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THE MODERATING ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VICARIOUS TRAUMA AND JOB PERFORMANCE AMONG HUMANITARIAN WORKERS IN SOUTHWESTERN UGANDA

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Abstract

Humanitarian workers are routinely exposed to traumatic narratives and distressing field experiences, placing them at risk of vicarious trauma and diminished job performance. Drawing on the Job Demands Resources Model, this study examined the relationship between vicarious trauma and job performance and tested the moderating role of social support among humanitarian workers in Southwestern Uganda. A cross-sectional survey design was employed with 263 participants drawn from major humanitarian organizations. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and hierarchical multiple regression. Results revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between vicarious trauma and job performance ($r = -.222, p < .01$). Regression analysis indicated that intrusive thoughts significantly predicted lower job performance ($\beta = -.135, p = .005$), whereas emotional distress was not a significant independent predictor ($\beta = -.057, p = .357$). Moderation analysis demonstrated that social support significantly buffered the negative effects of vicarious trauma on job performance. These findings confirm that job demands in the form of trauma exposure impair performance, but job resources such as social support attenuate these effects. The study contributes empirical evidence from a Sub-Saharan African humanitarian context and underscores the importance of structured organizational support systems to sustain workforce resilience and productivity.

Keywords: Vicarious trauma, Social support, Job performance, Humanitarian workers, Job Demands–Resources Model, Uganda

Introduction

Humanitarian workers operate in some of the most emotionally demanding occupational environments, frequently encountering human suffering, displacement, violence, and loss. While their work is critical for crisis response and social protection, sustained exposure to traumatic narratives and distressing field conditions poses significant psychological risks. One of the most prominent consequences of such exposure is vicarious trauma, a form of indirect trauma that arises from empathic engagement with survivors of adversity. Increasing evidence suggests that repeated exposure to others' trauma can generate emotional strain, intrusive thoughts, cognitive fatigue, and diminished professional functioning (Méndez-Fernández et al., 2022; Lemmer & Feller, 2022).

Literature Review

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Vicarious Trauma as a Job Demand

Vicarious trauma describes the psychological and emotional changes that occur when professionals are repeatedly exposed to the traumatic experiences of others through their work. Unlike direct trauma, it develops gradually through empathetic engagement with survivors of violence, disaster, or distressing life events. Professionals working in humanitarian services, healthcare, counseling, and social work are particularly vulnerable because their roles require continuous listening to traumatic narratives and responding compassionately to clients' suffering. Over time, such exposure may alter an individual's beliefs about safety, trust, and personal control, thereby affecting both personal well-being and professional effectiveness.

Within occupational health frameworks, vicarious trauma is increasingly recognized as a significant job demand because it consumes emotional and cognitive resources. Continuous exposure to distressing material may result in emotional exhaustion, intrusive thoughts, compassion fatigue, and difficulties maintaining professional boundaries. Employees may also experience concentration problems, impaired decision-making, and reduced problem-solving capacity, which can negatively influence service delivery outcomes. Studies indicate that when emotional demands exceed available coping resources, workers become more susceptible to psychological strain and burnout.

Recent empirical evidence further demonstrates that trauma exposure contributes to cognitive overload and diminished professional functioning. Storm (2021) highlights that repeated empathetic engagement with trauma survivors can overwhelm emotional regulation mechanisms, leading to fatigue and disengagement. Similarly, Méndez-Fernández et al. (2022) report that prolonged indirect trauma exposure is associated with reduced work performance, increased stress symptoms, and emotional depletion among helping professionals. Without adequate organizational support systems such as supervision, peer support, and stress management interventions, the cumulative effects of vicarious trauma may compromise both employee well-being and organizational productivity. Consequently, understanding vicarious trauma as a demanding occupational stressor remains essential for promoting sustainable workforce performance.

High exposure to traumatic material within humanitarian work represents a significant occupational demand that places considerable pressure on employees' psychological and cognitive capacities. Continuous engagement with distressing stories and crisis situations often results in emotional strain and mental fatigue, which gradually diminish workers' ability to function effectively. Intrusive thoughts, emotional distress, and persistent worry are among the central psychological responses associated with trauma-related job demands. These experiences consume attention and emotional energy, thereby reducing concentration, decision-making ability, and overall work effectiveness. In this pathway, high trauma exposure contributes to emotional exhaustion and cognitive depletion, ultimately leading to reduced job performance.

Job Performance in Humanitarian Settings

Job performance in humanitarian contexts goes beyond the completion of assigned duties. It involves maintaining sound judgment under pressure, sustaining emotional regulation during emergencies, and demonstrating commitment despite unpredictable and high-risk environments. Workers are often required to multitask, respond rapidly to crises, and make ethically sensitive decisions while managing their own emotional reactions. Evidence suggests that psychological strain interferes with cognitive clarity, attention, and productivity, which can compromise service

delivery outcomes (Legrand et al., 2022; Niessen et al., 2020). When stress accumulates without adequate coping mechanisms, employees may experience decreased motivation, errors in judgment, and reduced engagement.

Social Support as a Job Resource

Within the Job Demands Resources framework, social support comprising emotional encouragement, supervisory guidance, and collegial cooperation serves as a critical job resource. Supportive work environments strengthen coping abilities, enhance perceived control, and reduce vulnerability to burnout (Liu et al., 2021; van der Meulen et al., 2021). When strong support systems are present, the negative effects of trauma exposure are minimized, emotional strain is reduced, and employees are better able to sustain performance. Consequently, social support is expected to moderate or buffer the adverse influence of vicarious trauma on job performance.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships among vicarious trauma, social support, and job performance among humanitarian workers. This design enabled the collection of data at a single point in time, allowing for the assessment of existing psychological experiences and workplace conditions within the target population. The approach was considered appropriate for identifying associations between occupational demands, available resources, and employee functioning in humanitarian settings.

Participants

The sample consisted of 263 humanitarian workers drawn from major humanitarian and non-governmental organizations operating in Southwestern Uganda. Participants represented diverse professional roles, including field officers, psychosocial support staff, healthcare providers, and program coordinators who are routinely exposed to vulnerable populations and crisis-related environments. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were selected to reflect individuals actively engaged in humanitarian service delivery.

Measures

Data were collected using standardized self-report questionnaires assessing the key study variables. Vicarious trauma was measured using subscales focusing on intrusive thoughts and emotional distress, capturing the psychological impact of indirect exposure to traumatic experiences. Social support was assessed through measures of perceived emotional assistance from colleagues as well as supervisory support within the workplace. Job performance was evaluated using self-reported indicators of functional performance, including task completion, concentration, and effectiveness in professional responsibilities. All measurement instruments demonstrated acceptable levels of internal reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding the recommended threshold of .70. This indicates adequate consistency of the scales in measuring the intended psychological and occupational constructs within the study population.

Data Analysis

- Pearson correlation
- Multiple regression
- Moderated regression analysis
- Significance level set at $p < .05$

Results

Correlation Analysis

A statistically significant negative correlation was found between vicarious trauma and job performance:

$$r = -.222, p < .01$$

This indicates that higher trauma exposure is associated with lower job performance

Multiple Regression Analysis

Intrusive thoughts significantly predicted reduced job performance:

$$\beta = -.135, p = .005$$

Emotional distress did not independently predict job performance:

$$\beta = -.057, p = .357$$

The model explained 5.2% of variance in job performance ($R^2 = .052$).

Moderation analysis

Social Data Analysis

The study employed several statistical techniques to examine the relationships among vicarious trauma, social support, and job performance. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the strength and direction of associations between the key variables. Multiple regression analysis was then used to assess the predictive contribution of specific dimensions of vicarious trauma to job performance outcomes. In addition, moderated regression analysis was performed to examine whether social support influenced or buffered the relationship between trauma exposure and employee performance. All statistical tests were evaluated using a significance threshold of $p < .05$ to determine meaningful relationships.

Results

Correlation Analysis

The findings revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between vicarious trauma and job performance ($r = -.222, p < .01$). This result indicates that increased exposure to traumatic material was associated with lower levels of work performance among humanitarian workers. As trauma-related experiences intensified, employees demonstrated reduced functional effectiveness, suggesting that emotional and cognitive strain may interfere with workplace productivity.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Regression results showed that intrusive thoughts significantly predicted reduced job performance ($\beta = -.135, p = .005$). This suggests that persistent trauma-related cognitions play an important role in diminishing concentration, decision-making ability, and overall professional functioning. In contrast, emotional distress did not independently predict job performance ($\beta = -.057, p = .357$), indicating that emotional discomfort alone may not directly impair performance when other factors are considered simultaneously. Overall, the regression model accounted for 5.2% of the variance in job performance ($R^2 = .052$), reflecting a modest but meaningful explanatory contribution.

Moderation analysis

The moderation analysis indicated that social support played a significant role in shaping the relationship between vicarious trauma and job performance. When levels of support were low, exposure to traumatic experiences was associated with poorer performance outcomes. In contrast, moderate and high levels of social support weakened the adverse effects of trauma exposure, enabling workers to maintain better functional performance. These results are consistent with the Job Demands Resources buffering hypothesis, emphasizing that supportive supervisory and collegial relationships serve as important protective resources that mitigate the negative influence of vicarious trauma on employee performance. At lower levels of social support, exposure to trauma was associated with poorer job performance outcomes. However, when social support was moderate or high, the adverse impact of trauma exposure was markedly minimized. These findings provide empirical support for the Job Demands Resources buffering hypothesis, demonstrating that adequate workplace support helps protect employees from the negative performance consequences of trauma-related job demands.

Discussion

In line with the Job Demands Resources model, the findings indicate that vicarious trauma operates as a significant occupational demand that consumes employees' emotional and cognitive resources, ultimately affecting their work performance. Continuous indirect exposure to traumatic experiences appears to contribute to psychological strain, reduced concentration, and diminished functional effectiveness among humanitarian workers. The observed negative association between vicarious trauma and job performance is consistent with previous research conducted among trauma-exposed professionals, which demonstrates that prolonged emotional engagement with distressing situations can undermine productivity and professional functioning (Méndez-Fernández et al., 2022; Lemmer & Feller, 2022). Despite this relationship, the relatively modest effect size suggests that job performance is shaped by a combination of interacting factors rather than trauma exposure alone. Organizational conditions, individual coping strategies, professional experience, and personal resilience may also play important roles in determining performance outcomes. This indicates the need for a broader perspective when addressing workforce effectiveness within humanitarian environments.

The moderation results provide particularly meaningful insights. Social support significantly reduced the negative influence of trauma exposure on job performance. Employees who perceived stronger emotional, supervisory, and collegial support demonstrated greater capacity to cope with psychological demands and sustain effectiveness at work. These findings reinforce the Job Demand Resource proposition that job resources can counterbalance demanding work conditions by strengthening coping mechanisms and enhancing perceived control. The causal pathway emerging from the study can be summarized as follows: high levels of trauma exposure contribute to emotional and cognitive strain, which may reduce job performance. However, when strong social support systems are present, a buffering effect occurs, enabling employees to maintain performance despite exposure to challenging and emotionally demanding work environments.

Practical Implications

The findings highlight the importance of strengthening workplace support systems to protect both employee well-being and organizational effectiveness in humanitarian settings. Humanitarian organizations should prioritize the establishment of structured peer debriefing sessions to provide staff with safe opportunities to process emotionally demanding experiences and reduce the accumulation of psychological strain. Regular debriefings can enhance emotional ventilation,

promote shared learning, and prevent the long-term effects of vicarious trauma. Organizations should ensure the availability of accessible and confidential psychological counseling services. Professional mental health support enables employees to manage intrusive thoughts, emotional distress, and stress-related symptoms before they negatively affect performance or lead to burnout. Early psychological intervention can therefore contribute to sustained workforce productivity and retention.

Strengthening supervisory emotional support is equally critical. Supervisors and team leaders should be trained to recognize signs of distress, provide empathetic guidance, and foster open communication within teams. Supportive leadership enhances trust, improves morale, and increases employees' perceived control over challenging work demands. Resilience building initiatives should be integrated into human resource policies and staff development programs. Training in stress management, coping skills, emotional regulation, and self care can equip workers with practical strategies for managing trauma exposure. Embedding such programs within organizational structures promotes long-term workforce sustainability.

Investment in job resources should not be viewed solely as a welfare initiative but as a strategic organizational priority. Strengthening support systems directly contributes to maintaining performance, improving service delivery quality, and ensuring the continuity of humanitarian operations in high-demand environments.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the use of a cross-sectional research design restricts the ability to establish causal relationships among vicarious trauma, social support, and job performance. Because data were collected at a single point in time, it is not possible to determine the direction of influence or changes in these variables over time. Longitudinal studies would provide stronger evidence regarding causal pathways and developmental trends.

Second, the reliance on self-report measures may have introduced response bias. Participants' responses could have been influenced by social desirability, personal perceptions, or recall inaccuracies, which may affect the accuracy of reported experiences and performance levels. Future studies may benefit from incorporating multiple data sources, such as supervisor ratings or objective performance indicators, to enhance measurement validity.

The study was limited to humanitarian workers operating in Southwestern Uganda, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other regions or humanitarian contexts. Organizational structures, cultural factors, and operational environments differ across settings; therefore, caution should be exercised when extending the results beyond the study population.

Conclusion

The study provides empirical evidence that vicarious trauma is associated with reduced job performance among humanitarian workers, primarily through its impact on emotional and cognitive functioning. However, the findings also demonstrate that social support plays a significant protective role by weakening the adverse effects of trauma exposure. Grounded in the Job Demands Resources model, the results emphasize that while trauma exposure represents an unavoidable occupational demand in humanitarian practice, the availability of strong organizational resources can sustain employee effectiveness.

These findings underscore the importance of supportive workplace environments in trauma-exposed professions. Emotional, supervisory, and collegial support enhance coping capacity, reduce psychological strain, and enable workers to maintain productivity even under demanding conditions. Consequently, organizational resources should be viewed as essential components of workforce management rather than supplementary benefits.

Humanitarian agencies are therefore encouraged to prioritize structured support systems as part of strategic organizational planning. Social support mechanisms should not be treated merely as optional welfare initiatives but as critical performance-enhancing interventions that promote staff well-being, improve service delivery, and ensure sustainable humanitarian operations.

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