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### ACHIEVEMENT OF WELLBEING AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL WORKERS: CONSTRAINTS AND ENABLERS

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#### ABSTRACT

The achievement of wellbeing among social workers or their ability to flourish, has a bearing on their capacity to contribute towards sustainable social, economic and human development. Enhancing wellbeing among social workers is therefore important in ensuring successful client interventions. Understanding what constitutes and constrains social workers' wellbeing is important in enhancing it. Using the capabilities approach as a theoretical lens, this qualitative study examines the various conversion factors limiting or enabling wellbeing achievement among social workers. It uses a cross-sectional design. A non-probability, purposive sampling method was used to recruit and select 18 participants consisting of practising social workers and final-year social work students from a South African university. Semi-structured interviews were used as data-collection instruments. The main findings suggest that professional wellbeing is multifaceted. Social workers define professional wellbeing in terms of effective helping and professional growth, among other functionings. Various structural, organisational and personal factors can detrimentally affect the way that social workers can achieve and sustain these professional functions. These include persistent poverty and inequality, extreme resource constraints, and lack of supportive supervision and experience, amongst other factors.

**Keywords:** achievement of wellbeing; capabilities; constraining and enabling factors; functionings; social worker

## INTRODUCTION

Social work is a ‘helping’ profession that aims to intervene with at-risk populations to promote their wellbeing, empowerment, and protection (Nichols, 2012; Qalinge, 2015; Walker & Crawford, 2014). The concept of care is central to social work practice (Parton, 2003). As scholarship on the ethics of care points out, care refers to both the mental predisposition of concern and the actual practices people undertake on the basis of that concern. The primary mission of social workers is to promote social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people (International Federation of Social Workers, 2024). They help people meet their basic human needs and contribute to human development by removing obstacles to wellbeing, and thus expanding the range of things individuals can be and do (Fukuda-Parr, 2003). Social workers, social development and community development workers, child and youth care workers, and other professionals play a prominent role in offering such welfare services to South Africans. They are responsive to the needs of individuals and communities, and advance developmental social welfare by focusing on poverty reduction and pursuing social justice, equity and sustainable development. This is in line with the White Paper for Social Welfare, a policy adopted by South Africa in 1997 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1997). The White Paper embraces a developmental approach to social welfare and highlights the need to integrate social interventions with economic development (Department of Social Development, 2006; Engelbrecht & Strydom, 2015; Gray, 2006; Gray & Lombard, 2008; Lombard, 2007 ).

However, as Kheswa (2019) notes, social workers themselves often experience poor health, impaired wellbeing, low job satisfaction and occupational stress because of poor working conditions. Sonnentag et al. (2014) and Kheswa (2019) identify different types of stressors that need attention to avoid low levels of job satisfaction for social workers. These are: a) physical stressors that relate to safety and security issues; b) task-related stressors associated with job density; c) role stressors where job expectations and job descriptions are unclear; d) social stressors relating to poor human relations; and e) career-related stressors where social workers have limited opportunities to develop. Grant and Kinman (2012) suggest that while social work can be rewarding, it is a complex and emotionally demanding profession. Collectively, these scholars remind us of the significance of professionals’ health and overall wellbeing in advancing social welfare.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Social workers, in South Africa are confronted with many stressors in their work environment. Research on work conditions and social work mostly discusses how social workers are at risk of burnout resulting from high workloads, working overtime, increasing levels of bureaucracy, a lack of supervision, a lack of recognition of effort, a lack of resources as well as inadequate salaries (Ravalier et al., 2022; Schenck, 2003; Sekgobela, 2020). South African social workers’ situation is said to be worsened by the disorganisation within the Department of Social Development (Calitz et al., 2014; Sekgobela, 2020). They, for example, face multiple role responsibilities as a result of

staff shortages because, as noted by Nkosi (2018), the Department of Social Development is struggling to place social work graduates whom it funded through scholarships.

Besides the poor conditions, social workers in South Africa, as elsewhere, need to confront the overwhelming needs of the community (Earle-Mallesson, 2009). Consequently, they frequently experience burnout. They are also exposed to compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress, which results from their conversations with traumatised clients (Janse van Rensburg, 2009; Miller 2000; Sonnentag et al., 2014). Many scholars acknowledge the physical and psychological effects of poor working conditions on social workers' lives. Niedhammer and colleagues have, for example, identified cardiovascular disease and mortality as a result of chronic work stress (Niedhammer, et al., 2021). According to Ntsoane (2017), the physical and psychological ill-health indicate burnout experienced by social workers. This reinforces the impacts of distressing working conditions on helping professionals' health and work-life (Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015; Fukuda-Parr, 2003; Mack, 2022; Manganyi, 2021; Masango, 2020; Zimunya & Alpaslan, 2022). On the other hand, individuals with sound health are considered to be flourishing (Keyes, 2002).

Overall, the works discussed above conceptualise social workers' wellbeing by focusing specifically on health. Some scholars have attempted to go beyond this by conceptualising wellbeing as flourishing or total happiness (Keyes, 2002). This is particularly important because the term 'flourishing' goes beyond positive emotions or physical wellness to include the accomplishment of individuals' valued functionings and "making meaning and sense of important aspects of their life" (Grant, 2012, p.914). The distinction between happiness and flourishing was captured by Brighthouse (2005, p. 61):

*Happiness and flourishing are not, however, identical. We often think of someone as flourishing when they accomplish something of value, even if we do not think that they are personally, happy. An artist might be thought of as flourishing if she succeeds in producing great art, despite unhappiness in her personal life, and we might think that even if we think that the unhappiness produces greatness.*

To flourish, one should have more than positive emotions. One should be functioning well psychologically and socially, and be able to contribute to the common good (Keyes, 2002). This article contributes to this growing literature on the wellbeing of social workers. It draws a broader picture of social workers' wellbeing beyond being healthy, particularly paying attention to the aspects that relate to their work - what we call professional wellbeing. Using the capability approach as the guiding framework, the paper identifies various constraining and enabling factors to the achievement of professional wellbeing. It ends with recommendations on opportunities that ought to be promoted for social workers' wellbeing and effective engagement with clients.

## THE CAPABILITY APPROACH

This paper approaches the question of social workers' wellbeing through the capabilities lens as propounded by Amartya Sen (1980). The capabilities approach is a useful normative framework for conceptualising and assessing the achievement of individual wellbeing and freedom (Robeyns, 2017). The main feature of this approach is its emphasis on what people can effectively be and do. Central to this understanding are the concepts of capabilities, functionings, agency and conversion factors. Capabilities speak of the opportunities (freedoms) to be and do what one values (Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2017; Sen, 1999). According to Sen (1999), they reflect the combinations of functionings people can achieve, and from which they can choose one set. These capability sets are the primary informational base in wellbeing assessments. Functionings are the various states of being and doing that one achieves to lead a worthwhile life. They include physical and emotional states such as being adequately nourished, being in good health and being happy (Sen, 1999). Functionings are diverse and peculiar to each individual or group of people and have to do with individuals' underlying concerns or values. Capabilities and functionings are different, but interrelated concepts. The difference is like one between an opportunity to achieve and the actual achievement (Robeyns, 2003).

Equally central to the capability approach is agency, or individuals' capacity to act freely, following the goals or values they have reason to value. Such goals might be directed towards the agent's wellbeing or other people's welfare (Sen, 1985). As agents, social workers should be able to decide, act and achieve their valued goals (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009; Sen, 1999). However, social workers' agency can be fully understood only if one takes into account their aims, responsibilities, commitments and conception of the good. Sen's freedom and agent-oriented view asserts that if people are offered opportunities, they can be active in defining their own lives rather than being passive beneficiaries of development initiatives (East, Stokes & Walker, 2014). This concept of agency allows us to question whether social workers can decide, act and achieve the goals they value as individuals and as helping professionals. A focus on agency permits an appreciation that social workers' wellbeing goes beyond what they are and/or do, but also includes how their functionings are attained (whether there was personal involvement in the process or not) (Deneulin, 2014).

Another core dimension of the capability approach that is important to wellbeing assessments is that people have different capacities to convert resources into valued achievements (Robeyns, 2016). Various elements (conversion factors) determine the extent to which one can transform resources into capabilities or capabilities into functionings (for instance, converting professional knowledge and skills into effective helping and professional growth). Conversion factors affect one's freedom to attain cherished achievements (functionings) (Alkire 2005; Robeyns, 2021; Sen, 1999). Scholars often categorise these factors into personal, social, and environmental elements. Personal factors may include disability, age, or sex. Environmental factors such as climate and living or working conditions and social elements such as one's religion or culture are also examples of conversion factors (Bifulco et al., 2010; Robeyns, 2011, 2017, 2021).

Explaining how the concept of conversion factors works, Sen (1992, p. 38) asserts that

*The personal and social characteristics of different persons, which can differ greatly, can lead to substantial interpersonal variation in the conversion of resources and primary goods into achievements. For the same reasons, interpersonal differences in these personal and social characteristics can make the conversion of resources and primary goods into the freedom to achieve similarly variable.*

Take for example, two social workers, one newly qualified and the other a seasoned professional; with their different amounts of work experience and exposure to the profession, the two social workers might have different needs and abilities to convert their resources or professional knowledge into effective helping. A focus on conversion factors, therefore, permits a richer assessment and interpretation of the social workers' achievement of wellbeing. It brings to the fore issues of interpersonal diversity. In fact, by focusing on conversion factors, researchers can more deeply examine the degree of freedom that social workers have in achieving their valued functionings, whilst considering the different conditions that shape their capability sets (Onkera, 2017). For example, researchers can ask questions about how the work environment and structural factors such as high poverty levels affect the social workers' wellbeing achievements and identify what may enable them to attain this. Sen (2009) reminds us that individuals must not be forced into a certain state because of some man-made, environmental, or structural constraints. With constrained freedom to achieve wellbeing, social workers cannot do or accomplish what they find valuable and meaningful. They may attain culmination outcomes or unintended achievements (Sen, 2009).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Approach and design**

This article draws from qualitative research that sought a deeper understanding of how social experiences or interactions are seen by individuals (Schurink et al., 2021). A cross-sectional study was conducted using a case-study design (Creswell, 2013) to obtain insight into the wellbeing of social workers in South Africa and how it can be advanced within organisations.

### **Population and sampling**

For this research, purposive sampling was used to ensure the inclusion of participants with the features of interest to the study (Strydom, 2021; Tongco, 2007). The larger study involved 25 participants consisting of eight practising social workers in a specific geographical area, ten Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) final-year students, and seven social work lecturers from a specific university located in the same area. For this paper, only data obtained from students and practising social workers, thus a sample size of 18, are discussed. The information from lecturers was excluded from this article because their views were mostly about how social workers' wellbeing can be advanced in and through higher education, and that is outside the scope of the article. Inclusion criteria for the students required them to be above the age of 18 (for ethical

reasons), studying towards the Bachelor of Social Work at the case institution, be in their final year of studies, and have completed their final year practicum. The fourth-year students could give well-informed subjective views on professional wellbeing and the challenges they encountered in the field based on their practicum experiences. The practising social workers needed to have a Bachelor of Social Work from a South African university, practised social work for not less than a year and should have been in practice at the time of the interview. The tables below reflect the demographics of the interviewed students and practising social workers.

**Table 1: Practising social workers and social work students demographics**

<i>Participant Pseudonym</i> <i>S=Student</i> <i>PSW=Practising Social Worker</i>	<i>Year of BSW graduation</i>	<i>Years in practice</i>	<i>Practising context</i>
Doreen (S)	2016	Just internship	Foster care
Nyakallo (S)	2016	Just internship	Foster care
Khauhelo (S)	2016	Just internship	Foster care
Mpho (S)	2016	Just internship	Foster care
Bongi (S)	2016	Just internship	Foster care
Naleli (S)	2016	Just internship	Special school
Buang (S)	2016	Just internship	Special school
Tsepiso (S)	2016	Just internship	Special school
Lineo (S)	2016	Just internship	Military
Mantso (S)	2016	Just internship	Psychiatric complex
Pamela (PSW)	1998	19	DSD
Zanele (PSW)	2014	3	NGO
Mary (PSW)	2014	3	Private Hospital
Puleng (PSW)	1994	17	NGO
Elna (PSW)	1998	18	NGO
Bokang (PSW)	2015	2	NGO
Nxobile (PSW)	2012	5	NGO
Georgina (PSW)	1974	20	NGO

### **Data-collection methods and tools**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted in batches, first with students, then with practising social workers. This allowed for a collection of nuanced information on social workers' work experiences, perspectives on wellbeing, and how social work education can enhance professional wellbeing (Tongco, 2007).

### **Data analysis**

Data collection and analysis were essentially approached as two distinct but overlapping exercises. The researcher followed Silverman's (2005, p. 152) suggestion that "data analysis should not only happen after all your data has been safely gathered." Consequently, data analysis started during the collection phase with the researcher making sense of emerging data when taking field notes, listening to and transcribing interviews (Tessier, 2012). After data transcription, a combination of manual and computerised data analysis was conducted. This involved manual coding (working with hard copies of transcribed interviews and highlighting and writing up emerging codes) and transferring the codes into an electronic file. The data analysis process was recursive and required several rounds of coding (Wilson-Strydom, 2012). For instance, the researcher did descriptive, thematic and conceptual coding (drawing themes from the capability approach). NVivo software was used to organise and manage the data.

### **Trustworthiness**

The researcher used the strategies proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1986) as a measure to ensure trustworthiness (see Schurink et al., 2021). These include transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility. Transferability was ensured by creating a contextual acquaintance for the reader into the lifeworld of participants. This was done by using extensive quotations from participants and contextualising these within the applicable theory for analysis and findings. To ensure dependability, the researcher ensured that the process was well documented and maintained an audit trail. A set of research supervisors engaged with the information throughout the study. Confirmability refers to the ability to remain self-critical and reflect on your preconceptions (Schurink et al., 2021). The researcher had to be aware of their own biases regarding the wellbeing of social workers. Several rounds of coding with independent confirmation and electronic and manual data analysis strategies ensured that the findings were consistent. Credibility was achieved by ensuring that data were collected from more than one participant group.

### **Ethics**

The study obtained ethics clearance with the following ethics number: University of the Free State-HSD2016/1282. The researcher ensured the principle of voluntary participation by stating this clearly in the invitation to participate. Participants could also withdraw from the study at any time should they wish to do so. No participants withdrew once they had agreed to participate. Interviews took place only after potential participants signed a consent form that explained the purpose and process of the research clearly. Privacy and confidentiality were maintained by keeping all

information and copies of the transcripts in a password-protected computer. Interviews were conducted in spaces suggested by participants and pseudonyms were used for all participants. The principle of non-maleficence (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021) refers to the need not to harm research participants. The interview questions were designed not to cause distress to participants. The researcher kept in mind, however, that engaging with the concept of professional wellbeing of social workers could elicit strong emotions. Debriefing was done after each interview and psychosocial services were also available should anybody need a referral. None of the participants requested a referral.

## FINDINGS

The main findings of this paper are presented under one main theme: enablers of, and constraints on, the achievement of professional wellbeing, and four subthemes: personal factors; structural conditions, organisational factors; and the collective features of the profession as an enabler.

### **Enablers of, and constraints on, the achievement of professional wellbeing**

Professional wellbeing concerns the achievement of what social workers find valuable. Findings from this study suggest that social workers' valued functionings can be personal (private achievements) and/or professional (career-related achievements). Personal achievements include getting married, having a family and financial stability, amongst others. Professional achievements include helping clients effectively and professional growth; this article focuses on the various factors that impede the achievement of these two functionings. These factors include personal, organisational and structural elements. Table 3 below presents these factors and the number of participants for whom they are relevant.

**Table 2: Constraining factors for the achievement of professional wellbeing (students and practising social workers)**

<i>Category of constraining factors</i>	<i>Constraining factors</i>	<i>Number of participants for whom the constraining factor was relevant</i>
Personal factors	Limited work experience (number of years in practice) Young/new social workers vs old social workers and ample experience	10
	Nationality	2
Structural conditions	Poverty and inequality	18
Organisational factors	Organisational/institutional culture: lack of supervision and poor supervisory style; unsatisfactory benefits and allowances  Practicing context: NGO/ Private institutions vs DSD  Work environment: lack of resources; limited access to resources vs resource availability	18

### *Personal factors*

Personal factors such as work experience and nationality determine the extent to which social workers can convert capabilities into professional wellbeing functionings. The findings suggest that the more experienced individuals are, the more capacitated they are in converting what they learn during their social work training into effective helping. Similarly, social workers' capacity to adapt to, or familiarise themselves with, their work environment (which is mostly challenging) significantly depends on their exposure to practice. The intense and ever-changing work environments, organisational or work expectations, as well as welfare settings make adaptation essential for social workers. Both students and practising social workers attested to that. They emphasised that competence grows with experience and more exposure. It is in this light that six out of ten students recommended more practicum hours or practice exposure. For them, this would allow them to learn and adapt to the reality of work. One of them, Khauhelo, stated that:

*I think theory [is] enough but practice... is not enough...I think what we are missing a lot is exposure and the time to implement what we have been taught thoroughly and effectively, because I think that we need to. Not everything goes as we are taught, the processes are not as smooth as we are taught; for example, community work, I don't think four months is enough to do that and implement and launch your community project. So, I think with this framework we end up doing things rashly, we don't really implement the skills, or the principles accordingly. (Khauhelo, student)*

Lineo supported this idea: *"There are some incidences where I feel like it wasn't enough, so, I think we could have done more [practicum]."* On a similar note, Tsepiso thought that being gradually exposed to the practice environment could have helped in preparing them for real work. She stated:

*We should have been used to all this, because now it's like we are experiencing something new, it's like a surprise. (Tsepiso, student)*

Bongi, who also supported this idea, stated that:

*...some [of us] even now struggle a bit in terms of actually applying these things, because now I am in my fourth year and it's just all of this information for me and I am expected to apply it in three months... some of the things are already forgotten. I think they should improve in terms of having more practical. (Bongi, student)*

Speaking of this issue, Puleng expressed how her work experience enables her to adapt. She said:

*Work experience makes you look at certain situations a little bit different from the young and new social workers... You cannot expect a young social worker to know all these things [work challenges], so I am grateful for my experience, yes, I am grateful. It makes my work easier. (Puleng, practising social worker)*

She also shared the experience of one new social work graduate who, with all her professional knowledge and skills, could not offer help effectively because of lack of experience:

*We have X here, who was the best student at Mopane University. She is here with us, a wonderful and intelligent social worker. I was here when she started crying... You might be the most intelligent social worker getting the highest scores [in University], but the practical living part of being a social worker is very different from the book. Not even six months of practical can prepare you for what's coming, because when you are here [for practicum] you get 8 or so caseload, yet when you are done [in real practice], you will have 120 files and they are your responsibility baaaaam, it's overwhelming... the more experienced you are the better. (Puleng, practising social worker)*

In addition, both practising and student social workers suggest that their levels of reflexivity of experienced and inexperienced social workers differ significantly according to practice exposure. For them, reflexivity is mainly about emotional management, aligning values, knowing boundaries and pursuing a longer-term vision. Pamela (practising social worker) stated that:

*You need to be reflexive otherwise that [lack of it] will affect you or there will be some imbalances in your life. (Pamela, practising social worker)*

On the same issue, Puleng explained that with experience one develops a sense of self-concept and begins to appreciate one's own boundaries in practice. She said:

*People won't value knowing the boundaries and taking care of one's self at the beginning, but with experience and more clients looking up to you, you become a 'Tannie' and the 'Tannie' knows... The more experienced you get, the less stress you allow in your life. Your boundaries will be clearer. I would love for each new social worker who had the same experience as me to have strict boundaries because they are there to protect us. I have been out there, and I know how it is... The younger ones [new social workers] need to get to the point where they say I know where the boundaries are; I know what I can do and what I can't do because of these years of experience. I feel sorry for them because they have questions like how do they handle a client and how do I protect myself? You cannot expect a young social worker to know all these things, so I am grateful for my experience. It makes it a bit easier, I think. (Puleng, practising social worker)*

From what Puleng said, with more practice experience, practitioners develop self-awareness or an appreciation of healthy boundaries and also learn how to handle the pressures and stress associated with their profession and safeguard their wellbeing. Work experience can thus be regarded as an enabling factor.

Unlike work experience, which emerged as an enabler for effective helping, the issue of nationality emerged as one of the constraints for the functionings of helping and professional growth, particularly for immigrants. The liberty or extent to which one can help or grow as a professional when one is in a foreign country significantly differs from that of a local social worker. Two

participants raised this. Nevertheless, tentatively speaking, this might be a bigger issue in South Africa. In 2022, Statistics South Africa reported that about 3 711 000 South Africa-born population worked in community, and social services, yet only 138 000 immigrants worked in the same sector (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Nxobile, one of the practising social workers, explained how being an immigrant limits her opportunities to help or grow as a professional in South Africa:

*Another [constraining] issue is being a foreigner here in South Africa. Now the issue is no longer about who can do the job effectively, but it is about where are you from. So, if you are not South African, they will just say we don't care for what you have [qualifications], because I have been applying for jobs but I have never been called for an interview. Maybe it is because the first time they see that you are not South African, they think you want to take their opportunities. Maybe they want to develop their people. I think that puts me off. (Nxobile, practising social worker)*

Whilst social work is no longer considered a scarce skill, there is undoubtedly a close link between migration and social development. As noted in Statistics South Africa (2023), if managed properly, migration contributes enormously to social and economic development, and benefits both migrants and citizens. This requires effective policies and strong support systems to address the challenges faced by immigrants.

### ***Structural conditions***

Other than these personal factors, some structural factors constrain the social workers' capacity to undergo effective helping and professional growth. Structural conditions such as poverty and inequality significantly influence how social workers convert resources into functionings, particularly professional growth and helping. As noted by Francis and Webster (2019), the most fundamental challenge confronting South Africa is the reduction of poverty and inequality. These two issues, as well as COVID-19, interfere with South African social workers' attempts to facilitate the social functioning of the disadvantaged individuals and groups with whom they work, especially considering that other socially embedded challenges such as unemployment, poor housing and public health, malnutrition, illiteracy, violence and abuse are rife under such circumstances (Manomano, 2021; Marutlulle, 2021; Zizzamia, 2020). Bearing in mind that social workers operate with very limited resources, the prevalence of systemic poverty and its attendant challenges provide a significant constraint to effective helping and professional growth among social workers in South Africa. Elna, one of the practising social workers who once practised in England, made this point, reminding us at the same time that what one can do for disadvantaged people in a poverty-stricken country such as South Africa can differ from what one can achieve in a developed nation. She says.:

*Heavy caseloads always freak me out because I have never had such a high caseload. In England, you [social worker] have about between 20 and 30 cases, but you work in a team with 20+ social workers. So, it is a big office, but a caseload of 30 was nice and no social worker could go beyond that. [But] look what we have got here, we have a 120+, and that 120 is the*

*average. Some of us have a lot more than that. So, no way that you can feel in control of your work. It worries me so much ...I feel social workers should be giving help, but they cannot get to do that because they are sitting with high caseloads and they get new cases every week and often crises. That worries and stresses me...there was a time when social workers had cases of about 800 – how can you work like that? You never get around it [caseload], it is impossible.* (Elna, practising social worker)

The number of cases social workers deal with does not only constrain their agency freedom or their ability to intervene with clients effectively, but takes a toll on their overall wellbeing.

### ***Organisational factors***

On the subject of organisational factors, the practice context emerged as a conversion factor for social workers. The experiences of those practising in non-governmental or private organisations are significantly different from those of the individuals who work in public institutions or the Department of Social Development (DSD). The findings suggest that DSD offers better employee benefits than some NGOs. It, for instance, offers housing allowances, better salaries, cars and cell phones. These largely speak to the functioning of material achievements. Elaborating on this issue, Pamela stated that:

*In the NGOs, there is not much opportunity for wellbeing, because they [NGOs] highly depend on funding from donors. There are no opportunities in the NGO as compared to here [DSD]. We have benefits here. For example, one can get a car, a laptop, a cell phone and housing allowances.* (Pamela, practising social worker)

Along similar lines, Georgina said:

*Our salary is not up to standard if you compare it to the Department [DSD] salary. The Department's salary is higher, maybe twice our salaries. A person who had only one year of experience went to the Department at Health Department (sic), Medlife; he gets nearly my pay. Even, if you receive something like seventeen thousand (rand), with a pension, a house allowance, and medical aid that is better. We do not get any of those things. Ok, we have pensions, but not subsidies. No medical aid. Nothing like that...It makes me feel like crying but at least I have a job. That is the most important part.* (Georgina, practising social worker)

The differences extend to resource availability and the social workers' access to and use of resources. Pamela, one of the DSD practising social workers, highlighted this:

*Another challenge is of resources, there [are] not enough resources and sometimes you have to share offices, like you see the set up here. These are social workers, but you see how we are seated and I think we need conducive offices for our jobs, especially considering the issue of confidentiality. All those things do not happen here, they are partially happening. We say confidentiality, but when we get to the practical part of it, it is not happening. The last time I*

*saw it was when I was working with the organisation, the NGO, not here. (Pamela, practising social worker)*

For Pamela, some non-governmental organisations are better resourced than government institutions and that allows service delivery to take place. Some social workers, particularly those who worked for non-governmental organisations, confirmed this view. One of them, Zanele stated:

*I think I am very privileged. I have my own office and I can decorate it, as I want. I have a car I can drive every single day and go where I need to go. I feel enabled in the sense that I can do my job, especially when I compare this with what I hear about DSD. We are very privileged to be in the environment we are here. (Zanele, practising social worker)*

Similarly, Puleng mentioned that:

*[In the NGO] we have our offices and air conditioners and that is ...we each have a laptop, this is not new, but at least it's working ... everyone [must] do his or her job. (Puleng, practising social worker)*

In some organisations, resource shortages result in a selective allocation of resources. This affects social workers' abilities to perform their duties effectively. As the Social Work Task Force (2009) observed, effective frontline professionals depend on a system that provides them with the resources and conditions they need to do their jobs well. Limited access to available resources also has an impact on professional growth. Doreen, one of the students, for example, stated that during her field practicum, she could not access a vehicle because she was a student social worker. Consequently, her freedom to access and use a car to visit her clients was limited. Only four out of eighteen participants (Naleli, Mary, Puleng, and Bokang) expressed satisfaction with their access to workplace resources.

Views from both students and practising social workers suggest that a certain resource threshold for the achievement of their wellbeing should be in place in both the professional setting and at a personal level. One of the student social workers, Lineo, stated that to function effectively as a social worker,

*You should have your own office, and have access to resources to help your clients like maybe a car if you need to do home visits [or] resources when you want to do community work... Basically, you having resources, you having a phone to call your clients. All these are necessary resources to help your clients. (Lineo, student)*

Similarly, Bokang stated that:

*I do know of [some] social workers [who] are stuck, who are really struggling with their environment, specifically resources. By resources, I mean things like cars, fax machines, laptops, telephones that work, and copy machines for your reports. [They do not have] those things ... and that makes the job more challenging. (Bokang, practising social worker)*

Ten social workers (six practising social workers and four student social workers) explained the limits imposed on their ability to help in the absence of sufficient resources in the professional setting. Without access to basic workplace resources such as offices, vehicles, printers, fax machines, laptops and telephones, no effective service delivery could take place. The excerpts above suggest that to a certain extent, the conduciveness of the environment to work is contextual. It varies significantly between DSD and non-governmental organisations, depending on what one foregrounds regarding personal material achievements and access to resources for helping. Another aspect that varies according to context or organisation is the organisational culture. From the interviews, it emerges that the organisational culture influences how one accomplishes helping or growth as a professional. For instance, the supervisory styles are, in one way or another informed by the organisational culture or vice versa. Georgina, for example, expressed dissatisfaction with the type of supervision she was getting:

*...the [supervisors] only want work to be done. They just want the results. Unfortunately, I think, for them being a boss is about that. But, I don't think so, especially when people working under you do not have anyone to go to and say, I don't know this, I am so tired, I am so fed up... You want somebody to boost you... (Georgina, practising social worker)*

Expanding on the issue, Georgina also indicated that in some instances an overreach of the supervisory function infringes on their private lives and freedom of affiliation. Yet that also facilitates their growth as professionals. Narrating her experience, she said that she and her colleagues used to get together on Friday nights as a way of releasing pressure. However, for unknown reasons, their supervisor advised against that. She said:

*...we did that once or twice a year after work, on Friday night. We took our husbands with us and had a braai. We chat, laugh and have fun but now [the supervisors] have an issue with that. We are not supposed to have relationships with our co-workers after work. [Yet] what I do in my spare time should be my problem. How could [supervisors] come and tell us all that they are not happy with that? We cannot go to a party or a braai. I do not mean partying as in drinking and dancing or something like that... I mean building relations makes us feel more like a family at home [and work]. (Georgina, practising social worker)*

Drawing on these excerpts, it is important to note that such practices constrain the extent to which social workers convert affiliations into helping or professional growth. However, in some contexts, for instance, where proper supervision is offered and healthy affiliations are promoted, the opposite is likely to be the case. A good example is Mary's case, whose supervisor encourages healthy and empathetic relationships with clients. Her chances of utilising the relationships in effective helping are high. She said:

*My supervisor talks about maintaining good boundaries and relationships with clients... she is strict about giving clients our telephone numbers... and that helps. (Mary, practising social worker)*

### *The collective features of the profession as an enabler*

Other than identifying the various constraining factors to professional wellbeing achievement, the interviewed social workers expressed how their wellbeing significantly depends on the collective features of their profession. Such features include policies, values and principles. The social work profession in South Africa is guided and regulated by welfare policies such as the Welfare Laws Amendment Bill 90F of 1997, the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997), the Financing Policy for Developmental Social Welfare Services (RSA, 1999), and the Service Delivery Model for Developmental Welfare Services of 2006 (Department of Social Development, 2006). Such policies stress the importance of effective social service provision in South Africa. They are in essence enablers for the helping professionals, the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997) is a good example. The policy sets out the vision, goals, principles and guidelines of developmental social welfare in South Africa.

The way one would operate with or without policy guidance differs. This was highlighted by Nxobile, when she spoke about the importance of abiding by policy, such as the Children's Act (RSA, 2006), when intervening with children. She stated:

*[As a social worker] I should be guided by the Children's Act and it is a beautiful act. It is this big book, big like a Bible, well written. [Unfortunately], some social workers do not understand how to implement it. They just do not need to know [about it], but should also know how to implement or make use of it in practice. (Nxobile, practising social worker)*

The same applies to professional values. The findings suggest that social work values and principles are also enablers for effective helping. The values include social justice, respect for people's worth, human rights and dignity, competence, integrity, professional responsibility and service delivery (South African Council for Social Service Professions [SACSSP], 2025). As the South African Council for Social Service Professions states, in pursuit of quality services, social workers should aspire and subscribe to these values. Most of the social workers interviewed believe that values are part and parcel of the profession. They understand that their values define them as professionals.

An example of how ethical values can be viewed as enablers is the SACSSP's (2025) stipulation that "social workers' primary goal is to assist individuals, families, groups and communities and address social needs and problems. Social workers elevate service to others above self-interest". This is more than just informative for social workers. Rather it is a directive. The results one can produce under the guidance of professional values might differ from what one would achieve without them. Without being held accountable through ethical values, one might opt for self-satisfying actions. The fact that social workers should uphold professional values and principles possibly deters them from doing this.

In addition, the professional principles clarify the nature of relationships that social workers should have with clients and other colleagues (SACSSP, 2025). They stipulate what is expected and what

is not expected of social workers in those working relationships and that, in a way, advances effective helping. One of the principles, for example, is that social workers should not engage in exploitative relationships with their clients and should be respectful to their colleagues (see SACSSP, 2025). The value that received significant attention from social workers in this study was respect for human dignity and the worth of the person. Speaking of how this value leads to effective helping, Pamela stated that as a professional, she feels connected to the value.

[When it comes to] *the values and principles, respect takes the priority, [respect] for human dignity and rights...clients have rights.* (Pamela, practising social worker)

Speaking of the same principle of respect and upholding human dignity, Puleng (practising social worker) mentioned that:

[In helping], *I try to treat my clients with dignity. Even if that person has a low intellectual ability, I do not have to be his/her boss... I should always make him comfortable...* (Puleng, practising social worker)

Along the same lines, Elna (practising social worker) also stated that:

*...as a professional, you have to help people but you also have to work within the [values] framework. For example, the issue of respect; there are some instances when people [clients] walk into this building ...they scream at you, but you have to stay calm and show respect, whether you get that respect back or not. It is about staying professional... You cannot just force things on people; you have to respect people for who they are and where they come from. Respect in our job is just the way of dealing with people and calmness diffuses things a lot better.* (Elna, practising social worker)

These three excerpts refer to one of the professional values and from what these social workers are saying, values (in this case respect for human dignity and human worth) can aid in the achievement of their helping functioning. They stress their professionalism. Bokang (practising social worker) confirmed this by mentioning that professionalism is one of the most important aspects of social work practice. For her, this speaks largely of work ethics and the way one treats service users. Hence, social work values and principles stress the point that social workers should always be competent in their duties. They should also always engage in ongoing learning. This enables effective helping and also advances professional growth, both of which are some of the social workers' valued functionings.

## DISCUSSION

From a capabilities perspective, achieving effective functionings constitutes one's wellbeing (Robeyns, 2017). In this regard, social workers' achievement of wellbeing entails not only being healthy, but also the practise of their valued professional functionings, namely helping and professional growth. This study identified various conversion factors for professional wellbeing achievement at the personal, organisational and structural levels (Bazzani, 2023; Meerman et al., 2022; Robeyns, 2011, 2017; Sen, 1999). At a personal level, individual characteristics such as work experience or practice exposure and nationality determine one's freedom or the extent to which one can convert professional capabilities into functionings (helping and professional growth) and attains wellbeing. For instance, an experienced social worker with more years in practice might find it easier to convert practice knowledge and skills into helping, than a relatively new social worker. In addition, although noted by only two participants, the issue of nationality presents a constraint to the functioning of helping, particularly for immigrants. The findings suggest that regardless of one's disposition toward helping if one is an immigrant, finding a job as a practising social worker in South Africa is likely to be a challenge. Immigrant social workers' freedom (agency) to convert their knowledge into effective helping is limited. This might not be uncommon in an unequal society such as South Africa, where issues of immigration and structures of race and social class are still vile (Walker, 2019).

At the organisational level, social workers' ability to transform means or inputs into helping and professional growth depends on organisational/institutional culture (norms and beliefs, supervisory style as well as the benefits and allowances), the practising context, (NGOs / private institutions vs government institutions, or the Department of Social Development) as well as the work environment or availability of resources (Chiappero & Salardi, 2007). The views that emerged from student and practising social workers suggest that some NGOs are better resourced than government institutions. Lack of resources as well as the social workers' constrained access to the few available resources leads to occupational stress and ill health, and consequently affects not only the extent to which social workers can intervene with service users, but also their own progress as professionals. Resource scarcity promotes inequalities in capabilities, freedom of agency as well as variations in conversion factors among social workers (Robeyns, 2016 Wang, 2011; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). As noted by Soylemez-Karakoc et al. (2024), conversion factors might not refer to inequalities per se, but in situations where basic resources are lacking, they can limit an individual's capacity to convert opportunities into achievements. Government organisations such as the DSD, which offers housing allowances, better salaries (as compared to some NGOs), vehicles and cell phones, indirectly enhance the helping functioning among workers. When motivated, social workers are more effective and efficient. However, neither a lack of resources nor social workers' limited access to resources is necessarily a problem of the organisations' own making. These challenges are a result of poor implementation of welfare policies and the inadequate funding of social welfare services by the government. The Department of Social Development is responsible for the funding of social welfare services by both public

institutions and registered not-for-profit organisations (Lombard, 2008; RSA, 1999; Skhosana et al., 2014). But as Lombard (2008, p. 124) notes:

*...in an attempt to redress the legacy of the past and the consequent inequalities in social welfare, in the first decade of democracy, the [South African] government allocated the bulk of its welfare resources to transforming the social security system at the expense of social service delivery. As a result, South Africa has a costly social security budget with social services on the brink of collapse, leaving social workers and other social service professionals with low morale in the face of the huge challenge of providing welfare services with scarce resources, especially in the non-government sector.*

In short, because the government prioritises the social security system, both public and private social service providers are underfunded. However, as shown in this work, to attain professional wellbeing, a certain threshold level of resources should be met. As Velaphi (2012) observes, if sufficient funding is not provided, some social service organisations might face closure. It is important to note that when assessing wellbeing (achieved or achievable), it is not sufficient to know how many resources a person owns or can use to lead a valuable life; rather we also need to know more about their access to those resources and the circumstances under which they live and work (Robeyns, 2011).

Some social workers pointed out that organisational culture, particularly the style of supervision, affected their ability to convert resources into helping and professional growth functionings. Some supervisors interfered with the social workers' affiliations (both professional and personal) as well as with how they function. All these findings point to the importance of an environment conducive to productive working as a necessary condition for effective helping and professional growth. This calls for positive interventions by both the South African government and welfare organisations.

The collective features of the profession, such as policies, values and principles, can also enhance effective helping as well as professional growth among social workers. However, on the flip side, structural factors such as poverty and inequalities interfere with the achievement of those functionings by social workers. Whilst operating with limited resources has become the norm, systemic poverty and its attendant challenges provide a significant constraint to those two functionings among social workers in South Africa. This calls for better social welfare policies which factor in the prevalence of the particular challenges of poverty and inequality. The South African government should strive to implement its welfare policies in a way that would ensure positive and sustainable functioning among social workers. It should adequately finance its welfare system and ensure that the relevant organisations have adequate resources. Also, social welfare organisations should promote conditions that enhance the achievement of professionals' valued functionings and overall personal wellbeing. Future research can focus on various interventions that can be employed at all levels to advance professional wellbeing.

## CONCLUSION

This paper focused on social workers' professional wellbeing in South Africa. It identified social workers' valued professional functionings, namely helping and professional growth. The findings suggest that social workers are achieving these functionings in a very minimal sense. Various factors interfere with the achievement of their professional goals and overall wellbeing. The factors are either personal, organisational or structural. This study has shown that to function well and flourish as professionals, social workers need a certain amount of resources (at work and in their private lives). Without access to basic resources such as telephones, printers, laptops, fax machines and vehicles, social workers cannot effectively help clients. Similarly, although this is not the focus of the paper, without a decent salary social workers can hardly attain their personal goals (material achievements and personal growth). The factors that either constrain or enable social workers' ability to convert resources into professional functions operate at personal, organisational, and structural levels.

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