsors, or we would see, or I refer them to the Children's Court directly so it depends on what the problem is."

“...you rely on what is available in terms of NGOs. But if that doesn't work out, then you rely on private people to assist you.”

Participant 2: “...we always try to to work preventative.”

“...we then try to, then engage with the school...try to advise the the teacher on, you know, how to kind of better the situation...and obviously and then we also offer some some counselling to the parents.”

“...we also had one case now where we also engaged with church.”

Participant 3: “...sometimes our social workers will go and see the family, or we will phone the school and see if there's a counsellor or social worker at the school that can assist uhm the child... then we'll ask the church or the school to help the family while we wait for the referral.”

Participant 4: “... I would definitely reach out to a neighbouring NGO or DSD in that kind of the organisation next in line, and then kind of support the family in that process as well. If it can only be referred to that specific organisation, I would escalate the case to the supervisor, and then whoever's next in the food chain, and then kind of just support the family throughout that process.”

Participant 5: “...if you know that process, then it's easier to refer and then also, if they don't assist, you give them two weeks, if they don't come back to you, then you send the email to the supervisor.”

Participant 6: “...refer them or guide them to fill out a form 22 at the Children's Court, and if they go directly to the court, the court is required by law to assign a social worker investigate this within a certain time period... when it's not that urgent, I then try and assist them with resources within their community, NPOs, that might be able to assist with something, for example, like food parcels.”

Sub-theme 4.2 The Success of Alternative Measures

The opinions on the success of alternative measures varied. Three participants reported that with the help of the Children's Court, SAPS, family advocates, and the Child Protection Unit, some of their referrals have been successful. Participant 2 claimed that the success of their preventative measures is due to parents and their willingness to cooperate. Two participants reported that the success of their alternative

measures comes down to the resources they have at their disposal. Participant Four stated that they have never had an unsuccessful referral because of the resources they use.

The child protection system works well in some circumstances because it is still open and interdependent, which is the foundation of GST, and cross-sectoral cooperation is a key part of this (Heil, 2017). The main concept behind GST is that no single part works alone, which leads to fruitful results.

Participant 1: "I would say 50/50, okay, because it really relies on a lot of different factors. Sometimes it's necessary to go into the system to be in the system. So I would use, for example, contact the the the... family advocate, or I would see whether I can go around like that, or the Child Protection Unit or whatever, and see if they might assist me with something or somebody else."

Participant 2: "So ja I think it it, it has been successful..." So ja I think it it, it has been successful if the parents have the willingness to cooperate, but most of the times, it looks to us as if, when it fails, it's because there's a larger problem, such as, like a lot, a deeper psychological issue."

Participant 3: "In some cases, really successful, because when you go to court with a form two, then the organisation gets a court order to handle the situation, as we had situations where we reported to the police and the police didn't know how to use a form 36 so then our social worker needed to go with the police and uhm help him or her follow all the process of a form 36."

Participant 4: "I haven't really had unsuccessful referrals."

Participant 5: "I think that depends on your town and your resources, and who you have to assist you, 12 o'clock at night when you have a removal."

Participant 6: "At times, it has been successful...80% of the time, it doesn't get resolved or investigated or given attention to most families, then they just leave it."

Sub-theme 4.3 Addressing Structural Gaps

Five participants expressed the necessity for fundamental changes. Three participants observed that greater accessibility would improve the referral process. According to Vetfuti, Goliath, and Perumal (2019:3), the support function of supervision for social workers is lacking. In this study, two participants noted that having supportive and strong supervisors could empower social workers in child protection organisations. Participant Three proposed a standardised form for all child protection organisations to enhance the efficiency of the process. They observed that these structural enhancements might help minimise delays and inconsistencies among agencies, ultimately improving the overall effectiveness of the referral process.

Participants concentrate on structural transformation, in accordance with GST, acknowledging systemic components such as supervisory frameworks, process standardisation, and resource accessibility as pivotal in influencing outcomes. They stress that changes to the structure could lead to long-term benefits. This shows that they reflect a system-based attempt to make the system whole, which is an important part of GST-aligned practice (Walker, 2012:04; Bertalanffy, 1972:416).

Participant 1: "...if the government or child services social services would have affiliated offices for certain areas."

Participant 2: "would be great if there's a kind of a system on, on, let's say department of social development if they have a website or something, that there's a link that you can click on, and you kind of fill in a bit of a, you know, an intake there, and then that that form, or whatever goes through to the supervisor to..."

"...more supervisors, more equipped supervisors, is really, is really necessary."

Participant 3: "...if they can standardise one form for all organisations that will help...training the community in how to do referrals... if they have one process, have telephone numbers and email addresses on the website or even on their gate where you can make referrals to that will be would be really helpful."

Participant 5: "...so I think updating information being available...and then also that they need to know that they've got support with their supervisors."

Participant 6: "... easier access to them, a database where you can find an email or a contact number for the child protection organisation, knowing which are this, which is their service areas, and which area falls under them."

Theme 5: Feedback

Participants highlighted the importance of feedback within the referral process. Five participants considered the absence of feedback loops following referrals.

Sub-theme 5.1 Feedback Loops for Referrals

Five participants voiced their disappointment regarding the absence of feedback following their referrals. The absence of communication creates uncertainty for social workers regarding the status of their cases. Two participants shared their worries about cases for which they never received feedback, highlighting how this has led to increased stress and a sense of helplessness.

According to Bertalanffy (1972:417), a dynamic and open system will only work if there is a continuous exchange of information. The participants referred cases, but did not hear back. This breaks the relational dynamic, and then the system cannot function as a whole. Which in turn results in fragmented relationships and social workers under pressure.

Participant 1: "Others take a very long time to react or do not respond to referrals."

Participant 2: "...the social workers in the DSD or SAVF...they don't owe us an explanation...but you sit here and worry."

"...I think, I think if there is just somehow a system where, if I do refer a case...that there's just kind of a feedback, a way that they that the person that referred it can have somewhat of feedback."

Participant 4: "...sometimes we, I mean, there are still some cases that I'm sitting and I'm wondering what has happened with it."

"...What I think would be helpful is a feedback process, because I submit that form, but there's no feedback that's given to the person that I submitted... just so that you have the peace of mind knowing that something has actually happened."

Participant 5: "...giving feedback or just basic communication, and that open... open communication line."

Participant 6: "...I think definitely more feedback and more open communication in terms of their contact details, service areas, contact information, and just open communication channels between us and them."

3.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the methodologies employed and executed in Section A of the studies. Section B comprised the data and its subsequent interpretation. Thematic analysis was employed to discuss themes that address the research question. Chapter 4 will present the key findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the study.

CHAPTER 4

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The goal of this study was to explore and describe social workers' experiences in referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria.

To meet this goal, the objectives of this study were:

- To explore and describe the experiences, both good and bad that Pretoria social workers have when referring children to designated child protection organisations.
- To explore and describe the referral procedure utilised to send cases to Pretoria's designated child protection organisations.
- To explore and describe the steps social workers take if referrals fail to be successful.

The study's objectives were achieved by conducting a literature review, applying appropriate research methodology, and analysing the empirical findings derived from the study. The literature review offered a comprehensive review of the current research regarding social workers' experiences in referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria. This study was based on the general systems theory as its theoretical framework. This assisted the researcher in understanding how systemic structures affect child protection services and the significance of collaboration between social workers in designated and non-designated child protection roles. A qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design was used to properly investigate the individuals' unique experiences. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to obtain information on social workers' experiences while referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria. This helped the researcher develop recommendations to improve social workers' experiences in referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria.

The overarching research question that this study attempted to answer was the following: "What are the experiences of social workers when referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria?"

The research question was explored through various themes and sub-themes outlined in Chapter 3, emphasising the challenges and experiences faced by social workers during the referral process. The first theme explored the difficulties that the referral process caused. The second theme looked at how these challenges affected wellness, underlining the stress the children and the social workers were experiencing. Theme 3 focused on collaboration and resource restrictions. The fourth theme focused on dealing with unsuccessful referrals, emphasising various assistance and structural adjustments required to decrease delays and boost productivity. Theme 5 finally underlined the importance of feedback in the referral process, with participants highlighting the need for thorough feedback loops to increase responsibility and reduce stress.

4.2 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

4.2.1 Key findings regarding the positive and negative experiences that social workers in Pretoria encounter during the process of referring children to designated child protection organisations.

When social workers in Pretoria refer children to designated child protection organisations, they encounter a range of experiences, some inspiring and others demanding. This study emphasises how the organisations in question, their systematic difficulties, and their communication strategies greatly affect the referral process. When seen through the perspective of GST, social workers' experiences in Pretoria reveal the systemic structure of child welfare services. GST states that changes or dysfunctions in one area may greatly affect the entire system as every component of a system is linked (Bertalanffy, 1972:412; Walker, 2012:3).

Positive experiences in the referral process, social workers noted, usually result from relationships with well-run and attentive organisations. Participants, for instance, underlined how important organisations like SAVF Pretoria North are because their reliability and constant communication helped streamline referrals. Supportive relationships let social workers feel successful in their duties and have confidence in the help given to families and children. According to Singh & Azman (2022:24), “The system functions as each part interacts (communicates) with each other.” The participants who had positive experiences with organisations that were communicative for example, SAVF Pretoria North, would be described as the ideal functioning system because the system operates as an integrated whole (Singh & Azman, 2022:24).

Furthermore, these events reflect GST's interdependence concept, in which functional subsystems such as DCPOs and social workers help to maintain system-wide balance (Heil, 2017:1). This collaboration helps to further the more general objective of the National Child Care and Protection Policy (NCCPP), which encourages coordinated, integrated and standardised service delivery (NPPCC, 2019:4). Nonetheless, these positive encounters remained only a limited number of select organisations.

Negative experiences mostly formed the feedback by means of systematic problems and inefficiencies within the organisations. Pointing to significant delays, little feedback, and the difficulty of having to make repeated follow-up calls, participants voiced their irritation with the Department of Social Development. In other words, one of the biggest concerns of the participants was the lack of communication. Singh & Azman (2022:27) note that a system can only work if there is either internal or external communication across the whole system. The negative experiences are an example of what happens when communication and feedback fail.

One of the participants commented on concerns with ongoing systemic problems endangering children in the long term. A social worker needs to be able to see beyond a client's problem as well as the connections between the problems and other correlated problems, but they cannot help if it is linked to a system-wide problem as well (Singh & Azman, 2022:28).

Social workers discussed how they felt when facing these issues and how this had an emotional impact. All the frustration, stress, and panic that the participants feel are not isolated feelings but symptoms of system-level dysfunction that not only affect service users but social workers themselves (Singh & Azman, 2022:28).

4.2.2 Key findings regarding the referral process used to refer cases to designated child protection organisations in Pretoria.

Social workers referring cases to certain child protection organisations face several challenges. One main and often occurring problem is the lack of feedback from child protective organisations. Many times, participants in this study said they do not get information on the developments of the cases or confirmation that the reference has been accepted after a referral. A core principle of GST is that a good system needs regular feedback in its ever-changing environment to maintain balance, and this could be achieved through feedback loops (Heil, 2017:4), but the participants' recurrent

statements of no feedback represent a fault in feedback loops and, by default, the system.

Lack of communication causes uncertainty and dissatisfaction, which makes it challenging for social workers to know whether children are receiving the required help. It is essential to GST's concept of preserving balance via constant input and adjustment, this breakdown in feedback networks reflects a fundamental failure in systemic communication loops (Heil, 2017:2). The referral system cannot self-regulate or react dynamically to changing child protection requirements without functioning feedback loops, consequently leading to systematic stagnation and uncertainty for social workers attempting to monitor a child's safety (Walker, 2012:18).

Among the difficulties social workers encounter are inadequate organisational communication and cooperation. Participants observed numerous instances where unclear service regions or jurisdictional difficulties led to the transfer of cases between agencies. Lack of clear communication and outdated contact details only make the referral process slower.

Such fragmentation, as demonstrated in this research, results from the lack of a well-integrated open system wherein each component should interact with others in real time to preserve system coherence (Bertalanffy, 1972:413). The inefficiency in high-risk cases necessitated urgent action, as any delay increases the risk of harm to children, an essential caution that GST highlights the slow responses in intricate systems (Heil, 2017:2).

Child protection organisations emphasised the significant workloads and lack of resources as key challenges. The environment influences the system, and the system reacts to the opportunities and limitations presented by the outside world (Singh & Azman, 2022:26). Numerous participants recognised that organisations frequently face challenges such as limited personnel, insufficient financial support, and inadequate transportation for social workers to carry out their investigations. The limitations lead to slower case handling and impact the quality of the referral process overall.

When social workers face so many resource constraints, it causes a system imbalance, and the imbalance impacts the system functioning (Singh & Azman, 2022:26).

Social workers struggled in relationships with many stakeholders and designated child protection organisations. One of the regular irritations was the slow and restrictive attitude of legislative bodies like the Department of Social Development. Participants related stories of situations where administrative flaws at the Department of Social Development resulted in needless delays in cases by neglecting phone calls and emails. Furthermore, noted were difficulties with the South African Police Service (SAPS), especially in regard to their inadequate awareness of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 and associated regulations.

“Von Bertalanffy rejected the notion that each component can be analysed independently... Instead, he advocated that a system is characterised by the linkage and non-linear relationship between different components (Singh & Azman, 2022:25). This is to say that systems are interdependent and that restrictive and uncommunicative organisations pose a threat to dismantle the system as a whole (Singh & Azman, 2022:25).

Social workers' primary focus was on how these challenges compromised children's wellbeing. Participants indicated that children in slow-paced referrals and poor investigations sometimes found themselves in risky situations for protracted lengths of time. Their growth in the spheres of physical, emotional, and intellectual capacities is much affected by this. One participant shared an example where children missed school because the help they needed arrived too late, putting their future opportunities at risk. This delay meant that by the time support was provided, those children had already lost out on important learning and development. This is an example of a failure of the system to adapt and meet new challenges because of the fragmentation, which unfortunately already exists (Bertalanffy, 1972:417; Walker, 2012:20). Such a shortfall ultimately threatens this specific system's core objective of keeping children safe. When the system cannot coordinate its components to support vulnerable children, it undermines its very purpose.

Ultimately, these challenges pose a significant burden on the mental health and work efficiency of social workers. Participants expressed their frustrations and remorse from their struggle to ensure the safety and well-being of the children in their care. Social workers experienced difficulties due to systemic issues, such as jurisdictional limitations and the absence of statutory powers for non-statutory workers, which

restricted their ability to respond effectively in urgent situations. The state of wellness of the people who are part of the system is a key factor in how well the whole system works (Heil, 2017:2), and in that case, the emotional state of the participants is a testimony to the shape that our system is in right now.

4.2.3 Key findings regarding the measures used by social workers when referrals are not successful.

When referrals to designated child protection organisations failed, participants took alternative steps to ensure children and families still received support. From a GST perspective, these actions show how professionals adapt to address systemic gaps and maintain balance (Bertalanffy, 1972:417; Walker, 2012:20)

One common method they talked about was escalating cases through different legal pathways. Participants often helped families complete Form 22 for the Children's Court, which mandates the court to assign a social worker to investigate the case within a specified timeframe. In critical cases of abuse or neglect, individuals sought assistance from the South African Police Service or Child Protection Officers for investigations and immediate support. Thus, the participants used external communication and stretched across boundaries by using resources inside and outside the system to reach their goal (Singh & Azman, 2022:27).

In less pressing cases, participants often used community tools to help families with their short-term needs. The participants observed that non-governmental and non-profit organisations frequently played a crucial role in delivering food parcels and providing emotional support. Schools and churches were important players who helped in cases of emotional distress or educational neglect. These community-oriented initiatives helped families seeking government assistance. These participants used an action system to achieve change. An action system is a group of individuals that a social worker collaborates with to accomplish their objectives, such as a teacher or community leader (Singh & Azman, 2022:31).

The participants highlighted how crucial it is to foster strong connections with key stakeholders to tackle the issues surrounding unsuccessful referrals. Connecting with fellow social workers, child protection officers, and law enforcement can truly accelerate investigations and lead to better interventions. These personal connections

enabled participants to apply additional pressure when organisations failed to take action.

The participants noted, even with these efforts, that there were significant difficulties associated with these measures. They clarified that often delays resulting from court procedures and escalations meant children had to spend more than required in dangerous surroundings. Limited resources restricted their capacity to provide suitable support. Participants clearly expressed their disappointments and feelings of tiredness as they negotiated these institutional barriers, therefore indicating the emotional weight of these difficulties. Singh & Azman (2022:26) corroborate the feelings of the participants by noting that social workers have to acquire information from multiple system levels, including environmental pressures, and that it requires emotional labour, especially in a broken system.

4.3 CONCLUSIONS

This study uncovers the intricate and frequently difficult experiences faced by social workers in Pretoria as they refer cases to designated child protection organisations. Observing this through the perspective of GST, these experiences are interconnected and indicative of larger systems. Many participants expressed that while there were sporadic positive experiences, particularly in relation to working with effective organisations, these were rare occasions. Organisations that embraced proactive communication and maintained reliable processes usually achieved good results, which helped social workers to feel confident in the assistance they gave children. These experiences demonstrate how distinct parts work together harmoniously, with open communication and clear guidelines enabling successful actions (Walker, 2012:3).

Many participants felt that the resource challenges caused a lot of strain on the system, leading to delays in investigations and ultimately leaving children in dangerous situations for longer periods. Participants shared stories of children residing in harmful or neglectful situations due to these difficulties, with some highlighting the lasting impact on children's emotional, physical, and educational development. Participants shared the impact of these systemic issues on their emotional wellbeing. Many participants expressed feelings of grief, fatigue, and helplessness, particularly when they cannot get immediate assistance for children in dire circumstances. This is a

direct result of failed feedback loops because when a system cannot adapt to the changes in its environment, it will inevitably fail (Walker, 2012:04). The lack of legal authority for non-governmental social workers increased this feeling of restriction and made participants feel limited in their ability to act forcefully. Participants' sense of powerlessness resulted from their frequent pointing to the Department of Social Development for its slow replies and administrative flaws.

The heavy caseloads and limited resources faced by child protection agencies caused great worry among the participants. This suggests a lack of equilibrium among interconnected parts, where overloaded elements diminish the overall system's ability to respond effectively (Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019:22).

Notwithstanding these obstacles, participants discussed the many strategies they used to handle insufficient referrals. Many of the participants believed that establishing strong ties and connections with stakeholders such as police officials, child protection agents, and other social workers would help children to get the necessary assistance.

The results clearly indicate a crucial need for comprehensive reform across the system. The GST emphasises that every component of a system must work together; coherence, continuous feedback, and collaboration across various sectors are essential for ensuring effective responses in child protection – the system needs to become whole (Bertalanffy, 1972:416). Many participants believe that addressing these issues requires a greater number of communication channels, increased cooperation between companies, and more money for child protection organisations.

4.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.4.1 Recommendations for Child Protection Organisations

- A unified referral process, including a standard form and clearly defined guidelines for submission and prioritisation, should be implemented across all organisations.
- Organisations should establish systems for regular updates on case progress to social workers who refer cases.
- Increased funding should be directed toward child protection organisations to address shortages in transportation, staff, and office supplies critical for timely interventions.

- Regular training should be provided to social workers on the Children's Act, investigation techniques, and emotional resilience.
- Organisations should streamline the administrative process in order for the social workers to be able to manage their case load more effectively.
- Supervisors should place an emphasis on the supportive function of supervision to prevent burnout in statutory social workers.
- When possible, experienced social workers should handle the more challenging cases to prevent high staff turnover.

4.4.2 Recommendations for Social Workers

- Social workers should familiarise themselves with the Children's Act and develop expertise in referral processes and documentation.
- Proactive networking with child protection organisations and other stakeholders should be prioritised to strengthen collaboration. Social workers should take responsibility to seek networks with other professionals, organisations, and stakeholders.
- Social workers should engage in self-care practices and build support systems to prevent burnout, especially when handling challenging cases.

4.4.3 Recommendations for Community Stakeholders

- Meetings or forums should be established to facilitate cooperation among child protection organisations, NGOs, schools, the SAPS, and community members in their respective areas.
- Educating the public on recognising and reporting child abuse and neglect through campaigns and community workshops will strengthen the referral process.
- Community stakeholders should offer interim resources, such as food parcels or school transport, while formal referrals are being processed.

4.4.4 Recommendations for Future Research

- Further research should examine systemic inefficiencies in child protection organisations across different regions in South Africa.
- Studies should focus on best practices for collaboration between social workers and child protection organisations.

- Research should assess the long-term impact of delayed child protection interventions on children's well-being and development.

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ADDENDA

APPENDIX A ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER



Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotho



16 May 2024

Dear Miss D de Bruyn

Project Title:

Researcher: Social workers' experiences in referring cases to designated child protection organisations

Supervisor(s): in Gauteng

Department: Miss D de Bruyn

Reference number: Dr J Chiba

Degree: Social Work and Criminology

19086289 (HUM031/0424)

Masters

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was approved by the Research Ethics Committee on 25 April 2024. Please note that before research can commence all other approvals must have been received. Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karen Harris'.

Prof Karen Harris
Chair: Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
e-mail: tracey.andrew@up.ac.za

APPENDIX B CONFIRMATION OF PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

LOUISE AUCAMP
DIRECTOR OF FACT NETWORK



061 477 8480 SACSSP reg no: 10-18576 457 Lea St,
louise@factnetwork.co.za www.factnetwork.co.za Waterkloof Glen,
Pretoria

Dr Jenita Chiba
Jenita.chiba@up.ac.za
University of Pretoria

Dear Dr Chiba,

RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION FOR ASSISTANCE TO ACCESS RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for your letter regarding permission for assistance to access research participants through FACT Network for your research study which seeks to explore and describe the experiences of social workers when having to refer cases to designated child protection organisations in Gauteng.

You have our official permission and our organisation would be glad to assist in accessing potential participants. We will inform the potential participants of the study and seek their permission to provide their names to the students you have mentioned.

Kind regards,

Dr Louise Aucamp
louise@factnetwork.co.za

LAucamp

APPENDIX C RESEARCH POSTER

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Ms. Denielle de Bruyn

MSW Student investigating the experiences of social workers when referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Gauteng.

Our Goal:

To explore and describe the experiences of social workers in the process of referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Gauteng.

Who Do We Need:

Social Workers with a minimum of two years of experience in the field of child welfare and protection. Participants should be currently practising in Gauteng, with direct experience in referring cases to child protection organisations.

Participation Details: Participation will involve a confidential interview, lasting approximately 60 minutes, conducted at a time and place convenient for you or via a secure online platform.

Contact Information: If you are interested in participating or have any questions about the study, please contact Ms. Denielle de Bruyn at u19086289@tuks.co.za

Together can work towards a more effective child protection system in Gauteng.

APPENDIX D LETTER OF AGREEMENT TO DEBRIEF

FACT | Assessment & Therapy Centre

061 477 8480
socialworker@factnetwork

www.factnetwork.co.za
457 Lea St, Waterkloof Glen, Pretoria



Dear Denielle de Bruyn,

Thank you for your letter.

I would be happy to help you and offer counselling services to your research participants free of charge.

Kind regards,
Anli Swart
FACT Social Work Intern

APPENDIX E INFORMED CONSENT FORM



Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotheo

Department of Social Work & Criminology



INTERVIEWEE CONSENT

(full name) have had the researcher explain the Informed Consent form and understand my rights in participating in the study. I voluntarily consent to participate in the study, with the insight into the purpose of the study and what the data gathered will be used for. I will be provided a pseudonym for the study and all information shared will be handled with confidentiality, unless requested otherwise by myself. All information shared will be kept at the University of Pretoria for safekeeping for 10 years. I will be provided with a copy of my signed consent form.

As a research participant, I confirm the following statements by ticking in the appropriate blocks:

I consent to the interview being audio-recorded by the researcher.	YES	NO
I confirm that this study offers me no immediate benefit/s.	YES	NO
I confirm that I will not receive any financial compensation for my participation in the study.	YES	NO
I confirm that I will participate in this study of my own free will and can withdraw from participating at any given time without reason.	YES	

Interviewee's signature

Date

Researcher's signature

Date

Room XXX, Humanities Building
University of Pretoria, Private Bag X20
Hatfield 0028, South Africa
Tel +27 (0)12 420 xxxx | Fax +27 (0)12 420 xxxx
Email xxx@up.ac.za | www.up.ac.za

APPENDIX F SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Semi-structured interview schedule

Topic of research: The experiences of social workers when referring cases to designated child protection organisations in Gauteng

SECTION A: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Gender	
Age	
Home language	
Ethnicity	
Years of experience in Social Work	
Area of specialisation	
Employment (e.g. school, hospital, private practice)	

SECTION B: REFERRAL PROCESS

- 2.1. Can you please share with me a bit about the work that you do.
- 2.2. How often do you find yourself working with cases that require you to refer a case to a designated child protection organisation?
 - What are some of the factors that determine your referral of the case?
 - Please share with me what the process involves.
- 2.3. Please share with me the protocols and guidelines you follow when making referrals?
- 2.4. Does collaboration with other professionals or organisations feature in the referral process? Please explain.

SECTION C: EXPERIENCES

- 3.1. Please tell me what your experiences have been like when referring a case to a child protection organisation/s.
(What was challenging? What worked really well during the process? What are your feelings about this process - positive or negative?)
- 3.2. In which ways do you think these experiences affect the child's well-being?
- 3.3. How does this experience affect your well-being as a social worker? .

SECTION D: MEASURES FOR UNSUCCESSFUL REFERRALS

4.1. When a referral is unsuccessful, what measures do you typically take to address the needs of the child and family?

- How successful have these measures been? Please explain. Can you provide an example?

4.2. What support systems or resources do you make use of when facing challenges in the referral process?

SECTION E: SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

5.1. In your opinion, what improvements or changes could be made to the current referral process for child protection cases?

5.2. Are there specific training or resources you believe would enhance social workers' effectiveness in the referral process? Please can you elaborate.

5.3. In which ways can collaboration between social workers and designated child protection organisations be strengthened?

Any other responses or comments that you would like to share about your experiences

with
referring cases to child protection organisations?

.....

.....

Thank you for your participation.....