

# A Phenomenological Study of Child Protection Social Workers' Experience of Job Risk and Burnout

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## *Abstract*

*Research on job risk and burnout in social work shows a notable gap in understanding these professionals' more profound lived experiences — how they make sense of their roles, responsibilities, and emotional labor within their specific lifeworlds. This article explores the lived experience of job risk and burnout among child protection social workers through Heideggerian phenomenology. Drawing on one of the authors' doctoral research projects in Seychelles using a phenomenological perspective with their existential concepts, such as being in the world, Dasein, Care, Fallenness, and Das Man, the paper shows how child protection social workers make sense of their professional challenges within institutional, social, and relational contexts. Findings from in-depth interviews reveal that burnout is not merely a consequence of workload or procedural stress but an existential experience shaped by emotional labor, public scrutiny, and structural constraints. The analysis highlights how interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of these practitioners' work intersect with ontological realities and how moments of authenticity and self-care serve as pathways toward resilience. The article underscores the relevance of interpretive phenomenology for deepening our understanding of the affective and relational fabric of social work practice. It also offers implications for organizational support and educational programs, advocating for greater integration of reflexive and phenomenological approaches in the training of social workers.*

## *Keywords*

*Heideggerian Phenomenology, Existential Vulnerability, Lived Experiences, Child Protection Social Workers, Reflexivity.*

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## Introduction

Social work is often perceived as a profession grounded in enduring values and standardized methods. However, as Navratil (1998) argues, the belief in the unchangeable character of social work can obscure the socio-political and cultural conditions that shape professional practice. When theory, values, and methods are treated as fixed and beyond discussion, there is a risk of suppressing reflexivity and reinforcing dominant models that may not serve all client groups equitably. Acknowledging the socially constructed nature of social work practice invites critical reflection on how broader societal forces shape professional identities, institutional expectations, and ethical commitments. This study contributes to this discourse by exploring how social workers construct meaning in their everyday professional lives under high emotional and ethical demands.

Child protection social work is globally recognized as one of the most demanding areas of professional practice due to the emotional, psychological, and ethical complexities involved. In contexts such as Seychelles (a small Island state along the Indian Ocean found in Africa), where child protection systems face unique socio-cultural and institutional challenges, these demands often manifest in elevated experiences of job-related risk and burnout among child protection social workers (CPSWs) (McFadden, 2015; Truter & Fouché, 2019; Boonzaaier et al., 2021).

In the context of Seychelles, socio-cultural issues, for example, the use of illicit drugs, which is a major social problem, cause abuse cases to persist (Orock & Nicette, 2022). In 2018, the Seychelles News Agency (SNA) reported that there was an increased rate of the use of heroin (Seychelles News Agency, 2018). A survey done by the Agency for the Prevention of Drug Abuse and Rehabilitation (APDAR) in 2017 showed that the population of heroin users aged 15 years and above is around 5000 people (Seychelles News Agency, 2018) out of the country's 95,000 people. Orock and Nicette (2022) identified that the increased use of cocaine and other illegal drugs in Seychelles has negative consequences for the health of the persons involved, their families, as well as society. Studies have shown that sexual abuse is a direct effect of drug and alcohol use, which also results in other delinquent behaviors (Dembo et al., 1990). Therefore, in Seychelles, child abuse cases persist because of this ongoing social problem. On the other hand, institutional challenges that cause CPSWs to experience elevated job risk and burnout experiences relate to a lack of effective interagency cooperation. Interagency cooperation or collaboration involves a network between all partners working with children (police, National Council for Children, Ministry of Education, etc.), but some role players are uncooperative in the child protection system (Orock et al., 2025). The above socio-cultural and institutional challenges are just a few examples that highlight the experiences of elevated job-risk and burnout among CPSWs in Seychelles.

Despite the growing literature on occupational stress and burnout in social work, a notable gap exists in understanding these professionals' more profound lived experi-

ences — how they make sense of their roles, responsibilities, and emotional labor within their specific lifeworlds (Murphy, 2023). While research on child protection social workers has established the prevalence of burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and occupational risk, most of this work has been conducted using quantitative measures such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory or cross-sectional surveys (e.g., McFadden et al., 2015; Hussein, 2018). These studies are valuable in mapping prevalence and correlations but often fail to capture the lived and situated nature of how risk and burnout are experienced in everyday practice. Qualitative research, though increasingly present, has tended to employ thematic analysis or grounded theory approaches (e.g., Ravalier, 2019), which privilege thematic categorization over phenomenological depth. To date, there is little evidence of published phenomenological studies that explore child protection workers' embodied and existential experiences of risk and burnout.

One exception in the broader social work field is Sultan and colleagues' (2023) phenomenological study of social work educators' compassion satisfaction, which demonstrates the value of phenomenology in surfacing nuanced meanings around professional identity and emotional experience. However, this work does not extend to the high-stakes and morally complex domain of child protection practice. This gap highlights the need for a phenomenological study that situates burnout and job risk within the everyday consciousness of child protection social workers, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how these phenomena are lived, negotiated, and given meaning in practice.

To respond to this gap, this study explores the applicability of interpretive phenomenology, precisely the Heideggerian approach, as a methodology capable of capturing the existential dimensions of CPSWs' experiences. We argue that interpretive phenomenology offers a rich, ontologically grounded perspective that enables researchers to engage with the lived, situated meanings embedded in the everyday professional lives of CPSWs. We seek to answer the following research questions: *How can interpretive phenomenology be applied to understand child protection social workers lived experience of job-related risk and burnout in Seychelles? What are the lived experiences of job-related risk and burnout of child protection social workers in Seychelles?*

In addressing this question, we aim to articulate the methodological coherence of using Heideggerian phenomenology and demonstrate how such an approach provides deep insights into social work practice's practical, relational, and ontological aspects. Firstly, from a practical point of view, this paper discusses child protection social workers' work, highlighting their roles/duties. From a relational standpoint, through the phenomenological perspective, we show how they relate with others and the world in which they live.

Finally, from the ontological perspective through phenomenology, we explore who child protection social workers are and how they understand being in the world. The paper presents a theoretical overview, outlines the methodological framework, and illustrates its application through findings from an empirical study involving CPSWs in Seychelles. The paper draws from data from one of the author's doctoral research projects.

## Theoretical Framework: Heideggerian Phenomenology (in Contrast with Husserlian Descriptive Phenomenology)

Phenomenological traditions in research have evolved along distinct trajectories, each offering particular ontological and epistemological assumptions. Among them, two influential strands — Husserlian descriptive phenomenology and Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology — represent contrasting yet complementary approaches to understanding human experience. While both share a commitment to exploring lived experience, they diverge in how this experience is conceptualized and methodologically approached. The following comparative overview serves to situate this study within the Heideggerian paradigm, highlighting the rationale behind this methodological orientation (Table 1).

| Aspect                  | Husserlian Phenomenology                            | Heideggerian Phenomenology                                    |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Focus                   | Consciousness and lived experience as phenomena     | Ontological Structures of Being (Dasein)                      |
| Method                  | Epoché (bracketing), reduction, search for essences | Hermeneutic interpretation, engagement with pre-understanding |
| Goal                    | Descriptive accuracy of phenomena as experienced    | Interpretive depth of Being-in-the-world                      |
| Researcher role         | Detached observer aiming for neutrality             | Engaged interpreter embedded in context                       |
| Conceptual tools        | Intentionality, essence, lifeworld                  | Dasein, authenticity, fallenness, care, temporality           |
| Relationship to context | Context is considered secondary to experience       | Context is integral to understanding Being                    |

Table 1 Key Differences between Husserlian and Heideggerian Phenomenology  
Adapted from Cerbone (2009), Lopez & Willis (2004), and Guignon (1999)

This comparison highlights the methodological rationale for choosing Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology in this study, given its capacity to uncover meaning beyond surface description and engage deeply with the existential dimensions of professional experience.

Phenomenology as a research tradition emphasizes understanding human experience from the perspective of those who live it. Within this tradition, Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology represents a significant shift from the descriptive emphasis of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology (Husserl, 1989). While Husserl's approach focuses on identifying the essential structures of consciousness through epoché and bracketing, aiming to describe phenomena as they appear to consciousness, Heidegger reorients phenomenology toward an ontological inquiry. His concern is not merely with

the contents of consciousness but with the nature of being itself. In this sense, Husserl asks, «What is experienced?» whereas Heidegger asks, «What does it mean to be the one who experiences?». Heidegger (1962, 1927/2011) focused on the ontological nature of human existence, positing that people are not isolated subjects but beings in the world (Dasein) — permanently already embedded in social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Key concepts of Heideggerian phenomenology include Dasein, being in the world, Das Man (the impersonal «they»), fallenness, authenticity, temporality, and care. These concepts enable a deeper analysis of how individuals interpret their lived experiences not as abstract events but as relational and situated phenomena (Cerbone, 2009; Guignon, 1999; Watts, 2001; Cohn, 2002). This shift also implies a methodological divergence: while Husserlian phenomenology seeks descriptive accuracy through reduction and detachment from presuppositions, Heideggerian phenomenology embraces pre-understandings and seeks interpretive depth grounded in existential engagement.

For instance, being in the world reflects the indivisible link between individuals and the context in which they live and work. In the context of social work, this resonates with the person-in-environment perspective and systemic approaches. Similarly, the concept of care (Sorge) captures the essence of human concern for oneself, others, and the world, echoing social work practice's humanistic and ethical commitments (Moran, 2000).

These theoretical underpinnings form the foundation upon which the present study applies interpretive phenomenology to explore CPSWs' experience of job risk and burnout. The aim is not merely to describe what CPSWs experience but to uncover the ontological meanings embedded in their narratives — how they exist and make sense of themselves through their roles, relationships, and encounters with institutional structures and public expectations.

## **Phenomenology for Understanding Job Risk and Burnout Experience of CPSWs**

Considering Heidegger's phenomenology above, we now discuss how the theoretical framework was applied in the doctoral research project investigating the job risk and burnout experience of CPSWs in Seychelles. It is worth noting that the lived experience of the everyday world revealed through consciousness is the basic focus of phenomenological inquiry. When undertaking phenomenological research, it is possible to understand the meanings and perceptions of the world of those under study. This is the foundation of an interpretive or Heideggerian hermeneutic approach.

As mentioned earlier, the Heideggerian theory is about the question of being (Heidegger, 2000). In the same way, the research project of the doctoral study looks at what it means to be a CPSW in the context of Seychelles. In line with Heideggerian phenom-

enology, the researchers are interested in exploring CPSWs' experiences and how they make meaning of these experiences as practitioners. That is how CPSWs understand the experience on the job, including the job risk and burnout in a fast-paced world. In the study, we focused on the meanings CPSWs attach to their experience in practice.

As we studied the experiences of CPSWs, we decided to operationalize the concepts of «job risk» and «burnout» to understand them as participants explained or gave meaning to them. We did not operationalize job risk or burnout using some measurable variables, but added it from participants' perceptions. Furthermore, we used a theory-generating approach from an epistemological standpoint where participants' views contributed to producing the theory.

There are methodological implications for using phenomenology in this study. Job risk and burnout are existential issues. They highlight the challenges of work-related demands among CPSWs and raise the aspect of their being in the world in that capacity. Another methodological implication for this study is the Heideggerian notion of intersubjectivity, which assumes a mutual relationship between the researcher and those who are researched. Here, the object-subject divide is reduced within the research relationship, and intersubjective experience from both parties is acknowledged as a great source of knowledge. In addition to Heidegger, Being-in-the-World is a holistic phenomenon (Heidegger, 2000). Being-in-the-World promoted research exploration of holistic life experiences, which includes, where appropriate, that of the researcher.

Therefore, the key phenomenological concepts included interpreting lived experience to access Being-in-the-World. The theory sought to acknowledge research participants' emotional, temporal, and socio-cultural experiences. Thus, in line with social work approaches, this research was holistic in its investigation.

### *Key Phenomenological Concepts Applied in the Study*

To guide the interpretive analysis of CPSWs' lived experiences, several key concepts from Heideggerian phenomenology were applied throughout this study. Their brief descriptions are provided below to clarify their relevance to the methodological and analytical orientation:

- *Dasein (Being-there)*: The human mode of existence; a being aware of and concerned with its being. It emphasizes that individuals are always situated in a context.
- *Being-in-the-world*: The inseparable unity of person and context, highlighting how people live through their environment rather than separate from it.
- *Das Man (the They)*: The anonymous social norms and expectations that shape individual behavior and obscure authentic existence.
- *Fallenness*: A state in which individuals conform to social conventions without self-reflection, leading to alienation from their authentic being.

- *Authenticity*: A mode of being in which one takes ownership of one's existence and acts according to one's values and understanding of self.
- *Care (Sorge)*: The fundamental structure of Dasein's relation to the world — how we are always already involved and concerned with ourselves, others, and the world.
- *Temporality*: The understanding that human existence is shaped by the past, present, and future in an interconnected temporal flow.

The aim is not merely to describe what CPSWs experience but to uncover the ontological meanings embedded in their narratives — how they exist and make sense of themselves through their roles, relationships, and encounters with institutional structures and public expectations.

## Research Design and Methodology

This study is qualitative research using Phenomenological methods. In the following section, we delve into the doctoral researchers' position during the research.

### *Researcher Positioning and Reflexivity*

One of the authors' (the doctoral researcher) interests in undertaking this research arises from her experience working as a school counselor in Seychelles. In her words, she says, during this time, I had to refer cases of child abuse to social workers at the Child Protection Unit. In identifying and offering early help before referral to the child protection unit, I often felt psychologically stressed by the children's narratives and, at other times, emotionally drained. I began to imagine how child protection social workers who addressed the case in detail felt during these times. This led to an interest in carrying out this study with CPSWs.

The choice of in-depth interviewing as a data collection method results from methodological appropriateness, and as a school counselor, I am comfortable with the interview process. As someone in practice in the human service sector, I felt familiar with aspects of the participants' stories of their lived experience of job risk and burnout, so my empathy was genuine. However, I attended to the tensions of multiple roles in the research process (as a researcher and an insider- someone working in the human service sector). As Moustakas (1990) pointed out, the researcher's role is not confined to only interactions with the participants in the interview context. However, the researcher (background, question, and research design) influences the whole process.

A key characteristic of Heidegger's phenomenological interview and research is the acceptance of the researcher's beliefs, experiences, and preconceptions as a legitimate

part of the research process (Lowes & Prowse, 2001). Therefore, the question is not whether the researcher affects the process or whether such an effect can be prevented (Matelrud, 2001). Reflexivity is a way to manage these methodological demands. According to Grbich (1999), reflexivity is a process of self-awareness that should clarify how one's beliefs have been socially constructed and how these values are impacting interaction and interpretation in research settings.

In my phenomenological research, I incorporated the epistemological concepts of intersubjectivity and reflexivity into research practice beyond the interviewer role. For example, in line with Moustakas (1990), I got involved in self-dialogue, aiming to acknowledge «Dasein» as being in the world and my commitment to the topic. The self-dialogue took the shape of a fieldwork journal and a reflective diary. I also engaged in dialogue with my supervisor, research collaborator, and the participants about values and assumptions about the research process and emerging findings.

Throughout the research process, I was supported and supervised by an academic advisor with expertise in phenomenology and social work, whose contributions helped to refine the methodological orientation, ensure epistemological clarity, and enhance reflexive rigor.

The reflexive stance aligns with Heidegger's concept of intersubjectivity and hermeneutic understanding. Intersubjectivity acknowledges that the values, experience, and knowledge the researcher brings to the research are unavoidable and can enhance the research relationship (Cohn, 2002).

Objective bracketing is not in accord with Heidegger's stance (Moran & Mooney, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). However, intersubjectivity creates an interpretive space. This interpretation focuses on multiple meanings, what is revealed and concealed, and goes beyond mere description of phenomena (Watts, 2001).

### *Phenomenological Approach*

This study adopts an interpretive phenomenological approach grounded in the hermeneutic philosophy of Martin Heidegger (Heidegger, 1962, 1927/2011). Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which seeks to bracket subjective biases to arrive at the essential structure of experience (Husserl, 1989; Moustakas, 1994), interpretive phenomenology assumes that all understanding is shaped by the interpreter's pre-understandings and existential positioning (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). In this view, the aim is not to abstract the essence of a phenomenon but to illuminate its meaning as it is lived and understood in context.

Key concepts such as Dasein (Being-there), Being-in-the-world, Das Man (the They), fallenness, authenticity, and care structure the analytical lens used in this study (Cerbone, 2009; Moran, 2000; Watts, 2001). These concepts help us understand how CPSWs are



not merely functionaries in a system but relational beings embedded in a complex web of professional, institutional, and community interactions (Guignon, 1999; Cohn, 2002).

### *Application to Research Design*

The empirical component of this study involved two rounds of in-depth interviews with eleven CPSWs in Seychelles (Charmaz, 2002). Interviews were conducted over five months, with the first round generating initial themes and the second round used for deepening interpretation and participant validation of emerging ideas. The selection of participants followed purposive sampling (deliberately selecting participants or cases that can provide detailed, in-depth insights) to ensure «information-rich» cases (Sarantakos, 2001). Information-rich cases are those individuals, groups, or settings that offer the most useful data because of their knowledge, experience, or unique position in relation to the research question (more from Patton, 2015).

The criterion for sampling choosing participants included the fact that they had to be a child protection social worker, with several months to several years of work experience, and have at least two years of training with a diploma in social work achieved after secondary education or a bachelor's degree in social work achieved after high school. However, it was realized in the study that the social workers had varied years of work experience, which did not impact the job-related risk and burnout experience of the CPSWs because all participants expressed facing the phenomena under study. The varied years of work experience instead showed that despite the different years, they faced the same problem.

The methodological process followed the hermeneutic circle, moving iteratively between parts (individual accounts, quotes, and episodes) and the whole (comprehensive understanding of professional being) (Ezzy, 2002; Hoy, 1999). Data interpretation was abductive — combining inductive insights from the data with deductive theoretical reflection. Intuition and reflexivity were integral to the analytical process, consistent with the interpretive phenomenological stance (Cohen et al., 2000; Grbich, 1999).

Additionally, reflexivity was managed through fieldwork journaling, peer debriefing, and reflective dialogue with research participants and academic supervisors (Lowe & Prowse, 2001; Moustakas, 1990). In line with Heideggerian phenomenology, the researcher's positionality was considered a legitimate and necessary element of the knowledge construction process (Matelrud, 2001; Moran & Mooney, 2002).

This methodological orientation allowed us to explore how CPSWs experience risk and burnout not as isolated events but as existentially charged dimensions of their Being-in-the-world. In particular, the research emphasized how these experiences are co-constructed through interpersonal relationships, institutional norms, and public discourses, thus enabling a richer understanding of what it means to be a child protection social worker in Seychelles.

## Ethical Considerations

A fundamental aspect of any research is the ethical responsibility toward participants. Ethical considerations in this study included ensuring anonymity, voluntary participation, informed consent, and the right to withdraw at any time (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). Participants' privacy and confidentiality were strictly upheld throughout the research process. No names were used in transcripts, and identifying details were removed to maintain confidentiality.

The supporting research project at Masaryk University granted the study's ethical approval before data collection began. In addition, formal permission was obtained from the Director of Social Services at the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs in Seychelles. Collaborative discussions and planning were undertaken with the Principal Social Worker and the Senior Social Worker to ensure transparency and institutional alignment.

Given the small population and close-knit nature of Seychelles society, extra attention was paid to ensuring data anonymity and participant protection. The researcher, having practiced as a school counselor in Seychelles, was particularly sensitive to these ethical nuances. The phenomenological emphasis on intersubjectivity also supported an ethical stance based on respect for participants' lived knowledge, dignity, and autonomy (Ezzy, 2002).

Moreover, ethical commitment was understood in terms of institutional guidelines and as a personal and moral obligation to treat participants with care and human respect throughout the research process.

## Limitations of the Method

As with all qualitative research, this study has certain limitations. The findings are based on a purposive sample of eleven child protection social workers in Seychelles and, therefore, are not intended to be generalizable to all CPSWs. Instead, the study offers in-depth insights into lived experiences that are contextually and relationally situated. The dual role of the researcher as an insider (former school counselor) and an academic investigator presents both strengths and limitations. While this insider position facilitated rapport and empathy, it also required constant reflexive vigilance to manage possible biases.

Furthermore, the hermeneutic nature of interpretive phenomenology means that the researcher's pre-understandings and positionality shape interpretations. While reflexivity and supervision were employed to strengthen trustworthiness, these influences remain an inherent feature of the research process. Finally, conducting the study in a close-knit island community presented challenges in ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, which were mitigated through careful ethical planning.

## Findings: Lived Experiences of Job Risk and Burnout

This section presents the key findings of the study, based on in-depth interviews with child protection social workers (CPSWs) in Seychelles. The results reveal burnout and job risk as interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences affecting the everydayness of child protection social workers' lives. A highly significant finding in the doctoral research project was that the concept of Dasein («being», in this case, the CPSW) is in relationship with the Das man (world, that is, the workplace/clients/community), which is in line with Heidegger's phenomenological theory. The Dasein (being) is shaped/influenced by the Das man (world). Being in the world as a CPSW entails interactions with the world and people at work and in the community/home. These interactions with people at work (clients, colleagues, supervisor) and at home/community shape CPSWs' individual experiences of job risk and burnout in the lives of professionals. The life of CPSWs entails complex interactions with people, and their meaning-making shows a typical example of Being-in-the-World.

Below, we present brief excerpts from the original findings demonstrating these everyday changes, focusing on relationships and interactions. Confidentiality is observed as participants' names are not mentioned.

### *Interpersonal Experience*

Interpersonal experience is considered first-hand interactions between one or two persons or individuals. As practitioners in the social work profession, CPSWs interact with different groups of individuals at different levels, which adds a whole new experience to their everyday lives. In the study, CPSWs discuss their interactions in their role, how this influences them as individuals, and the challenges they experience during these interactions with their clients, their parents, other role players (for example, the Police, schoolteachers, school counselors, psychologists) in the community, or just community members. Role players are other collaborators involved in the child protection process.

In Seychelles, there exists a working document that outlines all collaborators involved in working with children to be involved in child protection. As such, some CPSWs highlight that they face job risk and burnout due to interactions at the workplace/organization and in the community as they perform their duties. Such experience was voiced by CPSWs, which shows they experience job risk and burnout at interpersonal levels resulting from unsupportive supervisors, high caseloads, uncooperative role players in the community, and the public and media image of the CPSWs.

At the workplace, some CPSWs mentioned that their experiences with supervisors were stressful as they were unsupportive. Participant 8 said, «*My supervisor made me feel incompetent, as if I did not know my job. She questioned every case I handled. This feeling made*

*me sad*». While some CPSWs felt the supervisor was unsupportive, others complained that supervisors cared only about the task being done, as in the case below.

Another CPSW, Participant 4, said, *«There is a lack of support from supervisors; for example, I had a situation where I was handling a challenging, high-risk case, and the supervisor, not minding this, added another new case, which was also demanding as the one I was handling. I felt overwhelmed running between the two cases. It kept me on my toes with no time to breathe»*.

Furthermore, another challenging experience that CPSWs discussed was high caseloads. All CPSWs in this interview mentioned that recording and handling caseloads were burdensome. In the interviews, CPSWs mentioned *«that at normal times, they would handle 5 to 6 cases per social worker in a month, but when schools are ongoing (since most of their referrals come from school counselors), the CPSWs would have 9 cases per person»*. This is particularly heavy for them, given the numerous roles they must take on in their job.

Additionally, some CPSWs highlighted the uncooperative nature of some partners they work with within the community. Participant 10 remarks, *«Police are difficult to work with in the child protection process. Sometimes, they want to do investigations without collaborating with the CPSW. On other occasions, you call if the client or even the CPSW is in danger during the home visit, but they do not even show up. This raises some frustrating experiences cooperating with the Police»*.

Also, Participant 11 said, *«Other partners like the Attorney General's Office take a long time to give consent for immediate removal of the child from the home where the perpetrator of abuse is the parent who has refused to give consent. This leaves me in a helpless position»*.

CPSWs also face the ordeal of being frontline workers and are constantly under scrutiny from the public due to the importance of their jobs. In this line, CPSWs are open to public and media criticism. In 2023, CPSWs in Seychelles were under heavy criticism for the abuse (sexual abuse) and death of a 3-year-old girl by her stepfather. In this case, many people took to social media platforms like Facebook to write their opinions about the case and criticize CPSWs. Some comments on Facebook read, *«Social workers are to be blamed as they failed to protect this child»*. Others said, *«Social services take too long to remove a child from abusive parents»*. These comments are just for one case, but CPSWs have always been under scrutiny by the public; their image in the community is often harmed as they are being blamed even for children's wrong behaviors in their homes, just because they advocate for these children.

Some CPSWs in Seychelles highlight that the hostile public and media image also causes them to experience job risk and burnout. Respondent 4 remarked during her interview, *«I feel undervalued; there were too many comments on Facebook criticizing me and my colleagues after the death of the 3-year-old girl»*. Another CPSW, Participant 9, mentioned that *«during that time of the case of the 3-year-old girl who died, people called on the helpline and insulted me that I do not know my job when I suggested any intervention for them. The*

*callers will say that is why you caused the young child to die, because of the kind of work you do. It was so hurt».*

These experiences of verbal abuse from clients influenced and shaped the way CP-SWs viewed their jobs and their everyday lives on the job. However prepared they were for these experiences, they also shaped their daily perceptions of the world/context in which they find themselves.

Similarly, Participant 8 shared, *«During my shift on the helpline, I experienced a barrage of criticism following the tragic case of the child who died last year. Callers blamed me, saying, «That is why that child died». The public's lack of understanding of our procedures can be emotionally taxing».* The public's misunderstanding and lack of knowledge of the protocols and procedures of child protection led to criticisms and blame on the CPSWs without understanding that the system itself poses constraints on them.

### *Intrapersonal Experience*

The intrapersonal experiences of CPSWs address the subjective/ personal experiences of CPSWs during practice and focus more on issues that affect the psychological state (mind, emotions). For example, home visits are emotionally demanding for CPSWs. Some CPSWs narrate their ordeals and experiences during home visits, especially in neighborhoods noted with people who abuse drugs.

Participant 9 mentioned, *«On a home visit, I was threatened with a knife by the parent who did not want the child to be removed from the home, yet she was physically abusing the child. I was so scared; I fear home visits to this day. I was all alone. I ran outside but could not leave because the child shouted for my help inside the house. I quickly called the police, who answered but arrived later, and still could not manage to get the child out as the parent was violent. This affected me psychologically. It is difficult to take this experience out of my mind».*

In addition, Participant 3 concurs with this, as she says, *«I must be emotionally prepared for home visits, especially in neighborhoods like Les Mammelles, Kosovo, or St Louis. One day, I went for a home visit alone in the Kosovo area, and on arriving and heading towards the house, there was a group of men abusing drugs and passing comments at me inside the neighborhood; I was so scared. This affects my mental health».*

In line with such experiences of fear described by the CPSWs above, Ciarán remarks that CPSWs experience being targets of threats and intimidation in the community because of their job, which costs CPSWs their health (mental/psychological wellbeing) and personal relationships (Ciarán, 2023).

These findings illustrate that burnout is not merely a result of workload or procedural complexity but a holistic and embodied experience, affecting CPSWs' sense of safety, dignity, and emotional balance. The following section provides an interpretive analysis of these lived experiences through the lens of Heideggerian phenomenology.

## Discussion/Interpretation: A Heideggerian Analysis of the Findings

This section interprets the findings through the lens of Heideggerian phenomenology. Drawing on key concepts such as Dasein, Being-in-the-world, Das Man, Care (Sorge), Fallenness, and Authenticity, the analysis seeks to illuminate the ontological dimensions embedded in the CPSWs' lived experience of job risk and burnout (Heidegger, 1962; Cerbone, 2009; Guignon, 1999).

### *Being-in-the-World: Contextual Embeddedness*

Being-in-the-world is central to understanding the CPSWs' experience (Heidegger, 1962; Moran, 2000). Their work cannot be separated from the socio-institutional context in which it occurs. The narratives demonstrate that CPSWs are not merely executing tasks but are embedded in complex relational environments that shape their professional identity and emotional life. For example, at the level of their interpersonal experience, CPSW practitioners interact with different groups of individuals at different levels, which adds a whole new experience to their everyday lives. Such interactions also come with challenges, like with community stakeholders, the pressure from public opinion, and institutional dynamics, all of which point to the relational and situated nature of their Being.

### *Das Man and the Influence of Social Norms*

The impact of media, public discourse, and organizational expectations on CPSWs reveals the operation of Das Man — social norms and impersonal collective judgment (Heidegger, 1962; Guignon, 1999; Watts, 2001). Participants' expressions of feeling judged, undervalued, or blamed illustrate how Das Man shapes their self-understanding and contributes to emotional distress. Some participants mentioned that the hostile public and media image also causes them to experience job risk and burnout. Their experiences echo Heidegger's insight that the anonymous «they» governs everyday behavior and obscures authentic modes of being.

### *Fallenness and Conformity in Professional Roles*

Some experiences reflect a state of fallenness, where CPSWs conform to procedural expectations and external demands without space for reflective practice (Cerbone, 2009; Cohn, 2002). High caseloads and administrative pressures draw workers into routinized modes of action, limiting their capacity for authentic engagement. Mixed up in the tight

schedules and the need to follow procedures, CPSWs express an inability to reflect, a lack of agency, which all affects their authenticity. This fallenness manifests as emotional detachment or exhaustion, revealing the ontological cost of functioning in a role-driven bureaucracy.

### *Care (Sorge) as a Structure of Being*

Despite the challenges, the findings also reveal a persistent orientation toward care. In Heidegger's sense, care is the fundamental structure of human existence — our concern for ourselves, others, and the world (Heidegger, 1962; Guignon, 2009; Moran, 2000). CPSWs' accounts show that even in moments of burnout, they remain deeply invested in the well-being of their clients. However, their narratives also point to the fact that they pay less attention to care: care for the self. The growing awareness of the need for self-care reflects an existential reorientation toward authenticity and balance.

### *Temporality and Emotional Resonance*

CPSWs' accounts are shaped by temporal awareness — the persistence of fear from past traumatic experiences, the anxiety of anticipated future threats, and the emotional weight of present responsibilities. Heidegger's view of temporality as a constitutive feature of Dasein is reflected in how participants describe enduring psychological burdens (Heidegger, 1999; Hoy, 1999; Moran & Mooney, 2002). Burnout thus emerges as an experience deeply intertwined with lived time, not just the current workload.

### *Authenticity and the Search for Meaning*

Amidst fallenness and external pressures, some CPSWs exhibit moments of authenticity — reflective awareness of their limits, needs, and purpose (Heidegger, 1962; Guignon, 1999; Lowes & Prowse, 2001). The recognition of self-care as a professional imperative signals a movement toward a more authentic mode of being. This self-reflective stance opens space for existential resilience, where meaning is reclaimed not through efficiency but through human presence, compassion, and purpose.

## **Conclusion**

This study has explored the lived experience of job risk and burnout among child protection social workers (CPSWs) in Seychelles through Heideggerian phenomenology.

The analysis offers a deeper understanding of the existential dimensions embedded in social work practice by drawing on key ontological concepts such as Being-in-the-world, Dasein, Das Man, Care, Fallenness, and Authenticity. The findings demonstrate that job risk and burnout are not merely functional or procedural issues but are fundamentally relational and affective experiences shaped by the workers' embeddedness in institutional, social, and cultural contexts. The analysis offers a deeper understanding of the existential dimensions embedded in social work practice by drawing on key ontological concepts such as Being-in-the-world, Dasein, Das Man, Care, Fallenness, and Authenticity.

The phenomenological perspective allows us to view CPSWs not simply as service providers responding to organizational stressors but as human beings navigating their existence through their professional roles, relationships, and moral commitments. Their narratives reveal how burnout is experienced as a form of existential disconnection, manifesting through institutional detachment, emotional exhaustion, public judgment, and loss of meaning. Conversely, moments of authenticity, reflective self-care, and commitment to others illustrate pathways toward existential resilience and renewed professional integrity.

This Heideggerian interpretation reframes job risk and burnout not merely as occupational phenomena but as ontological conditions of being in the world under institutional, relational, and existential pressures (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016; Gill, 2014). The findings suggest that understanding CPSWs' experiences requires more than measuring stressors — it requires listening to how they make meaning of their work, suffering, and care. In doing so, this research highlights the transformative potential of phenomenology in revealing the depth and dignity of professional life in social work.

This study underscores the value of interpretive phenomenology in uncovering the affective and ontological fabric of professional experience. It calls for greater integration of phenomenological and reflexive approaches in social work research and practice. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of cultivating supportive organizational cultures that recognize the procedural demands of child protection work and its profound existential burden.

Future research may build on these insights by examining how training, supervision, and policy frameworks can support CPSWs in sustaining their authenticity, care, and meaning in practice. By centering the lived experience of social workers, we move closer to a human-centered and ethically attuned social work practice — one that acknowledges not only what social workers do but who they are in their everyday being.

Furthermore, these findings offer important implications for social work education. Training programs should integrate phenomenological and reflexive perspectives into curricula to help future practitioners develop a deeper awareness of their existential positioning, emotional labor, and relational embeddedness. Courses that encourage reflective writing, dialogical learning, and experiential methodologies can foster students' capacity for self-understanding and authentic professional identity. Educators should also create spaces for critical reflection on power, vulnerability, and the meaning of care, allowing



students to engage with technical competencies and social work practice's ontological and ethical dimensions. This resonates with the epistemic shift toward understanding in social work theorizing, as discussed by Navratil (2019), who highlights the importance of cultivating interpretive and reflexive thinking within the assessment and professional reasoning frameworks.

Summarily, this study situates burnout and job risk within the everyday consciousness of child protection social workers, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how these phenomena are lived, negotiated, and given meaning in practice. To respond to the research questions, this study highlighted methodological as well as empirical findings in phenomenological research, precisely the Heideggerian approach, to capture the existential dimensions of CPSWs' experiences, making a unique contribution to research.

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