Adaption, connection, and sensitivity: Examining the experiences of mid-level social service managers during times of disaster

Research article

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Abstract

Mid-level social service managers are tasked with meeting the strategic goals of their employing organisation alongside overseeing staff and service delivery. When a disaster occurs, however, their role may be significantly impacted. This article explores the experiences of three mid-level social service managers, all registered social workers, following significant earthquake events in Aotearoa New Zealand. The narratives highlight the importance of building alliances and rapid adaption to respond to changing circumstances all while remaining sensitive to the needs of individuals accessing services, communities, and colleagues. Community mapping and establishing communities of practice for mid-level managers are strategies identified as valuable to advance current disaster management practice.

Key words: *disaster and emergency management, management and practice, social work, social services.*

Introduction

Internationally, managers of social service organisations are faced with the challenging task of balancing ethical responsibilities and endeavouring to provide an optimal work environment for staff whilst delivering effective and efficient services to clients and communities (Coulshed & Mullender, 2001). Often these managers have previously been practitioners, often social workers, who have moved into various management roles due to opportunity, a sense of natural progression, or promotion. Consequently, many have minimal specific managerial training (Hopkins & Hyde, 2002; Webster et al., 2015).

In addition to limited training, mid-level social service managers are faced with challenges of austerity whereby they must seek creative solutions to organisational challenges that have arisen both internally and externally to the local environment (Hopkins & Hyde, 2002; van Heugten, 2014). The persistence of neoliberalism and New Public Management reform has exacerbated resource constraints, introduced results-based accountability, and promoted a contract culture in social services in the pursuit of economy and efficiency across Western nations (Ferguson, 2008; Healy, 2009; Rogowoski, 2018; Webster & McNabb, 2016). Increased fiscal responsibility (Lauri, 2019) combined with largely negative media attention of social work practice undermining public trust in the profession (Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013; Warner, 2013) and concerns of retention and wellbeing across the workforce (McFadden et al., 2015; Turley et al., 2022), has placed managers in complex situations which extend beyond strategic planning and staff development. Responding to these challenges, social service mid-level managers need to be 'competent strategic and ethical organisational operators' (Hughes & Wearing, 2017, p.79).

Moving beyond the focus on managing services during times of neoliberal reform and fiscal pressure, this article considers a further area of complexity; the experiences of mid-level social service managers involved in natural disaster response and recovery efforts in Aotearoa New Zealand. As an underexplored area, this research provides important insight to better understand the implications for practice at a time of increasing climate related crises and natural disasters including wildfires, flooding, earthquakes, droughts, and storms.

Social service mid-level managers and disaster management

For the purposes of this article, mid-level managers are conceptualised as those who oversee and support staff and lead discipline-specific services but are not necessarily acting as chief executives of an organisation or determining budgets. While the core tasks of social service management may lie with ensuring the vision and mission of organisations are maintained and achieved, mid-level managers may also be required to respond to crisis events. Natural or human-made disasters are increasing globally, including the compounding impacts of climate change and the recent COVID-19 health emergency (Wu, et al., 2022; Fronek et al., 2022). Situated in the liminal space between individuals and communities, social service organisations frequently work alongside the most marginalised members of society, and it is these people who are most vulnerable to the negative and long-term effects from disaster events (Alston et al., 2019; Harms et al., 2022).

It has been argued that incorporating social work expertise in disaster management coordination is essential to ensure a focus on recognising, planning for, and responding to social and economic inequalities, with particular attention on vulnerable communities to reduce or mitigate harm (Rapeli, 2017; Hassett, 2021). Furthermore, it has been argued that the social work profession has a mandate to prepare for, and respond to disasters in connection to the underpinning values and principles which commit social workers to engaging with people and structures to enhance wellbeing, strive for social cohesion, and challenge social injustice (Adamson, 2014; Harms et al., 2022; IFSW, 2014). Exploring the inclusion of a disaster focus in social work education, Adamson (2014, p.19) highlights the opportunity to incorporate disaster management into 'Big picture theme's' by embedding into social policy, law and community development to see beyond individual crisis and trauma to engage in concepts of macro level intervention.

Disaster management refers to the managerial and organisational functions required to reduce potential hazards or to ensure adequate support following an emergency. In Aotearoa New Zealand, four phases shape the disaster management framework, namely: risk reduction; readiness; response; and recovery (Civil Defence, 2015). In the Australian context these four Rs map onto the Emergency Management Arrangements of prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR), 2020). Risk reduction/prevention and readiness/preparation are pre-disaster phases aimed at reducing the likelihood of disasters and limiting the impact of a disaster (van Heugten, 2014). Activities may include vegetation management, national awareness campaigns, and testing warning systems such as emergency mobile alerts and tsunami sirens. The response phase occurs immediately after a disaster and includes relief and rescue efforts to support affected people (Civil Defence, 2015; AIDR, 2020) including temporary shelter, evacuation processes and the provision of clean water and food. The recovery phase ranges from short to long term recovery post-disaster. Often depicted as a cycle, these phases can overlap, especially in instances of continued disruption such as aftershocks, landslides and the spread of wildfires.

Multiple actors across government, non-government, private and community sectors may engage in these phases of disaster management. As argued by Shevellar and Westoby (2014), how social workers are involved in disaster management has largely gone unrecognised in literature. Research focused on their contributions only gained recognition in the last decade (Alston et al., 2019; Dominelli, 2014) providing growing evidence of social workers' involvement in post-disaster work as opposed to pre-disaster engagement (Harms et al., 2022). This has included, for example, direct work with affected individuals in delivering psychosocial support (Briggs & Heisenfelt Roark, 2013; Du Plooy et al., 2014; Harms et al., 2022, Hickson & Lemann, 2014), establishing helplines (Maher & Maidment, 2013), and facilitating community connectedness (Alston et al., 2018). Social service managers have also been responsible for deploying significant numbers of staff to engage in response and recovery efforts (Alston et al., 2019), however, their overall contributions have been largely overlooked.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, several social service organisations are tasked by government as being first responder agencies, thus assigning them with specific statutory roles and responsibilities as outlined in the National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan Order (2015).

Beyond these agencies, however, many other social service organisations may also find themselves active in disaster management, particularly following an event such as earthquakes or flooding (Authors own, 2019; van Heugten, 2014). Strengthening relationships between social service management structures and local and regional emergency management bodies to improve information sharing channels has previously been recommended (Rapeli, 2017). While social workers are often well connected with the people they support, there is further potential for mid-level managers to facilitate community capacity building by creating connections between and among communities and organisations for collaborative disaster management efforts (Mathbor, 2007). Such integration, networking and cohesion aids in building social capital, enhancing effectiveness in disaster response and recovery (Mathbor, 2007).

With recent flooding, bush fires, cyclones, earthquakes, and a global pandemic experienced around the world, it is evident that social services, mid-level managers, and social work practitioners need to be prepared in anticipation of disaster events. The research findings presented in this article offer practical advice and guidance to support processes of risk reduction, readiness, response, and recovery by examining the role of mid-level social service managers in the context of earthquake response efforts in Aotearoa New Zealand. Challenges and lessons learned are reported to better enable mid-level social service managers to appropriately plan and respond to future disaster events.

Method

The findings discussed in this article were drawn from the final stage of a mixed methods project designed to explore social workers' involvement in disasters in Aotearoa New Zealand and their role, capacity, utility, and training needs in the four phases of disaster management. The primary research question was:

> How have registered social workers been involved in disaster management in their professional role in New Zealand?

This in-depth inquiry was structured into four phases which have been reported elsewhere including a content analysis of social worker and emergencies in Aotearoa New Zealand online news media (Authors own, 2018), semi-structured interviews with disaster management professionals who were not social workers, and a survey of registered social workers (RSWs) in Aotearoa New Zealand investigating their involvement in disaster management (Authors own, 2021).

Taking a nested sample approach (Yin, 2012), survey participants were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews in the fourth stage of the project. In total, eleven RSWs participated in semi-structured interviews and the findings reported below are drawn from the accounts of three social workers who were employed in middle-management positions in social services at the time of the disasters. It should be noted that social service middle management was not a demographic explicitly sought for this study but was a sub-group that emerged from interview participation.

In recognition of the lack of research on social service management roles during disaster response, and the differing responsibilities held by mid-level managers compared to the psychosocial support and one-to-one clinical interventions provided by the frontline social work participants, separate analysis of these three interviews is warranted despite the inability to make generalisable or representative claims. The project received low-risk ethics approval (notification 4000019500) from Massey University, New Zealand. The participants in this article gave consent to be named in any subsequent case study publications, as they, and the researchers, recognised that anonymity could be challenging due to the small number of social workers in mid-level management roles in Aotearoa New Zealand.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed before being shared with participants for approval. Transcripts were then analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), applying a framework analysis method (Ritchie & Spencer, 2003). Following the first in-depth reading of the transcripts, a matrix was developed where each column represented a different interview participant (referred to as a case) and each row represented initial codes developed inductively. Transcript were then re-read to review existing codes for consistency, develop new codes through deeper interpretation, and populate cells with a summary of the relevant data. This process provided a systematic structure for qualitative analysis, keeping interpretive decisions visible and auditable (Gale et al., 2013). Codes were assessed to develop initial descriptive themes before analysing patterns and connections to establish three overarching analytical themes with a focus on implications for practice. The matrix ensured the views of each participant remained contextualised, and themes could be constantly compared across all cases. This approach was most appropriate due to the similarity of the cases, set topic guide, and inclusion of more than one researcher on the project (Ritchie & Spencer, 2003; Gale et al., 2013).

Participants and context

The three participants were involved in the immediate response and recovery efforts following the significant 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand. In addition, participant three was also engaged in the response and recovery efforts following another significant earthquake in 2016 which affected the towns of Kaikoura, Wairau, and the surrounding region. At the time of the earthquakes, participant one was employed as a Clinical Manager for Social Work Services at a local hospital. Participant two was the Service Leader for a local non-government organisation (NGO), managing the delivery of three community services for youth including a residential, mobile, and specialised early intervention mental health team. Participant three was the Service Lead for delivering and coordinating the psychosocial support response efforts at a local district health board. All three participants were registered social workers with extensive social work practice experience.

Findings

Employing a thematic analysis methodology, eight descriptive themes were established from the first level codes: Linking systems and managing relationships, service continuity, identifying vulnerable groups, right people for the right job, coordinating and resourcing staff, information management, staff wellbeing, and self-care. These descriptive themes were interrogated to identify relationships and connections between them to establish three analytical themes that address implications for middle management practice as discussed below.

Managing external relationships

Managing relationships with Government agencies, regional organisations and within communities was repeatedly raised as a core role for the mid-level managers during immediate response and ongoing recovery efforts. Managers may also be involved in organising and supporting external staff who are brought into an affected area. Participant three, for example, discussed how bringing in social workers from outside of the earthquake-affected region was necessary to meet the demand on existing services, to support local staff, and increase outreach to a widely dispersed population. Leading a team that was flown in from Christchurch to Kaikoura to offer psychosocial support in rural areas, participant three explained that residents appreciated the sense of confidentiality an outsider offered whereby *"The local community knew they weren't going to bump into them [the social worker] in the local supermarket every other day, and so they were able to disclose or discuss issues they might have felt were more sensitive or more confidential to talk to a local about."* Sensitivity, however, was essential and the importance of respecting, supporting, and resourcing existing staff and services to ensure they were not replaced, devalued, or undermined was stressed. *"They know the local people, but of course they are also impacted and so it's that delicate dance of ensuring you're not trampling on local services and local people"*. To help navigate these dynamics, participant one recommended social work managers and team leaders invest in building cross agency networks in advance, recognising that such relationships can require considerable time and energy. To further enhance the development of partnerships, participant two detailed how they actively extended offers of help and support to other agencies, even if uptake was unlikely, as collaboration and collective working was deemed essential of effective response and recovery efforts.

Connected to the importance of managing relationships, all three participants discussed their role in linking systems together to ensure consistent messaging, prevent the duplication of services, and identify gaps in provision through collective effort. Reflecting on instances of child protection, participant one detailed how a young person may be admitted to hospital during a disaster and have an active protection order from one of their relatives. To confirm the situation and establish correct security measures, engaging with other services, including child protection teams and local police, is essential to ensure that no child is exposed to risk or goes home with the wrong person. This learning was supported by participant three who discussed that multiple organisations and stakeholders are involved in disaster response efforts and clear communication with a wide range of parties was necessary to get appropriate information to guide decisions. *"I was also linking with the Civil Defence and Red Cross co-ordinators and the different agency leads to just try and, you know, get back intel and understand if there were any other things that we should be doing."*

Knowing how to engage appropriately with media was noted as a necessary skill for mid-level social service management. As experienced by participant one, it is common for media to approach services following a disaster event, disguised as relatives, attempting to gain insight and information regarding the response efforts. *"We soon learnt how to work out who was bogus and who wasn't. A lot of media [were] pretending to be someone's cousin and those sorts of things."* Asking specific questions to confirm a caller's identity and not hesitating to ask if they represent the media is important to protect client rights to confidentiality and privacy. Media training during qualifying and post-qualifying programmes may help develop the necessary skills and confidence which can be transferred beyond the context of disaster response and emergency relief.

Disruptions to services and people's lives are to be anticipated beyond the immediate disaster event. As highlighted by participant three, unexpected delays in transitioning service delivery from response to recovery can lead to gaps in provision. This may be influenced by access to resources, physical environment instability, political will, or budget constraints, however, delays can cause significant frustration to staff, management, and community members. Participant three recommended planning for longer lead-in times and inclusion of social work managers in disaster planning to help mitigate such disruptions. Further, promoting adaptability and reinforcing the notion that a one-size model is inappropriate in disaster response and recovery, participant three was able to draw comparisons between their experiences responding to the different earthquake events. For example, she detailed how the local Indigenous community responded immediately in Kaikoura, providing food and shelter to anyone in need. This proactive community response meant her team could help behind the scenes and were less front facing than was needed in Christchurch and illustrates the importance of being critically aware of how disaster response and recovery efforts are contextually situated.

Recognising the scale of a disaster and engaging with local communities to understand local need and resources must also be prioritised. For instance, to support the mental wellbeing of men in Christchurch, a 'mate-date' for guys to talk with one another was implemented, however, when this was proposed in Kaikoura, participant three commented that the farmers were resistant. It was emphasised that as a manager, participant three needed to challenge demands for the replication of previous interventions, stating that *"here is an entirely different context and entirely different levels of resilience and entirely different levels of connection. And you know, a rural-based community verses a city-based community is quite different."* These examples demonstrate how responding to a disaster may contrast to a person's usual job, and a manager must be able to adapt and think creatively to guide their team to address complex situations and disruptions.

The participants also stressed the importance of identifying potentially vulnerable groups early and recognising that not all affected individuals will have a local support system or available resources to fall back on. Participant one recounted how tourists arrived at the hospital in Christchurch seeking assistance, not knowing where else to go and with no way of contacting their family or friends overseas as telecommunication lines were down.

Similarly, in the event of the North Canterbury earthquakes, large numbers of tourists were stuck with no feasible routes in or out of the region, needing access to shelter, food, and water for an undefined period, *"lots of tourists were stranded".* With a highly seasonal tourist industry, the disaster also significantly impacted the local economy. As reported by participant three *"It happened at a time when the summer tourist businesses had just hired their staff and then they weren't able to continue with their business."* Financial instability and geographical and social isolation, therefore, were considered core factors when developing immediate and mid-term response efforts to ensure these groups were not overlooked and it was important for social service managers to be connecting with a wide range of organisations to address the needs of vulnerable groups.

Managing staff

Social work managers are responsible for staff in their own organisations and a disaster event can create new pressures and requirements. Usual workloads and activities may be significantly disrupted as other needs arise and managers need to co-ordinate staff, consider resourcing requirements, and delegate responsibilities. Appropriately matching staff and volunteers with key tasks to harness the skills, knowledge, and capabilities from across the team is important. For example, when balancing service demands for large scale food production and the need for safe transport, participant two detailed how an individual who is an experienced driver with the skills to operate a heavy vehicle but does not feel confident in their cooking may be more appropriately tasked with the role of navigating uneven terrain in a four-by-four to get staff to and from their homes rather than meal preparation. The skills within the team may be diverse and transferable to a range of contexts, and viewing practice as a wider group effort to match the right person for the right task remains important.

Managing disruptions and delays was a common challenge faced by all three participants, with telecommunication failures, infrastructure damage, and limited mobility impacting the ability of their staff to meet basic needs and deliver services. Managing a youth mental health residence during the Christchurch earthquakes, participant two commented on how daily routines were interrupted, and *"Immediately everything that was normal was delayed."* Common tasks such as showering and eating meals became irregular causing residents to become distressed. As instigators of change, working with the staff to create new routines and programs to enable meaning and purpose to the day for residents was effective in managing these disruptions and addressing residents' uncertainties and anxieties.

Alongside disruptions to routines and resources, participant one discussed how power cuts and damaged telecommunication lines prevented access to central databases and information management systems. Social workers are trained in a wide range of information management processes including producing case notes, conducting assessments, coordinating service reports, and multi-disciplinary team communication. Recognising the transferability of these skills, participant one was able to quickly devise charts, tables, and databases by hand to ensure continuity of care, communication with family members, and information handover across staff and services.

These prompt and appropriate adaptations to data management proved vital when relocating elderly patients and care home residents in the immediate response efforts and illustrates how an over-reliance on technology can create vulnerabilities in disaster or emergency events. Service managers must be prepared with alternative methods should existing systems fail.

All three social work managers offered advice on supporting the wellbeing of team members, highlighting that staff will be impacted by a disaster event and their needs must also be recognised. For example, participant two stressed the importance of regularly checking in with individual staff and communicating respect and care:

> *You know just a simple phone call. Yeah, are you alright over there? Hey, anything we can do? Have you got enough bread in your freezer? Just little things, and yeah, no don't come to work today if they need to come around to help with (…) pouring pipe, don't worry about it. Because you know people will rally around, it's about the humanness of it too.*

Extending on this theme, participant one discussed a creative approach to supporting wellbeing using music to facilitate debriefing with her team following the earthquakes in 2010. Members selected and shared songs that reflected their feelings and experiences during the disaster and response efforts, with some choosing to write their own words or sing. However, for the 2011 earthquakes, many of the staff members experienced significant personal loss to property and family members. An opportunity to share their own stories and reflect on their feelings in a safe space guided by an external professional supervisor was more appropriate. This demonstrates how what works effectively in one context is not always appropriate in another, and managers need to be responsive to the needs of the team. Being approachable and contactable as a service leader is also important and these skills had significant implications for participant three who was working predominately in a rural context. Staff were spread across a large geographical area and were not working from an office or welfare centre; therefore, they didn't have the same physical presence of colleagues as was the case during the Christchurch earthquake. *"You've got a whole team around you in Christchurch, if something happens you can just walk down the corridor and find someone else to talk to. It's not that easy and so it's a different type of work."* Supporting wellbeing meant ensuring staff could call when they needed to and being responsive was essential.

Managing self

Service delivery in a disaster space may be considerably different to usual practice and social service managers have a critical role in ensuring their team members are sufficiently supported to complete required tasks. In addition, their own management role may be disrupted. In response to these changes, flexibility and adaptability was evident across all three case studies for managing service continuity and complex needs. Each participant highlighted that there were no hard and fast rules or step-by-step guides to rely upon, with role boundaries and presenting needs regularly changing. For example, despite being employed as a Clinical Manager, participant one found herself operating the hospital mortuary in the immediate

response, taking directions from a coroner over the phone who was unable to attend due to infrastructure damage. "The coroner was fantastic so I was on the phone all the time, 'can we do this and what happens here?'." Participant two also moved onto her agency premises for a time to ensure the residents were safe and receiving adequate care and support. She recognised her own ability to be calm and effective in a crisis, something which she noted is often required by social workers.

Social workers commonly discuss the importance of self-care and knowing their own limitations. As a manager of a large team in a hospital context, participant one found herself prioritising the needs of others before her own, disclosing that this was ultimately to her own detriment. Exhaustion and stress can lead to burn out, and self-care is essential to reduce the negative personal effects of a disaster and subsequent increased pressures on services during times of crisis. This was reiterated by participant two who described how the impact of the disaster response efforts on her well-being became noticeable after approximately six weeks. Becoming tearful and feeling vulnerable, taking a few days off work was needed to decompress and engage in selfcare. "Then I will take that space and I'll steer off into the ocean or into the bush for a good while and reflect on what that experience was like". As has been highlighted across social work practice, the case studies reiterate how mid-level social service managers need to look after themselves appropriately to effectively support others (Harms et al., 2022).

Discussion

All three participants detailed the key role they played in linking systems and managing cross agency relationships. These findings illustrate the importance of community mapping to understand the assets, both physical and social, within the broader community to ensure clear communication and collaboration that draws upon existing resources and strengths. As emphasised throughout the findings, collective efforts and collaboration is central to effective disaster management, and understanding the resources, networks, services, knowledge, and skills already present within the community enables such approach. When you enter a community with a commitment to partnership approaches, working with, not working on people, *"you discover a significant untapped reservoir of human and associational potential just waiting to be identified, connected and mobilised by the residents of that place"* (Russell, 2020, p.199). While not negating the responsibility of local authorities and central government in appropriately funding and resourcing response and recovery efforts, community mapping helps to identify appropriate connections and strengths, enable consistent communication, ensure local services are not undermined or displaced, and that communities are meaningful involved in their own recovery and development.

It is recommended that community mapping is completed as a collective effort not limited to social service managers and their teams. For this to be successful, time must be protected to engaging with local agencies, community groups, leaders, iwi (Indigenous communities) and government organisations. This is essential to develop a comprehensive understanding of the community from multiple perspectives, ensuring nondominant groups are heard and respected, whilst building community resilience through their active involvement in disaster preparedness activities (van Heugten, 2014).

A collaborative approach to community mapping also serves to strengthen formal and informal community relationships before a disaster event, supporting the development of interconnected working and limiting duplication of services (Alston et al., 2019; van Heugten, 2014). The knowledge of community resources and strengths should not be held by one person and there is potential for professional associations to collaborate with social service managers to facilitate collective efforts at a regional level and ensure information is shared. Due to the fluid and dynamic nature of communities, and emergence of new communities and lobby groups post-disaster (Fronek et al., 2022; Vallance and Carlton, 2015; van Heugten, 2014) such an exercise must be revisited regularly for effective disaster management efforts that value communities.

Building on community mapping, the case studies demonstrate the role mid-level social service managers have in contributing to community cohesion and social capital during all phases of disaster management (Alston et al., 2019; van Heugten, 2014). As has been discussed elsewhere (Authors own, 2021), although regional civil defence groups are tasked with supporting wellbeing and building capacity with first responder organisations, research has indicated limited awareness of how social workers can effectively contribute to disaster management, and that "the role of the social worker is often overlooked" despite a long history of working with individuals, groups and communities affected by disasters (Bartoli et al., 2022, p.2). Collective community-based approaches are recognised in social work as a core means for enhancing wellbeing and reducing feelings of isolation or powerlessness (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009), concerns which were raised throughout the interviews as illustrated through the unequal effects of the earthquakes on seasonal workers, tourists, and rural residents. When faced with considerable political and public pressure for immediate, visible, concrete outcomes, however, government response efforts have been critiqued as being short-term focused to the determent of longer-term sustainable recovery plans (Shevellar & Westoby, 2014). Emphasising the importance of community development approaches associated with values of collective action for social change (Delgado & Humm-Delgado, 2013), mid-level managers have a role in enhancing local participation and citizen engagement to facilitate collective power to address concerns that are deemed significant for the community's own needs and resilience (Shevellar & Westoby, 2014). Such approach ensures efforts are sustainable whilst attuned to local values and context (van Heugten, 2014), supporting people to achieve greater power and control over their lives.

Localisation is a key component of community development (Ife, 2016) and by mainstreaming community social work and methods based on partnerships, social service managers can challenge the growing perception that the role of a social worker is confined to assessments and care plans (Turbett, 2020). This will also indicate resistance to the individualisation of social problems and managerial throughput/output models that have threatened human services since the 1990s (Tsui & Cheung, 2004; van Heugten 2014). Learning from the examples presented here, it is recommended that managers invest in strengthening relationships across services, amongst staff, with community groups and national or regional emergency management agencies to facilitate collaboration (Mathbor, 2007; Rapeli, 2017).

The importance of understanding the potential personal impact a disaster event can have on frontline social workers was highlighted by all three participants. Recognising the impact of grief and loss (Alston et al., 2018), and potential demoralisation due to significant shifts in living standards and capabilities is essential in disaster management (Briggs and Heisenfelt Roark, 2013). Understanding such complexities is necessary for responding to team dynamics and staff needs. Furthermore, mid-level social service managers and their staff may be faced with dilemmas where services cannot meet demand and implementing priorities to triage need is required. As discussed by van Heugten (2014), practitioners across a range of human services and disciplines have reported receiving inadequate preparation for responding to such moral dilemmas, and mid-level managers must be prepared to support staff who are struggling with the emotional labour and consequences of such decisions. As demonstrated in the findings, support and a safe working environment can be offered in a wide range of ways including team debriefing, regular phone contact, and external supervision; however, a sustainable model of care for service delivery during response and recovery efforts is also required, as was noted in social work contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic (Harms et al., 2022).

The involvement of social workers commonly extends far beyond the initial disaster event, and they often remain actively engaged in resolving long-term consequences and recovery efforts (Bartoli et al., 2022). When developing a response and recovery plan, a sustainable model of care must consider how organisational structures can assist staff to meet emerging and complex needs without risking burnout or negative impacts on physical and psychological health (Alston et al., 2019). The role of a social service manager commonly includes matching people with appropriate roles, staff care, recruitment, and retention (Coulshed & Mullender, 2001; Hughes & Wearing, 2018), however, in times of disaster, adapting to the added stressors and arising complex needs is essential to ensure staff are supported to provide ethical, safe, and appropriate interventions whilst maintaining their own wellbeing. For example, one manager adopting a four-weekly roster system for a specialist response team where individuals would work one week out of four in the recovery zone, and three weeks in their normal role. This ensured there were sufficient staff to support the existing mental health services, while having a specialist team with the skills and capacity to work with affected individuals in their communities. This working model supported staff wellbeing through managing workloads and clear expectations, as well as providing consistency for building relationships with affected individuals rather than ad-hoc availability.

Lastly, the participants demonstrated how mid-level social service managers must practice self-care to ensure they are able to provide support to others. Recognising that people can be affected on a personal and professional level by a disaster event (Drolet et al., 2021), the findings reiterate the work of Bartoli et al, (2022, p.128) who highlight how "working in a disaster is emotionally and physically demanding," and self-care is central to delivering effective support (Alston et al., 2019; Harms et al., 2022; van Heugten, 2014). Social service mid-level managers, therefore, must be mindful of burnout and prioritise wellbeing and self-care for their team and themselves.

Limitations of this study are acknowledged. The research focused on the experiences of a small number of social service mid-level managers in one country, and in relation to their experiences of earthquakes as a significant disaster event. The value of the three case studies, however, lies in the depth of experience and richness of detail provided by the participants. The key messages from the participants, while not intended to be generalisable, may be relevant to other geographical contexts and types of disaster events. With limited previous research that has explored the experiences of social workers employed as mid-level managers during disasters, this study has endeavoured to contribute, in a limited way, additional knowledge in this important field of social work and social service practice.

Conclusion

Although this research focused on response and recovery, findings highlight how mid-level managers of social service organisations have a critical role in all four phases of disaster management, to ensure effective processes and systems are in place not only for their service users but also for the safety and wellbeing of staff and themselves. Situated within multiple organisational contexts and communities, mid-level managers and their staff are uniquely positioned to establish connections with individuals, services, and communities at all stages of the disaster management process. Advocacy and building alliances are two key skills embedded in social work practice which complement the use of community mapping as an effective tool for engagement with neighbourhoods and communities highlighting strengths and resources prior to disaster events that can then be drawn upon as or when necessary. Developing stronger local, regional, and national relationships with emergency management organisations would facilitate opportunities to conduct such exercises as well as raise the general profile of social work disaster practice. Social service managers have a pivotal role in contributing to disaster management activities and the establishment of communities of practice for managers, for instance, through professional organisations, would strengthen their own networks and knowledge base, thus enhancing their effectiveness as both social service and disaster practice managers.

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