

# Occupational Stress and Altruistic Behavior in Social Work: An Analysis of Emotional Demands and Job Satisfaction

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between occupational stress and altruistic behavior among social workers. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design, data from 107 social workers were analyzed to examine correlations between time pressures, client prioritization, stress levels, burnout risk, and job satisfaction. The results show that while altruistic behavior enhances job satisfaction, it also contributes to stress and emotional exhaustion, particularly in early-career social workers. The findings highlight the importance of organizational interventions to mitigate burnout and support the well-being of social workers in high-demand environments.

**Keywords:** Occupational Stress, Altruistic Behavior, Burnout, Job Satisfaction, Social Work, Emotional Labor, Professional Experience, Gender Differences

## INTRODUCTION

Occupational stress and altruistic behavior are two central yet seemingly contradictory phenomena that shape the professional lives of social workers. The profession of social work requires practitioners to provide emotional, psychological, and social support to vulnerable populations, such as children, individuals in crisis, and marginalized groups (Banks, 2021; Ferguson et al., 2022). While the altruistic nature of social work fosters a strong sense of purpose, the emotional labor involved can lead to high levels of stress and burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). These dual pressures—helping others while managing personal stress—create a unique dynamic that warrants further investigation.

The issue of **occupational stress** is particularly pressing in the field of social work. Research consistently shows that social workers experience higher-than-average levels of emotional exhaustion, time pressure, and role ambiguity, which increases their risk of burnout (Lloyd et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2023). At the same time, **altruistic behavior**—defined as selfless actions aimed at benefiting others—remains a fundamental aspect of the profession (Grant, 2012). However, the relationship between these two variables is complex. While altruism can motivate social workers to engage deeply with their clients, it may also amplify emotional exhaustion when their efforts exceed their personal resources (Regehr & Bober, 2021).

Despite growing awareness of the challenges faced by social workers, the **academic discourse** around the intersection of occupational stress and altruistic behavior remains fragmented. Most existing studies either focus on burnout as a standalone phenomenon (Hakanen & Bakker, 2017) or examine altruistic tendencies without considering the emotional toll on practitioners (Penner et al., 2005). Few empirical studies explore the ways in which demographic factors—such as gender, age, and professional experience—moderate the relationship between stress and altruism in social work. This research gap limits the development of targeted interventions to improve social workers' well-being and job satisfaction.

The current study aims to address this gap by exploring the correlation between occupational stress and altruistic behavior among social workers. Using a sample of 30 social workers, we conducted a quantitative analysis to examine how factors such as time pressure, client needs, and burnout risks influence job satisfaction and altruistic tendencies. In particular, we investigate how demographic variables—such as gender, age, and professional experience—affect the interplay between stress and altruism.

## Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between occupational stress and altruistic behavior among social workers?
2. How do demographic factors such as gender, age, and professional experience influence stress levels and altruistic tendencies?
3. How do specific stressors—such as time pressures and burnout risks—impact job satisfaction and altruistic behavior?

## Hypotheses

Based on existing literature, we formulated the following hypotheses:

1. **H1:** There is a negative correlation between occupational stress and altruistic behavior.
2. **H2:** Social workers with more professional experience report lower stress levels and higher job satisfaction compared to less experienced workers.
3. **H3:** Female social workers experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout risk compared to male social workers.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The relationship between occupational stress and altruistic behavior is rooted in multiple theoretical perspectives across disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and occupational health. This section explores the key theories and concepts that underpin our study, including the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, emotional labor theory, and altruism theory. These frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of how stress affects social workers and how altruistic behavior can either mitigate or exacerbate occupational stress.

### Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R)

One of the most widely used models to explain occupational stress and burnout is the **Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model** developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007). The JD-R model posits that every occupation has unique job demands (e.g., workload, emotional demands) and job resources (e.g., support, autonomy). When job demands exceed the available resources, employees experience stress, which can lead to burnout. Conversely, when resources are adequate, employees can remain motivated and engaged (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

In the context of social work, job demands include time pressures, emotional exhaustion, and the need to manage complex client situations. These demands are often compounded by limited resources, such as insufficient staff, lack of supervisory support, and high caseloads (Hakanen & Bakker, 2017). Social workers who lack the necessary resources to cope with these demands are more likely to experience burnout, which negatively impacts their altruistic behavior (Lloyd et al., 2021). Research has shown that the JD-R model is particularly relevant in professions involving emotional labor. For example, Xanthopoulou et al. (2009) found that job resources, such as peer support and professional development opportunities, can buffer the impact of job demands on burnout in helping professions. Applying the JD-R model to social work highlights the importance of organizational interventions aimed at enhancing job resources to reduce stress and sustain altruistic behavior.

### Emotional Labor Theory

The concept of **emotional labor** was first introduced by Hochschild (1983) to describe the process of managing emotions to fulfill the emotional requirements of a job. Emotional labor involves both **surface acting** (displaying emotions that are not genuinely felt) and **deep acting** (attempting to feel the required emotions). In social work, emotional labor is an inherent part of daily interactions with clients, as social workers are expected to

demonstrate empathy, compassion, and understanding, even in emotionally taxing situations (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003). Emotional labor can contribute to both occupational stress and burnout. Studies have shown that surface acting is associated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion and lower job satisfaction, whereas deep acting can have a more positive impact on well-being (Grandey, 2000; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011). However, both forms of emotional labor require significant emotional resources, which can be depleted over time, especially in high-stress environments (Zapf et al., 2021). Social workers' altruistic behavior is closely tied to emotional labor. The desire to help others often drives social workers to go beyond their formal job descriptions, even at the expense of their own well-being (O'Brien, 2019). This altruistic motivation can lead to **compassion fatigue**, a state of emotional exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to clients' trauma and suffering (Figley, 2002). While altruism is a key protective factor against burnout, it can also become a risk factor when social workers prioritize their clients' needs over their own (Penner et al., 2005).

## Altruism Theory

Altruism theory explores the motivation behind selfless actions aimed at benefiting others. In social psychology, altruism is often defined as prosocial behavior motivated by a concern for others' welfare, without expecting external rewards (Batson, 2011). Altruistic behavior is a core component of social work, as practitioners are driven by a desire to make a positive difference in the lives of others. Batson's (1991) empathy-altruism hypothesis suggests that altruistic behavior is driven by feelings of empathy and compassion. When individuals empathize with others' suffering, they are more likely to engage in selfless actions to alleviate that suffering. However, excessive altruism can lead to self-sacrificing behaviors, which may increase the risk of burnout and emotional exhaustion (Post, 2005). In occupational settings, altruism is often linked to **intrinsic motivation**, which refers to the internal drive to perform a task for its inherent satisfaction rather than external rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Social workers often report high levels of intrinsic motivation, which is associated with greater job satisfaction and resilience to stress (Grant, 2012). However, research has shown that when intrinsic motivation is not balanced with adequate self-care and organizational support, it can lead to negative outcomes such as **overcommitment** and **burnout** (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010).

## The Interaction of Stress and Altruism in Social Work

The interplay between occupational stress and altruistic behavior in social work is complex and multifaceted. While altruistic behavior can provide social workers with a sense of purpose and fulfillment, it can also exacerbate stress when emotional resources are depleted. Several studies have found that social workers with higher altruistic tendencies are more likely to experience compassion fatigue (Bride et al., 2007; Stamm, 2010). This suggests that while altruism is a protective factor against burnout, it can also become a risk factor if not carefully managed.

Conversely, some research suggests that altruistic behavior can act as a buffer against occupational stress. For example, Penner et al. (2005) found that individuals who engage in prosocial behavior experience higher levels of psychological well-being, even in high-stress professions. Similarly, a study by Masten (2014) found that social workers who perceive their work as meaningful are more likely to remain resilient in the face of stress.

The balance between altruism and self-care is crucial in social work practice. Organizations that provide social workers with opportunities for self-reflection, supervision, and emotional support can help mitigate the negative effects of occupational stress and enhance the sustainability of altruistic behavior (Regehr & Glancy, 2021). Without such support, social workers risk experiencing emotional depletion, which can reduce their capacity to engage in altruistic actions and ultimately impact the quality of care provided to clients (Collins, 2020).

## METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the research design, data collection process, sample characteristics, and analysis procedures employed to explore the relationship between occupational stress and altruistic behavior among social workers. The study used a **quantitative survey-based approach** to collect data from **107 participants** working in various social work settings. The methodology ensures a rigorous approach to answering the research questions while maintaining reliability and validity.

## Research Design

The study followed a cross-sectional quantitative research design to examine correlations between occupational stress and altruistic behavior. A survey questionnaire was distributed to participants to measure key variables such as time pressures, client needs, perceived stress levels, burnout risk, and job satisfaction. The primary objective of this study was to identify how demographic factors such as gender, age, and professional experience influence social workers' experiences of occupational stress and their willingness to engage in altruistic behavior. A correlational analysis was conducted to explore the relationships between these variables.

## Sample Characteristics

The sample consisted of 107 social workers from a variety of professional backgrounds. The participants were recruited through online distribution channels and physical postings in social service institutions. The sample included diverse demographic groups based on gender, age, and years of professional experience. The demographic breakdown of the sample is presented in the following tables.

Table 1: Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Female	61	57.0
Male	36	33.6
Diverse	11	10.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 2: Age Distribution

Age Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
25-34 years	39	36.4
35-44 years	43	40.2
45-55 years	25	23.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 3: Professional Experience

Years of Experience	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>1-5 years</b>	29	27.1
<b>6-10 years</b>	32	29.9
<b>11-15 years</b>	25	23.4
<b>&gt;15 years</b>	21	19.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The data were collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire designed to measure five key variables related to occupational stress and altruistic behavior. The questionnaire was distributed using Google Forms, and

participants could access the survey via a shared link or QR code. The survey included five core items, each measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated "strongly disagree" and 5 indicated "strongly agree." The questions focused on the following areas:

- **F1: Willingness to spend additional time with clients**
- **F2: Prioritization of client needs over personal well-being**
- **F3: Perceived stress level at work**
- **F4: Risk of burnout**
- **F5: Overall job satisfaction**

In addition to these core questions, participants were asked to provide **demographic information** regarding their gender, age, and years of professional experience.

The variables used in this study are outlined below. Each variable was measured using the **Likert scale** responses from the survey.

Variable	Description	Scale
F1: Time	Willingness to spend additional time with clients	Likert Scale (1-5)
F2: Client Needs	Prioritization of client needs over personal well-being	Likert Scale (1-5)
F3: Stress	Perceived stress level at work	Likert Scale (1-5)
F4: Burnout Risk	Self-assessed risk of burnout	Likert Scale (1-5)
F5: Satisfaction	Overall job satisfaction	Likert Scale (1-5)

These variables were selected to capture critical aspects of occupational stress and altruistic behavior that are relevant to social work practice.

This study adhered to **ethical research guidelines** to protect the rights and well-being of participants. Ethical considerations included the following:

1. **Voluntary Participation:** Participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences.
2. **Informed Consent:** All participants provided informed consent before completing the survey.
3. **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** The data were collected anonymously, and the responses were kept confidential. The information was used solely for academic purposes and stored securely.

## RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study, focusing on the relationship between occupational stress and altruistic behavior among social workers. The analysis includes descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and comparisons based on gender and professional experience. The results provide insights into the emotional challenges faced by social workers and the factors that contribute to stress, burnout, and job satisfaction.

### Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive analysis shows that social workers consistently prioritize their clients' needs and dedicate additional time to their clients beyond their formal duties. The highest mean score was recorded for prioritization

of client needs (F2) at 3.73, indicating a strong client-centered focus. The average score for time spent with clients (F1) was 3.47, suggesting that participants often go beyond their scheduled working hours to support their clients. However, these altruistic behaviors are accompanied by relatively high stress levels (F3) and burnout risk (F4), with mean scores of 3.67 and 3.30, respectively. Despite these stressors, social workers reported a moderate level of job satisfaction (F5), with an average score of 3.33.

When broken down by gender, female social workers reported slightly higher scores for stress levels and burnout risk compared to their male counterparts, with mean values of 3.71 and 3.35, respectively. In contrast, male social workers reported higher job satisfaction at 3.40 compared to 3.29 for female participants. The diverse participants in the sample showed relatively balanced scores across all dimensions, although their score for prioritization of client needs was slightly lower, at 3.33.

Question	Overall Mean	Female	Male	Diverse
F1: Willingness to spend additional time	3.47	3.52	3.40	3.33
F2: Prioritization of client needs	3.73	3.82	3.70	3.33
F3: Perceived stress level	3.67	3.71	3.60	3.67
F4: Risk of burnout	3.30	3.35	3.20	3.33
F5: Job satisfaction	3.33	3.29	3.40	3.33

### Correlational Analysis

The correlation analysis reveals significant relationships between the core variables. The correlation matrix shows a strong positive correlation between time spent with clients (F1) and job satisfaction (F5), with  $r = 0.71$ , indicating that social workers who invest more time in their clients tend to experience higher job satisfaction. However, a negative correlation between time spent with clients and stress levels (F3) ( $r = -0.62$ ) suggests that this behavior may also contribute to emotional exhaustion. The strongest correlation was observed between stress levels (F3) and burnout risk (F4), with  $r = 0.82$ , confirming that high stress levels significantly increase the likelihood of burnout. Conversely, job satisfaction (F5) showed negative correlations with both stress levels (F3) ( $r = -0.69$ ) and burnout risk (F4) ( $r = -0.75$ ), indicating that reducing stress and burnout is essential for maintaining job satisfaction among social workers.

Variable	F1: Time	F2: Needs	F3: Stress	F4: Burnout	F5: Satisfaction
F1: Time	1.00	0.65	-0.62	-0.78	0.71
F2: Needs	0.65	1.00	-0.45	-0.56	0.58
F3: Stress	-0.62	-0.45	1.00	0.82	-0.69
F4: Burnout	-0.78	-0.56	0.82	1.00	-0.75
F5: Satisfaction	0.71	0.58	-0.69	-0.75	1.00

### Analysis by Professional Experience

The analysis based on years of professional experience shows that early-career social workers are more vulnerable to stress and burnout. Participants with 1-5 years of experience reported the highest stress levels and burnout risk, with mean scores of 4.10 for both variables. This suggests that younger social workers may struggle more with managing emotional labor and balancing work demands. In contrast, social workers with more than 15 years of experience reported the lowest stress levels (3.30) and burnout risk (2.80), as well as the highest job satisfaction (3.50). These findings indicate that professional experience serves as a protective factor, allowing

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social workers to develop better coping mechanisms over time and manage their workload more effectively.

Overall, the results indicate that experience in the field is a key factor in reducing emotional exhaustion and improving job satisfaction. Social workers with more experience are better equipped to handle the emotional demands of their roles, which helps them maintain resilience in high-stress environments.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide important insights into the relationship between occupational stress and altruistic behavior among social workers. The findings confirm that while altruistic behavior is a key motivator in social work, it also contributes to increased stress levels and burnout risk when social workers lack sufficient coping resources. This section discusses the key patterns identified in the study, connecting them to existing literature and highlighting practical implications for social work practice.

### Altruistic Behavior as a Double-Edged Sword

Social workers demonstrate a strong willingness to prioritize their clients' needs, as reflected in the high scores for F2: Prioritization of client needs and F1: Time spent with clients. This altruistic behavior aligns with previous studies that highlight the importance of intrinsic motivation in helping professions (Grant, 2012; Batson, 2011). However, this study also reveals that altruistic tendencies can increase occupational stress when emotional resources are depleted. The negative correlation between time spent with clients and stress levels indicates that overextending oneself may contribute to emotional exhaustion, a phenomenon often referred to as compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002). The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) offers a useful framework for understanding this dynamic. High job demands, such as emotional labor and time pressures, increase the risk of burnout, especially when job resources are limited. The correlation between burnout risk and stress levels in this study supports this model. However, the positive correlation between time spent with clients and job satisfaction suggests that altruism can also provide a protective factor by enhancing social workers' sense of purpose and fulfillment (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

### Stress and Burnout in Social Work

Occupational stress and burnout remain critical challenges for social workers. The mean score for perceived stress level (F3) of 3.67 indicates that social workers experience moderate to high stress levels, with younger and less experienced professionals reporting the highest stress levels. The strong positive correlation between stress levels and burnout risk underscores the link between emotional exhaustion and the demands of social work (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). These findings highlight the need for interventions aimed at reducing stress through better support systems, such as supervision, peer support, and workload management (Regehr & Glancy, 2021). Interestingly, this study found a negative correlation between job satisfaction and both stress levels and burnout risk. This suggests that reducing occupational stress is essential for maintaining social workers' well-being. The literature confirms that intrinsic rewards, such as the sense of making a meaningful impact, can buffer the effects of stress and promote resilience (Teater, 2019).

### Gender and Experience as Moderating Factors

The study also reveals important gender differences in occupational stress. Female social workers reported higher stress levels and burnout risk compared to male participants, consistent with research on gendered experiences of emotional labor (Grandey, 2000). Women in social work are often expected to engage in deep acting, a form of emotional labor that involves aligning internal feelings with professional expectations (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). While this can enhance empathy, it also requires significant emotional effort, increasing the risk of emotional exhaustion (Zapf et al., 2021). Professional experience emerged as a key protective factor against stress and burnout. Social workers with more than 15 years of experience reported the lowest stress levels and highest job satisfaction. This aligns with resilience theory, which posits that individuals develop coping mechanisms over time (Masten, 2014). Experienced social workers may also benefit from greater autonomy and emotional regulation skills, which help them manage their workloads more effectively (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009).

## Practical Implications

The findings suggest several practical implications for social work organizations. Reducing occupational stress requires enhancing job resources, such as supervision, emotional support, and professional development opportunities. Providing targeted interventions, such as stress management programs and emotional labor training, can help mitigate burnout risk. Additionally, promoting work-life balance and encouraging self-care practices are essential strategies to improve social workers' well-being (Regehr & Bober, 2021). Organizations should also consider gender-specific approaches to address the unique challenges faced by female social workers. Creating a supportive organizational culture that acknowledges the emotional demands of the profession can help reduce the emotional burden and enhance job satisfaction. In conclusion, while altruistic behavior is a core component of social work, it must be balanced with adequate support systems to prevent burnout and ensure sustainable practice. The next section will summarize the study's key findings and propose directions for future research.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study demonstrates that altruistic behavior in social work can both enhance job satisfaction and increase stress and burnout risk when emotional and organizational resources are insufficient. Social workers who prioritize their clients' needs tend to find meaning and fulfillment in their roles, but prolonged exposure to emotionally demanding situations without support can lead to emotional exhaustion and compassion fatigue. The strong correlations between stress levels, burnout risk, and job satisfaction highlight the need for systematic interventions to improve social workers' well-being.

Organizations must provide adequate job resources, including supervision, peer support, and stress management programs, to help social workers manage the emotional demands of their roles. Encouraging work-life balance and promoting self-care practices are essential strategies to prevent burnout. Addressing gender-specific challenges, especially for female social workers, is also critical to reduce the emotional labor burden and enhance resilience. Future research should focus on long-term studies to explore how stress and altruism evolve over time and assess the effectiveness of organizational interventions. Investigating the impact of organizational culture on social workers' well-being can further contribute to developing sustainable practices in the field. Supporting social workers through targeted interventions ensures their emotional health and professional effectiveness in a demanding profession.

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