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Compassion Satisfaction Among Social Work Practitioners: The Role of Work–Life Balance

Junghee Bae, Porter F. Jennings, Christi P. Hardeman, Eunhye Kim, Megan Lee, Tenesha Littleton, and Sherinah Saas

School of Social Work, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, USA; School of Social Work, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, USA

ABSTRACT
Previous research has established that social work practitioners are especially vulnerable to work-related psychological distress and burnout due to the high-stress nature of the profession, yet less research has focused on examining factors associated with social worker retention. Emerging research on compassion satisfaction suggests that this factor could mitigate professional burnout, yet there is a gap in research focusing explicitly on examining compassion satisfaction among social workers. To address this gap in knowledge, this quantitative study collected survey data on practicing social workers who were alumni from a large southeastern university (n = 120) to examine individual and organizational factors associated with compassion satisfaction. Multiple regression analyses revealed that higher levels of emotional intelligence, perceived work autonomy, and perceived work–life balance were associated with an increase in compassion satisfaction among experienced, licensed social work practitioners. Findings have implications for how social work employers can promote compassion satisfaction through cultivating emotional intelligence among practitioners, allowing social workers autonomy in decision making, and providing supportive work environments. Recommended directions for future research include longitudinal studies with large sample sizes that expound research on compassion satisfaction by examining the role of additional factors, such as client population, job role characteristics, and supervisor support.

KEYWORDS
Social work practitioners; compassion satisfaction; work–life balance; work autonomy; emotional intelligence

Introduction
Social work is a profession committed to addressing some of the most challenging social problems in the world, including oppression, discrimination, poverty, and mental health issues.

When addressing these complex issues, social work practitioners often experience stressful work environments where they are met with high needs and limited resources. These factors increase their risk of experiencing job-related psychological distress and burnout (Adams, Boscarno, & Figley, 2006; Bride, 2007; Sanchez-Moreno, de La Fuente Roldan, Gallardo-Peralta & de Roda, 2015). Burnout is broadly defined as “a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with other people in some capacity” (Zalaquett & Wood, 1997, p. 192), and can manifest in symptoms such as “chronic physical and emotional fatigue, the depletion of the empathic resources and of compassion, boredom, cynicism, diminution of enthusiasm, temporary distress and depression” (Diaconescu, 2015, p. 57). These adverse responses can also lead professionals to experience feelings of professional failure that can be expressed in negative attitudes toward the people they serve. Therefore, understanding potential protective factors that prevent burnout is necessary not only for the well-being of social work practitioners, but also for the protection of clients they serve.

Although much of the existing research in social work has focused on risk factors that increase burnout (such as work overload, insufficient resources, traumatic stress, compassion
fatigue, and negative relationship with coworkers and managers; Butler, Carello, & Maguin, 2017; Kim, 2011; Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002; McFadden, 2018; Simon, Pryce, Roff, & Klemmack, 2006), a few studies have used a strengths-based lens to focus on examining protective factors that mitigate burnout. Such studies have identified a negative relationship between burnout and compassion satisfaction among social work practitioners (Cummings, Singer, Hisaka, & Benuto, 2018, Stamm, 2002), and have suggested that compassion satisfaction may mitigate the undesired effects of burnout in the social work profession (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Cummings et al., 2018). However, despite the empirical evidence that increased rates of compassion satisfaction are associated with lower rates of burnout (Butler et al., 2017; Rossi et al., 2012; Wagaman, Geiger, Shockley & Segal, 2015), there is a limited amount of research that has examined compassion satisfaction as a potential protective factor associated with burnout reduction among social work practitioners specifically. Research examining factors that promote compassion satisfaction has important implications, as this knowledge can be used to protect social work practitioners against burnout and improve the well-being of both social work practitioners and the clients they serve. To respond to the above identified gap in knowledge, the aim of this study is to examine factors that can increase compassion satisfaction among social work practitioners.

**Compassion satisfaction**

Compassion satisfaction is defined as “the level of satisfaction helping professionals find in their job and the degree to which they feel successful in their job” (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006, p. 1074), and presents as “motivation, stamina, interest, and a sense of accomplishment in aiding clients” (Wagaman et al., 2015, p. 203). This concept encompasses the rewards social workers receive from observing improvements in client functioning and growth, as the practitioner often shares in experiencing the clients’ feelings of empowerment, energy, and exhilaration (Rossi et al., 2012). When social workers experience compassion satisfaction, they also often experience increased positive perceptions of their work, which can result in enhanced professional practice (Wagaman et al., 2015).

**Factors associated with compassion satisfaction**

Studies have identified several primary factors associated with the concept of compassion satisfaction, including emotional intelligence, work autonomy, and work–life balance (Athey et al., 2016; Ingram, 2013; Saragih, 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014).

**Emotional intelligence**

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to control individual emotions, the ability to influence others’ emotions, and the utilization of emotions in problem-solving contexts (Balakrishnan & Saklofske, 2015). It has been identified as a “key predictor of adaptive coping and interpersonal success in the workplace,” and is thought to “enhance life satisfaction and psychological and physical health” (Kinman & Grant, 2011, p. 263). Emotional intelligence has been established as a core component of social work practice, yet little research has examined the specific relationship between emotional intelligence and compassion satisfaction among social workers (Ingram, 2013).

**Work autonomy**

Work autonomy refers to the amount of control that individuals believe they have in their job to make work-related decisions and includes issues such as the perception of “workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values” (Whitebird, Asche, Thompson, Rossom & Heinrich, 2013). Research on helping professionals (such as nurses and teachers) concludes that work autonomy has been known to increase job satisfaction (Athey et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). Additionally, research has found high levels of work autonomy to be associated with factors that positively impact job performance, including increased motivation and satisfaction, more control over job stress, and reduced work and family conflict (Saragih, 2011). However, the effects of work autonomy on
compassion satisfaction among social work practitioners have not yet been comprehensively explored.

**Work–life balance**

Work–life balance is an additional factor that has been associated with job satisfaction (Orkibi & Brandt, 2015). As professions experience the impact of demographic shifts that include younger generations of employers within a society of changing gender and familial norms, concerns regarding manageable lifestyle factors that allow for a balance between work and personal life have been placed at high priority in choosing a profession (Keeton, Fenner, Johnson & Hayward, 2007). However, although recent studies have shown that work–life balance plays a critical role in increasing general job satisfaction (Athey et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014), there has yet to be extensive research conducted on the impact of work–life balance among social work practitioners specifically.

**Summary of the literature and identified gaps**

In summary, review of the literature reveals that there is empirical evidence to suggest that compassion satisfaction could mitigate burnout among social workers (Cummings et al., 2018; Stamm, 2002), but there is a lack of research comprehensively examining factors that can promote compassion satisfaction in this specific profession (Butler et al., 2017; Rossi et al., 2012; Wagaman et al., 2015). Furthermore, while emotional intelligence, work autonomy, and work–life balance have been associated with increased compassion satisfaction among general employees, there is a lack of studies examining the association of these factors among social work practitioners. Based on these identified gaps in the literature, the purpose of this study is to explore individual and organizational factors that are associated with compassion satisfaction among social work practitioners. Specifically, this study examines the relationship between emotional intelligence, work autonomy, work–life balance, and compassion satisfaction to generate findings that can enhance social work practice and guide future research in this area.

**Theoretical foundations**

To more thoroughly understand the factors that are related to compassion satisfaction, this study applied two prominent theories from the literature to identify factors that promote compassion satisfaction: the job-demands resource (JD-R) model and the conservation of resources (COR) theory.

**The job-demands resource model**

The JD-R model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001) has been used to examine the influence of internal and external resources on employee wellbeing (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). This model proposes that when job demands (e.g., physical workload, time pressure) are high, and job resources (e.g., rewards, supervisor support) are low, employees respectively experience exhaustion and disengagement that result in burnout. However, while the JD-R model provides a framework for understanding burnout as a consequence of an imbalance between job demands and resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), it fails to highlight the role of internal resources (e.g., strong coping skills, social support), which research has shown to be correlated with the burnout process (Alvaro et al., 2010). Therefore, as suggested by Ojedokun and Idemudia (2014), this study builds upon the JD-R model by incorporating COR theory’s inclusion of personal and social resources in order to more thoroughly examine compassion satisfaction.

**The conservation of resources theory**

The COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) is an integrated stress model positing that individuals seek to obtain and conserve resources, and the loss of or threat to such resources in the workplace results in stress that may lead to job dissatisfaction. However, while the COR theory does examine the personal and social resources not included in the JD-R model, it only examines factors in relation to burnout, and not the inverse relations resulting in compassion satisfaction.
Integrated resource model on compassion satisfaction

Due to the above-identified gaps in these existing theories, this study proposes a novel integrated resource model on compassion satisfaction. This model suggests that emotional intelligence (e.g., individual resource), work autonomy (e.g., organizational resource), and work–life balance (e.g., individual and organizational resources) are all factors that may influence compassion satisfaction. Figure 1 presents this integrated conceptual model to enhance understanding of the combined influence of these variables on compassion satisfaction.

Research questions and hypotheses

Informed by the above-discussed theoretical foundations and the integrated resource model on compassion satisfaction, the following research question was generated to guide this study: What factors determine compassion satisfaction among social workers? Based on the review of existing research, the following hypotheses emerged:

1. Emotional intelligence will be positively associated with compassion satisfaction.
2. Work autonomy will be positively associated with compassion satisfaction.
3. Work–life balance dimensions will be associated with compassion satisfaction as follows: work interference with personal life and personal life interference with work will be negatively associated with compassion satisfaction, and work/personal life enhancement will be positively associated with compassion satisfaction.

Methods

Sample

This study utilized a convenience sampling strategy consisting of social work graduates from a large southeastern university who graduated between 1961 and 2016, and who registered their email on the alumni networking database. All registered alumni were emailed an invitation to complete the survey voluntarily, and a preliminary qualifying question allowed only currently practicing social work alumni to complete the survey. A total of 120 participants responded ($N = 120$). 91% ($n = 109$) of participants were female with an average of 36.5 years of age ($SD = 12.6$; range = 23–75). 86.7% ($n = 104$) of the participants identified as white, 8.3% ($n = 10$) identified as black, 5% ($n = 6$) identified as “other.” Approximately 77% ($n = 92$) of the participants reported current active social work licensure status, and 23% ($n = 28$) did not report active licensure status. 65% ($n = 78$) of participants reported engagement in direct practice with clients at the time of the survey, while 35% ($n = 42$) of participants engaged in indirect practice.

Instruments

The survey questionnaire was created using existing validated instruments designed to examine the following factors: compassion satisfaction, emotional intelligence, work autonomy, work–life balance, and socioeconomic characteristics.

Compassion satisfaction

One of the three concepts measured in the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL; Stamm, 2010) is compassion satisfaction. This concept was
assessed using participant ratings in response to statements in the ProQOL related to key constructs of compassion satisfaction using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). An example of a statement on this scale is: I get satisfaction from being able to [help] people. Higher scores indicate that a person finds greater satisfaction in his or her ability to be an effective caregiver in his or her professional role. The Cronbach’s alpha for our sample was .92, which was comparable to that of .88 found by Stamm.

**Emotional intelligence**

Emotional intelligence was measured using the Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale (BEIS-10; Davies, Lane, Devonport, & Scott, 2010). The shortened scale was adapted from the original 33-item Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS; Schutte et al., 1998) and Salovey and Mayer’s (1990) Emotional Intelligence Framework. The BEIS-10 includes 10 statements (e.g., I know why my emotions change) and uses a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Responses were reverse coded such that high scores on all items indicated higher emotional intelligence (z = .68).

**Work autonomy**

Work autonomy was measured using Breaugh’s (1999) Work Autonomy Scale. This scale consists of nine items on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). The scale measures three dimensions of autonomy: methods autonomy (e.g., I am allowed to decide how to go about getting my job done), scheduling autonomy (e.g., I have control over the scheduling of my work), and criteria autonomy (e.g., My job allows me to modify the normal way we are evaluated so that I can emphasize some aspects of my job and play down others). Higher scores reflected greater levels of work autonomy. The Cronbach’s alpha was .91, which was comparable to the reliability reported by Breaugh.

**Work–life balance**

Hayman’s (2005) Work–life Balance Scale was used to measure work–life balance. This scale consists of three dimensions: work interference with personal life (WIPL; e.g., personal life suffers because of work), personal life interference with work (PLIW; e.g., personal life drains me of energy for work), and work/personal life enhancement (WPLE; e.g., personal life gives me energy for my job). The scale consists of fifteen items and is measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (almost all of the time; Agha, Azmi & Irfan, 2017). The WIPL and PLIW sub-scale items with higher means indicate lower levels of work–life balance. However, higher means on the WPLE sub-scale indicate higher levels of perceived WLB. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficients in the sample for WIPL (.79), PLIW (.84), and WPLE (.80) were comparable to those reported by Hayman.

**Sociodemographic variables**

Several sociodemographic factors were included as control variables in analyses: gender (male = 0, female = 1), race (White = 0, Black = 1, other races = 2), marital status (single = 0, married = 1, other = 2), length of professional social work practice (in years), and currently a licensed social worker (yes = 0, no = 1). Also, practice role indicating whether participants worked directly with clients or in indirect services (such as management, supervision, planning, etc.) was coded as a binary measure (direct practice = 0, indirect practice = 1).

**Procedures**

Data were collected from January 9, 2017 to February 5, 2017 through an online survey using Qualtrics (2016). A link to the survey was sent to 2,100 potential participants who completed bachelor’s degree in social work (i.e., BSW) or/and master’s degree in social work (i.e., MSW) at a large southeastern university between 1961 and 2016 via email addresses obtained from an official school alumni list. Following standard protocol for online survey administration suggested by Dillman (2000), an initial pre-notice invitation email followed by another email a week later with the cover letter/invitation, and link to participate was used to collect the data. An
invitation to participate along with the survey link was also posted on social media (Twitter and Facebook) at the time the invitation email was sent out. To decrease respondent burden and increase the likelihood of participation, the survey instrument was designed to not be too long, approximately 15 minutes to complete (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014).

All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS, Version 22. Univariate, bivariate and multivariate analyses were performed on the data. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) and Pearson correlations were used to examine the bivariate relationship between the dependent variable and each independent variable. Multiple regression analysis was used to analyze the relationship between the continuous dependent variable, compassion satisfaction, and the independent variables (i.e., emotional intelligence, work autonomy, work–life balance) while controlling for sociodemographic characteristics. A power analysis using G*Power 3.1 software suggested a sample size of 95 in order to detect medium-sized effects given our modeling strategy (linear modeling approach with 11 predictors, detection of effect sizes .30 or greater), which was achieved in our sample size (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner & Lang, 2009).

Results

Descriptive analysis

A brief summary of descriptive statistics is presented in Table 1. Overall, participants reported levels of compassion satisfaction at a mean score of 38 (SD = 12.2). Respondents in this study scored a mean of 37.1 (SD = 12.4) on emotional intelligence and 5.1 (SD = 1.3) on work autonomy. Regarding the sub-scales of work–life balance, they reported an average work interference with personal life of 2.5 (SD = 0.7), personal life interference with work of 1.8 (SD = 0.7) and work/personal life enhancement of 3.3 (SD = 0.8).

Bivariate analysis

The results of bivariate analysis between compassion satisfaction and each independent variable are shown in Table 2. The findings showed that at the bivariate level, emotional intelligence, work autonomy, work/personal life enhancement, years of practice experience, and active social work licensure status were all factors that positively correlated with compassion satisfaction ($p < .05$). Work interference with personal life and personal life interference with work were negatively correlated with compassion satisfaction ($p < .05$).

Multivariate analyses

Multivariate models of compassion satisfaction are presented in Table 3. In the first model which included emotional intelligence as an independent variable, emotional intelligence had a
significant, positive association with compassion satisfaction ($B = 0.729, p < .001$) after controlling for sociodemographic variables. In the second model (which included work autonomy as an independent variable) individuals who had higher work autonomy experienced a significantly higher level of compassion satisfaction ($B = 1.442, p < .01$) when controlling for sociodemographic variables. In the third model (which included three sub-scales of work–life balance) individuals who had higher personal life interference with work had a significantly lower level of compassion satisfaction ($B = -3.024, p < .01$). However, individuals who had higher work/personal life enhancement reported a higher level of compassion satisfaction ($B = 2.953, p < .001$). In the integrated model which included all three independent variables in this study, work autonomy ($B = 1.153, p < .01$) and work/personal life enhancement ($B = 2.534, p < .01$) were positively associated with compassion satisfaction. Also, there was a negative association between personal interference with work and compassion satisfaction ($B = -3.043, p < .01$). Emotional intelligence and work interference with personal life were not significant factors in the integrated model.

Table 3. Multivariate analyses of compassion satisfaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Emotional Intelligence Model</th>
<th>Work Autonomy Model</th>
<th>Work-life Balance Model</th>
<th>Integrated Model</th>
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<td>$SE$</td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
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<td>3.307</td>
<td>4.695</td>
<td>0.046</td>
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<td></td>
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<td><strong>Years of Practice</strong></td>
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<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
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</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Discussion

This study explored whether emotional intelligence, work autonomy, and work–life balance were factors that contributed to compassion satisfaction among social work practitioners. Results concluded that emotional intelligence, work autonomy, and work–life balance were all factors significantly associated with compassion satisfaction when controlling for gender, race, marital status, license status, practice role, and years of practice. These findings have important implications for combating burnout among social workers.

Regarding emotional intelligence, results showed that social workers who had higher emotional intelligence experienced more compassion satisfaction. This finding provides empirical evidence supporting a previous conceptual study by Ingram (2013), which argued that emotional intelligence among social workers contributes to the core process of social work practice and the development of positive interaction between practitioners and service users (Ingram, 2013). Additionally, findings are consistent with existing research by Grant, Kinman, and Alexander (2014), who concluded that developing emotional intelligence among social work students decreases their psychological distress (Grant et al., 2014). Having a greater insight into others’ and one’s own emotions during the helping process may improve a social worker’s ability to manage the stress that is associated with working with distressed clients thereby increasing compassion satisfaction. Consistent with Ingram’s findings, results from this study suggest that at the individual level, social workers should be encouraged to cultivate emotional intelligence as not only a relevant practice skill, but also as a...
protective factor that may increase professional longevity. Such a goal can be achieved through the increased inclusion of emotional intelligence content in social work undergraduate and graduate education, continuing education, and workplace training.

Regarding work autonomy, the results found that social workers who had a higher level of perceived work autonomy reported higher levels of compassion satisfaction. Findings are consistent with previous studies identifying a positive relationship between work autonomy and job satisfaction among other professions (Athey et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014), and provide empirical evidence expanding this conclusion to social work practitioners specifically. Prior research examining the relationship between social workers’ perceptions of their jobs and burnout found that social workers often experience ambiguous job roles and responsibilities, which can contribute to burnout (Lloyd et al., 2002). The finding that work autonomy was related to increased compassion satisfaction implies that when social workers perceive more independence and freedom to control tasks in their job role, they experienced a greater realization of fulfillment and efficacy in helping others. This finding suggests that employers should consider how to allow social workers more independence in decision making and more control over their work.

Regarding work–life balance, the results demonstrated that work/personal life enhancement was associated with higher levels of compassion satisfaction while personal life interference with work was associated with lower levels of compassion satisfaction. This lends support to existing literature on work–life balance, which found that employees’ perception of achieving work–life balance is associated with job satisfaction and mental wellbeing (Jang, Park & Zippay, 2011; Orkibi & Brandt, 2015), and provides evidence for social workers. The perception of work–life balance may be particularly salient for social workers who often work in human service organizations that are underfunded, understaffed, and highly bureaucratic (Lloyd et al., 2002). This finding suggests that employers should provide supportive work environments that minimize conflicts between personal life and work demands. Work–life balance programs and policies that promote self-care, flexible work scheduling, and family friendly leave policies might be considered to increase employee wellbeing (Jang et al., 2011).

These results have implications for how the executive directors of social service organizations should support their employees. They should promote emotional intelligence of employees, encourage work autonomy of employees, and secure better work–life balance through transformational leadership that empowers employees (Fisher, 2009). In contrast to transactional leadership based on rewards and punishment in return for doing a job, transformational leadership inspires employees, intellectually stimulates them, and considers them individually (Bass, 1999; Fisher, 2009). Based on this perspective, a leader is defined as “anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential” (Brown, 2018, p. 4). This transformational leadership style is congruent with social work principles that value the empowerment of individuals and the interaction of individuals in a system (Fisher, 2009) and has been known to increase compassion satisfaction among employees (Tafvelin, Hyvönen, & Westerberg, 2014). Rather than leaning on leadership styles based on compliance and control that uses fear to motivate employees (Brown, 2018), transformational leadership that inspires emotional intelligence and work autonomy of employees is needed for social work leaders to increase compassion satisfaction.

Limitations

While this study adds to the scant literature examining factors that contribute to compassion satisfaction among social workers, there are several noteworthy limitations. First, this study utilized a cross-sectional design, and thus causation cannot be assumed from the results (Rubin, 2013). Second, the sample size was limited, and additionally was largely homogenous in terms of race and gender in comparison to the general population, which thus limits generalizability. Lastly, this study did not examine client population, job role characteristics (e.g., workload,
time-consuming paperwork), or other organizational factors (e.g., social support from supervisor and coworkers) that could also contribute to compassion satisfaction among social workers.

**Conclusion**

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to a richer understanding of what factors contribute to compassion satisfaction among social workers that have been discussed little so far. This study found that emotional intelligence, work-autonomy, and work-life balance play important roles in increasing the compassion satisfaction of social workers. Examining compassion satisfaction shifts the narrative to a strengths-based perspective focused on what keeps social workers in the profession, and this knowledge can be used to increase retention. Furthermore, these findings suggest that transformational leadership that inspires employees is needed. Future research may contribute to the further understanding of compassion satisfaction among social workers by conducting a longitudinal study with larger sample size and examining other factors such as client population, job role characteristics, and support from supervisors and coworkers.

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**ORCID**

Tenisha Littleton [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0486-5402](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0486-5402)

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