Burnout and Mindfulness Among Social Workers in Spain: A Structural Equation Model

Mindfulness and Areas of worklife as a burnout predictors

Abstract

Although the number of studies on burnout in social work has increased in recent years, research is still scarce. A similar situation occurs in the area of studies on the effects of mindfulness in this profession, although the research topic has increased exponentially. Based on a quantitative analysis, our study proposes a structural equation model that relates the constructs of burnout, areas of worklife, and dispositional mindfulness among social workers. Results suggest that high levels of mindfulness as well as consistency in the areas of worklife have predictive and preventive effects on the incidence of burnout in social work.

Keywords

burnout, social work, areas of worklife, mindfulness, social services, professional care

Theoretical Framework

Although the number of investigations on burnout in social work has grown in recent years, most of them have focused on the health and education professions (Gil-Monte, 2011). Research about the effects of mindfulness on burnout, empathy, self compassion (Gracia Gonzalo et al., 2019), perceived stress (DiCarlo, Meaux and LaBiche, 2020), and job satisfaction (Choi and Koh, 2015) has also grown widely (Tovar and García-Campayo, 2017), but only few studies have focused specifically on the profession of social work (Crowder and Sears, 2017; Harker et al., 2016; Samios, 2018; Thomas and Otis, 2010).

This study intends to provide a contribution to the analysis of the relationship between burnout and mindfulness, specifically in the social work profession. Based on a contextualization of the body of research carried out in recent years, we present the results of a quantitative analysis on a descriptive level, as well as analysis of correlation among three variables: burnout, six areas of worklife, and mindfulness. Based on those three variables, we designed a structural equation model to measure the influence of mindfulness and of the six areas of worklife on burnout prevention. Our paper concludes

with discussion and main conclusions. Among those conclusions, in the structural equation model we observed a negative influence between dispositional mindfulness and levels of burnout. This study reports the positive influence of high levels of mindfulness and congruence in the areas of work life on the burnout levels of social workers. Mindfulness could thus act as a preventive element to avoid or mitigate burnout in social work.

Maslach and Jackson (1981) define burnout as a syndrome that principally emerges in those who work helping other people, and which is composed of three dimensions: 1) emotional exhaustion, manifested as tension, anxiety, or insomnia, among others; 2) depersonalization or cynicism, characterized by disillusionment, frustration, or lack of confidence in organizations or in people, and 3) low personal achievement, associated with perceptions of low productivity, low effectiveness, and incompetence (Maslach et al., 1981). Burnout is a subjective phenomenon of psychological erosion, generated by a mismatch between what people are and the work they have to perform; it unravels gradually and tends toward chronification (Maslach et al., 2001). The Maslach Burnout Inventory Scale (MBI) developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981) exists in several versions and is regarded as a benchmark in the measurement of the dimensions of burnout.

Burnout is not an individual phenomenon, but emerges in an organizational setting (Maslach et al., 2001). To analyze the burnout triggers that are generated in the work environment, Leiter and Maslach (1999) developed the Areas of Worklife Scale (AWS), a questionnaire that "measures the three opposing dimensions of burnout– energy, implication, and effectiveness – as well as areas of worklife that could contribute positively or negatively to those three dimensions" (Gascon et al., 2013: 2). Leiter and Maslach (2003) verified the relationship of all areas of worklife in the AWS scale with the construct of burnout, and showed that the analysis of these areas could act as an early predictor of burnout (Maslach and Leiter, 2008). This relationship has also been evidenced in studies that had social workers in their sample (Lasalvia et al., 2009; Ray et al., 2013).

As a help-oriented profession based on direct contact with users, social work has traditionally been considered a profession whose members are at risk of burnout (Acker, 2010; Crowder and Sears, 2017). Studies on burnout in social work have appeared since

the 1980s (Cherniss, 1980), although most research has tended to focus on the health and teaching professions (Gil-Monte, 2011).

The number of studies on burnout and social work is currently growing, thus reflecting increasing concern for the analysis of professional practice, as well as for the development of personal and professional resources designed to address the needs of the social work environment (Esteban-Ramiro and Fernández-Montaño, 2017).

Social work presents specific characteristics that determine the risk of burnout: contextual elements, such as the profession's underrated image, along with great need for improvement in terms of professional status (Lázaro, 2004); a strict bureaucracy that can limit professional capacity (Zamanillo, 2011); a series of tasks that become routine (Ander-Egg, 1993); instability and precariousness of employment, as well as resource shortages that make it difficult to intervene according to professional criteria (Kadushin and Harkness, 2014). It is important to point out that social work recognizes social justice, peace, and human rights as fundamental values and concerns (Lundy and Van Wormer, 2013), with the hope of transforming society to increase the well-being of individuals, families, groups, and communities (Boddy et al., 2017). Such adopted values can paradoxically generate more chances of developing burnout, since the syndrome develops especially among those who love and feel a vocational orientation towards their profession (Ferrer Puig, 2005).

The influence of sociodemographic factors on the emergence of burnout among social workers has also been analyzed, with divergent results. Some studies have found higher levels of emotional exhaustion among women (Vilá et al., 2015; Caravaca et al., 2019), and others among men (Domínguez et al., 2017). A similar situation occurs with marital status. Some studies show significant associations between not having a partner and burnout among social workers (Caravaca et al., 2019), while others indicate higher levels of burnout among married people (Barría, 2003). Furthermore, some results show a relationship between higher education level and a lower degree of burnout (Alfaro de Prado, 2009).

In terms of the labor sector, studies indicate a high level of burnout among professionals in the public sector (De la Fuente and Sánchez, 2012), as well as in the separate dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion (Facal-Fondo, 2012), depersonalization (Caravaca et al., 2019), and a sense of low professional efficacy (Caravaca et al., 2019;

Gómez et al., 2019), surpassing the level of burnout experienced by workers in the private sector (Acker, 2010). Within the public sector, general social service professionals have a greater sense of low efficacy (Aragón, 2006), while in specialized social services there tends to be a lower risk of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, as well as a greater sense of personal achievement (Gómez et al., 2019). While Soto and González (2018) find that social workers with a stable contract suffer less exhaustion, other authors such as Vilá et al. (2015), affirm the opposite.

The importance of the job environment is increasingly singled out as an important modulating variable that plays a role in the onset of burnout (Blanco, 2006). A negative work environment with interpersonal conflicts, inadequate communication (Lázaro, 2004), or a lack of teamwork (Vilá et al., 2015), can lead to burnout among social workers.

For all these reasons, it is considered highly important to develop caring habits that allow social workers to face stressful situations, thereby helping them to prevent burnout (McGarrigle and Walsh, 2011), starting in the initial training phase (Warren and Chappell Deckert, 2019). Various studies on self-care have shown the importance of leisure and free time for the health of social workers (Lee and Miller, 2013), as well as social support (family, friends, relevant people) and professional support in the workplace (Hombrados-Mendieta and Cosano-Rivas, 2011) as basic tools for self-care and burnout prevention (Martin et al., 2020).

As one of these "caring practices", the adoption of mindfulness practices is increasingly common: they have shown benefits in health and quality of life (Hick, 2009; McGarrigle and Walsh, 2011). These caring practices have turned out to be especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which social workers have faced particularly daunting challenges in terms of providing customer service. To ensure remote interventions, social workers have made significant efforts to adapt technologically to new circumstances (European Social Network, 2020). They have also had to adopt a more intense work pace while showing a greater degree of commitment and dedication, sometimes without sufficient protection or adequate recognition (Fantova, 2020). All of these factors tend to increase their sense of overload. Mindfulness can decrease stress in challenging contexts such as these, while increasing workers' mental capacity to cope with their fear of COVID-19 as well as with other mental health issues (Majeed et al., 2020).

Mindfulness can be defined as "awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment." (Kabat-Zinn, 2003: 145). These practices were introduced progressively in the 1960s in the West, through the works of Hanh (1988), and Kabat-Zinn (2003), a pioneer in the creation of mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) that include practices adapted to Western culture. These tools can contribute to social work in three dimensions (Hick, 2009): in professionals' own self-care and self-knowledge (the internal dimension), in interventions with individuals, families, groups, and communities (the micro dimension), as well as in community and political interventions (the mezzo and macro dimension). Further contributions of mindfulness to the area of social work can be noted in a greater awareness of the importance of care (McGarrigle and Walsh, 2011), increasing compassion or acceptance (Yan Ho et al., 2019), and a decrease in judgmental attitudes (Kinnunen et al., 2020).

Studies that analyze the effects of mindfulness on social workers are still scarce (Trowbridge and Lawson, 2016), although they are currently on the rise. These investigations have found significant relationships between the practice of mindfulness and the reduction of burnout (and its individual dimensions) in social workers in general (Crowder and Sears, 2017; Thomas, 2012; Thomas and Otis, 2010), in geriatric social workers (Pandya, 2019), and in human services professionals in general (Hanna and Pidgeon, 2018). Among these professionals, mindfulness practice has additionally been associated with lower levels of compassion fatigue (Thomas, 2012; Thomas and Otis, 2010), greater resilience (Hanna and Pidgeon, 2018), greater compassion satisfaction (Pandya, 2019), and a greater degree of mental well-being (Goodman and Shorling, 2012).

It is important to note that, in addition to research on the effects of mindfulness practice, further studies have analyzed dispositional or trait mindfulness, many of them with the help of the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) by Brown and Ryan (2003). Dispositional or trait mindfulness can be described as an innate tendency "present in the daily life of individuals, which include, among others, the ability to not act with reactivity to internal experiences, to observe, to pay attention and to deal adequately with sensations, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, to act with awareness and to not judge the experience" (Cepeda-Hernández, 2015: 5). Dispositional or trait mindfulness is a

construct that is different from the state of mindfulness achieved during meditation (Thomson and Waltz, 2007).

Among the latter studies, Samios (2018) concluded that a higher level of dispositional awareness in the moment leads to less burnout, while trait mindfulness dampens the negative effects of burnout and is likewise a predictor of life satisfaction. Harker et al. (2016), showed a relationship between trait mindfulness and lower levels of burnout and psychological distress. For their part, In Park and Kyung Nam (2020) showed that remaining in a state of mindfulness is an effective strategy to mitigate role conflict and thereby reduce burnout. Puolakanaho et al. (2018) found that mindfulness and acceptance skills are significant predictors of well-being on the job; they associated burnout symptoms not only with workplace conditions, but also with those skills.

Method

Sample and procedure

Participants in this study were a convenience sample of 271 social workers currently working in the Region of Aragón, Spain. According to the information provided by the Aragón Association of Social Workers, 785 social workers were actively working in the Region of Aragón at the time of the study.

For the distribution of the questionnaires, we requested the collaboration of the Aragón Association of Social Workers. They included a link to the questionnaires in their monthly email bulletin distributed to all members. In addition, questionnaires were delivered in printed form and collected in person at several centers. In all cases, participants received an information sheet, questionnaires, and a letter of informed consent and data protection. Before distributing the questionnaires, the study design was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Community of Aragon (CEICA).

Of those 271 professionals, 232 were women (85.6%), and 39 were men (14.4%). The average age was 42.97 years (SD=10.04; range 23-63). The average age of the women was 43.08 years (SD=9.73), and that of the men was 42.37 (SD=9.73). Table 1 shows the sample's socio-demographic characteristics.

31.7% of the respondents had obtained a Master's degree, and only 1.5% had a doctorate. Regarding marital status, 79.3% of the sample had a stable partner, and 57.9% had children. 84.1% did not suffer from any chronic disease, and 66% lived near their workplace. In terms of labor sector, 54.6% worked in the public sphere: the most represented types of centers were community social services (41%), non-governmental organizations (28.8%), and specialized social services (10 %). 58.7% had a permanent contract, and 89% worked full time. Finally, 55.4% had practiced mindfulness techniques at some point in their life, and more than 90% of the participants practiced exercise or leisure activities during the week.

[Table 1 approximately here]

Measures

Demographic questionnaire

A self-elaborated sociodemographic questionnaire was provided, which included a series of socio-personal, educational and work variables. The relationship among those variables is included in Table 1. "Participants' features are described in Table 1"

Burnout. Areas of Worklife Scale (AWS)

The Areas of Worklife Scale AWS was created by Leiter and Maslach (2003) with the purpose of ascertaining the extent to which certain organizational environment factors can influence the emergence and development of burnout. The tool used in this study was the Spanish version of the survey, elaborated by Gascón et al. (2013).

The survey is composed of 45 items distributed among two questionnaires. A first, 16-item questionnaire assesses the three dimensions opposed to burnout: energy (the contrary of exhaustion), efficacy (as opposed to inefficacy), and implication (as opposed to depersonalization or cynicism), on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (“never”) to 6 (“daily”). This subscale has shown high correlation with the MBI dimensions, as well as adequate psychometric properties in both Spanish and English (Gascón et al., 2013).

A second questionnaire of 29 items measures the level of an individual's congruence or incongruity with their work in six areas (workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values) on a five-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). An incongruity perceived by the individual between their values and those six areas serves as a detection indicator for burnout; a higher degree of congruence indicates a greater probability of work motivation (Gascon et al., 2013). Cronbach's Alpha for this scale lies between 0.71 (values) and 0.89 (workload). The alpha values for the scales meet the 0.70 cirterion (Gascón et al., 2013).

Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS)

The Mindful Attention Awareness Scale MAAS is a brief scale that assesses the individual's dispositional capacity to be aware and conscious in daily life experiences (Soler et al., 2012). It consists of 15 items focused on attention/awareness components of the mindfulness construct on a 7-point Linkert scale from 1 ("almost always") to 6 ("rarely"). High scores in the average of the total of the items indicate a greater state of mindfulness. The scale can be used on individuals who have and who do not have meditation experience, and is used frequently in mindfulness research.

In our study we used the Spanish version of the MAAS (Soler et al., 2012). Cronbach's alpha for this scale yielded 0.89, comparable to the results attained by the English version.

Analysis

First, we carried out a descriptive analysis of the variables used in the subsequent structural model, taking into account the mean and standard deviation of the mindfulness scale MAAS, the six areas of worklife scale AWS, and the Burnout scales. In this initial exploration, we also took into account a series of socio-personal and work variables, as well as their influence on the mean of those scales, by running an analysis of variance (ANOVA and Pearson test for correlations). In addition, we have used the eta-squared statistical test to calculate the measure of effect size, as well as the 95% confidence interval in relation to the mean of the values for each of the variables that have turned out to be significant. We then analysed the correlation coefficients among the three variables that would subsequently form the structural equation model.

Derived from our theoretical review, the fundamental objective of this research was to test the influence of mindfulness and the six areas of worklife on the prevention of burnout. For this purpose, we carried out an analysis using a structural equation model with the IBM-SPSS program and its AMOS extension (v.22). We tested the proposed structural model, including the observed variables and latent variables. In the hypothetical model, influences of socio-personal and job covariates were also tested: as they were not significant, they were eliminated from the final model. In order to ascertain which values of the parameters make the observed data more likely, we chose maximum likelihood estimation (MLE). Standardized regression coefficients (beta) were included to report the results and their level of significance ($p < .001$). Finally, we tested our model's goodness of fit using x2 / d.f, RMSEA, CFI, TLI, and GFI as indicators, following Byrne (2010).

Results

First, the statistically significant relationships and correlations among the burnout constructs (BURN), the six areas of worklife (AWS), and mindfulness (MAAS) are presented in this section. In addition, those analyses are presented for each of the dimensions or areas that make up the scales. Appendix 1 shows the lower and upper levels of each mean at a 95% confidence interval.

- El Apéndice 1 muestra los niveles inferiores y superiores de cada media a un intervalo de confianza del 95%

In the case of the burnout construct, as shown in Table 2, significant relationships were found with socio-personal and employment variables: weak evidence about employment status of the couple (mean "unemployed" = 2.12; $p = .048$; $\eta^2 = .018$) and professional college membership (mean "yes" = 1.81; $p = .035$; $\eta^2 = .016$); and strong evidence about having performed meditative practices sometime in life (mean "yes" = 1.86; $p = .009$; $\eta^2 = .025$).

As shown in Table 2, weak evidence about significant relationships were obtained between the exhaustion dimension and the variables: employment status of the couple (mean "unemployed" = 2.68; $p = .027$; $\eta^2 = .023$); professional college membership (mean "yes" = 2.15; $p = .016$; $\eta^2 = .022$); type of contract (mean "indefinite contract" = 2.16; $p = .044$; $\eta^2 = .015$), and the performance of coordination and supervision positions (mean "yes" = 2.27; $p = .033$; $\eta^2 = .017$). Also, the results shows strong evidence relations

with the variable having performed meditative practices sometime in life (mean "yes" = 2.25; p = .002; η^2 = .036). In the depersonalization dimension, the analysis shows weak evidence of relationships with the variables of having performed meditative practices sometime in life (mean "yes" = 1.49; p = .032; η^2 = .017), type of current contract ("indefinite contract" mean = 1.49; p = .026; η^2 = .018), and work shift (mean "night" = 3.20; p = .017; η^2 = .044). Finally, weak evidence of statistically significant relationships were obtained between the efficacy dimension and the variable type of work center (mean "public" = 3.75; p = .022; η^2 = .028); and very strong evidence or relationships with the variable educational level completed (mean "doctorate" = 2.63; p = .000; η^2 = .60). The lower mean scores in this dimension were taken into account, since they indicate a sense of low efficacy.

[Table 2 approximately here]

Significant correlations can be observed between the burnout construct, the sociopersonal and work variables, and: the practice of exercise (r = -. 13 *), the performance of leisure activities during the week (r = -.12 *), and the assessment of the work environment (r = -. 43 ***).

The AWS construct has weak evidence of relationships with the variables gender (mean "man" = 3.44; p = .032; η^2 = .017) and type of workday (mean "part-time" = 3.45; p = .49; η^2 = .014); and also shows strong evidence of relationship with the variable professional college membership (mean "no" = 3.43; p = .003; η^2 = .033), as shown in Table 3.

In terms of analysis by areas, as likewise indicated in Table 3, the workload area presents weak evidence of statistically significant relationships with the variable type of centre (mean "hospital / health center" = 3.35; p = .020; η^2 = .072). This area also shows strong evidence with the variables gender (mean "man" = 3.17; p = .001; η^2 = .024); coordination/supervision position (mean "no" = 2.95; p = .008; η^2 = .026) and professional college membership (mean "no" = 3.07; p = .008; η^2 = .026).

In the control area, weak evidence of significant relationships are obtained with the variables period of working leave (mean "from 15 days to 1 month" = 3.54; p = .049; η^2

= .348); and home-workplace proximity (mean “no” = 3.39; p = .012; η^2 = .025); as well as very strong evidence with the variable type of center (mean “Specialized Social Services” = 3.68; p = .000; η^2 = .097). In the reward area, weak evidence relationships can be observed with marital status (mean “with a stable partner” = 3.47; p = .022; η^2 = .020), while the justice area shows weak evidence related to the variable chronic disease (mean "no" = 3.13; p = .012; η^2 = .023), and strong evidence related to the variables gender (mean “men” = 3.37; p = .007; η^2 = .027), and professional college membership (mean “no” = 3.29; p = .003; η^2 = .032). Finally, the values area only shows a weak evidence of relationships with the variable home-workplace proximity (mean ”no” = 3.61; p = .025; η^2 = .019), while the community area does not show evidence of relationships with any of the socio-personal and work variables analysed. Appendix 2 shows the lower and upper limits of each of the means obtained at a 95% confidence interval.

- El apéndice 2 muestra los límites inferiores y superiores de cada una de las medias obtenidas a un intervalo de confianza del 95%.

[Table 3 approximately here]

Moreover, our analysis shows significant correlations between the AWS construct and the variables: exercise practice (r = .13 *), leisure practice during the week (r = .15 *), and work environment (r = .59 ***).

Finally, regarding the MAAS mindfulness construct, statistically significant relations are only obtained with the variable of having performed meditative practices sometime in life, with strong evidence by those who have not performed this type of practice (4.07; p =.002; η^2 = .034). In addition, statistically significant correlations are observed between this construct and the performance of leisure activities during the week (r = .13 *), as well as with the work environment variable (r = .16 **).

In the descriptive statistics of the constructs of the three scales, the burnout construct (BURNMEDIA) shows a mean of 1.74 (SD = .81), the construct of six areas of worklife (AWSMEDIA) reaches an average of 3.28 (SD = .50), and the mindfulness construct (MAAS) presents a mean of 3.89 (SD = .89).

Before analyzing the structural model, we carried out a correlation analysis among the model’s latent variables. As can be seen in Table 4, the correlation coefficients among

the three variables are strong and significant (r> .03; p <.01). The “six areas of worklife” scale AWS and the mindfulness scale MAAS both correlate negatively with Burnout (-.646 ** and -.463 ** respectively), showing an inverse relationship. The correlation between the AWS scale and the MAAS scale is positive (.413 **).

[Table 4 approximately here]

We proceeded to test the structural model of relationships between these latent variables: the graphical representation and structural coefficients are shown in Figure 1. As can be observed, mindfulness (MAAS) has a positive and significant influence on the six areas of worklife AWS (.427 ***), and a negative influence on burnout levels (-.259 ***). It is relevant to note that congruence in the six areas of worklife has a thoroughly positive effect on the prevention of burnout by exerting a negative impact on this latent variable (-.694). In addition, in terms of indirect effects, the effect of the MAAS scale mediated by the AWS in the Burnout scale would be -.296 ***. This model explains 18.3% of the variance of the AWS and a highly relevant 70.2% of Burnout, so that high levels of mindfulness and a great degree of congruence in the six areas of worklife would be predictive variables for the prevention of burnout.

[Figure 1 approximately here]

Discussion

First of all, this study has attempted to verify the relationships between burnout, areas of work life, and dispositional mindfulness in social work.

In this way, our correlation analysis between the model’s three latent variables shows high and statistically significant correlation coefficients. The MAAS scale shows an inverse relationship with the burnout scale, coinciding with the results of Tomas and Otis (2010), as well as Tomas (2012). Their results could be related to the correlations between the AWS and MAAS scales detected in our study, such as the correlation we found

between a higher level of mindfulness as a dispositional state or trait, on the one hand, and greater congruence in the areas of worklife, on the other.

In the testing of the structural model of relationships among latent variables, a positive influence of mindfulness (MAAS) on the six areas of worklife is obtained, (AWS), along with a negative influence on burnout. This could indicate that a greater presence of mindfulness as a trait or dispositional state could increase the levels of congruence in the different aspects measured by the AWS scale in each of its areas (manageable workload, control, reward, community, justice, and values). Furthermore, the areas in this scale would help prevent the dimensions of burnout (exhaustion, depersonalization, and low efficacy). This last result is in line with studies that show that a higher level of trait mindfulness leads to a lower level of burnout (Harker et al., 2016; In Park and Kyung Nam 2020), also cushioning its negative effects (Samios, 2018). Trait mindfulness can thus be regarded as an effective tool for burnout prevention (Puolakanaho et al. 2018).

The results of the equation model presented in Figure 1 also show that congruence in the six areas of worklife has a thoroughly positive effect on the prevention of burnout by exerting a negative impact on this latent variable. This result would reinforce the notion of the importance of the six areas of worklife as early predictors of burnout (Maslach and Leiter, 2008), also in social workers (Ray et al., 2013). It would also underscore the importance of the congruence of the areas of worklife as protective factors against burnout (Lasalvia et al., 2009). The study of these areas is especially relevant in the midst of the current pandemic situation, where social workers have been on the frontline and their overload as well as lack of protection have become more evident (European Social Network, 2020; Fantova, 2020).

In addition, the model developed herein explains statistically the variance of burnout to a very large extent (70.2%), as well as the variance of the AWS construct (18.3%).

Moreover, a statistically significant relationship can be observed between the burnout construct along with two of its dimensions (exhaustion and depersonalization), on the one hand, and the performance of meditative practices on the other, so that those who have carried out this type of practice present more exhaustion and depersonalization. These results are at odds with research that indicates the positive effects of different practices based on mindfulness in reducing burnout (Goodman and Shorling, 2012; Hanna and Pandya, 2019; Pidgeon, 2018; Thomas, 2012; Thomas and Otis, 2010). A similar situation

occurs in the analysis of the mindfulness construct (MAAS), which again presents statistically significant relationships with the fact of not having practiced meditative techniques at any time in life.

These results may be due to the fact that the research question "Have you ever performed meditative practices or mind-body techniques in your life?" does not specify when they were last performed or were last practiced, the duration of the practices, and their frequency; thus there is a limitation in the analysis of their possible benefits. In this sense, various studies indicate that the benefits derived from mindfulness practices require long-term commitment (Hick, 2009).

Secondly, we deemed that it would be relevant to analyze the influence of sociodemographic factors on burnout in social work. In our analysis of sociodemographic factors, we observed (in the p values and the test eta esquared) some weak statistic evidence of a relationship in the analyzed sample between temporary work contracts and the exhaustion and depersonalization dimensions of the burnout construct (BURN), in line with other studies that show a greater relationship between job instability and exhaustion (Vilá et al., 2015).

The low-efficacy dimension yields statistically strong evidence of relationships with the subject's educational level: thus, those who have doctorates display a greater degree of burnout, in contrast with studies that found a relationship between a higher academic level and a lower degree of burnout (Alfaro de Prado, 2009). Moreover, the sensation of low efficacy present wike evidence related with work in public-sector centres. This result is in line with previous studies that have shown a relation between social work in public centres and a sensation of low efficacy (Caravaca et al., 2019; Gómez et al., 2019), as well as with overall burnout levels (Acker, 2010; De la Fuente and Sánchez, 2012).

Regarding the significant relationships between sociopersonal factors and areas of worklife that can influence burnout, the results show statistically a weak evidence of relationships between the feeling of control at work and the performance of work activity in specialized social services, as well as between the workload and work activity in hospitals and health centers (which could be considered specialized centers). These results would be in line with other studies that show a higher level of burnout in general service social workers (Aragón, 2006), or a lower emotional exhaustion,

depersonalization, and greater personal achievement among social workers of specialized social services (Gómez et al., 2019).

Our analysis also shows strong statistical evidence of relationships between the gender variable and two areas of worklife: (AWS): workload and justice, which could lead to less burnout. In addition, a weak evidence of relationship is also obtained between the male gender and the results of the general construct of six areas AWS. These results could be consistent with the higher levels of emotional fatigue observed in female social workers (Caravaca et al., 2019; Vilá et al., 2015).

In addition, the fact of having a stable partner has been statistically associated with higher levels of congruence in the reward area, which could lead to lower levels of burnout, according to previous research indicating a relationship between the lack of a partner and higher levels of burnout (Caravaca et al., 2019).

It should be noted that the three constructs analyzed herein show statistically significant correlations with the performance of leisure activities during the week. These correlations are also present between the burnout construct (BURN), the AWS six areas of worklife construct (AWS), and the practice of exercise. These results show the importance of such practices oriented toward a healthy lifestyle, including time spent with family and friends (Martin et al., 2020; McGarrigle and Walsh, 2011) as a tool for self-care and burnout prevention in the social work profession (Lee and Miller, 2013).

Finally, the three constructs show very strong statistical evidence of correlation with the work environment, both in the p values and in the statistical test eta squared. A positive assessment of the work environment would lead to lower levels of burnout, a greater degree of congruence in the areas of worklife, and improved mindfulness levels among social workers. This result is similar to those obtained by Blanco (2006), and it is in line with authors who highlight the importance of reducing interpersonal conflicts, or improving communication and teamwork (Lázaro, 2004; Vilá et al., 2015), in order to improve the work environment in the social work profession.

Conclusions

Many previous investigations have studied the relationship between mindfulness and burnout prevention. This article's specific contribution is the presentation of a structural

equation model that aims to simultaneously relate the burnout constructs, the areas of worklife, and mindfulness as a dispositional trait specifically in the social work profession.

We conclude that high levels of mindfulness (MAAS) along with congruence in the six areas of worklife (AWS) would act as predictive variables, and therefore be effective, in preventive terms, of burnout syndrome.

It would be important to go into further depth on the subject of burnout and social work, as the latter is a profession involving special risk, especially in view of the organizational environments within which it takes place. Since mindfulness is a potentially effective variable in preventive terms, it is also important to continue analyzing the implications of its use in the advancement of self-care, the prevention of burnout, and the promotion of health in social workers, as part of overall caring for the internal dimension (self-care and self-knowledge), as described by social workers such as Hick (2009), but also in the context of professional interventions, and, furthermore, within the framework of public health policies.

The prominence displayed by the socio-personal variables related to leisure and free time, exercise and positive assessment of the work environment have had is remarkable in the three analyzed constructs, thereby underscoring the relevance of these self-care tools for social workers. It is thus of vital importance for organizations to commit themselves to the promotion of work/life balance measures in order to prevent burnout in their employees.

This study analyzed the relationships between burnout, areas of worklife, and mindfulness as a dispositional state or trait. It likewise took into account the eventual practice of mindfulness tools at some earlier point in life; the information collected in the corresponding question was nevertheless incomplete regarding the time of practice, duration, and frequency. This limited the analysis of the results pertaining to that factor.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the overload and uncertainty of social work professionals around the world, revealing weaknesses of the social service systems. The repercussions of this new scenario for social workers are still being analyzed – also in terms of burnout. In any case, the need to invest more resources in developing care tools for professionals has become evident, and such care tools could include mindfulness approaches. Perhaps this new context could represent a turning point: an opportunity to

reconceive social services by ascribing greater importance to the care of their professionals.

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Tables

Table 1

Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (n=271)

VARIABLE	%
Gender	
Female	85.6
Male	14.4
Age	
<45	51.6
>46	44.7
DK/DA	3.7
Educational level completed	
Bachellor´s Degree	57.9
Postgraduate Degree	8.9
Master´s Degree	31.7
PhD	1.5
Marital status	
Stable partner	79.3
Without a stable partner	18.5
DK/DA	2.2
Employment status of the couple	
Employed	92.1
Unemployed	7.9
Children at home	
With children	57.9
Without children	42.1
Chronic disease	
Yes	15.9
No	84.1
Working leave the previous year	
Yes	15.1
No	84.9
Period of working leave	
≤ 3 months	82.1
>3 months	17.9
Home-workplace proximity	
Yes	66.8

No	33.2
Work center	
Public	54.6
Private	45.0
Free profesional practice	.4
Type of center	
Community social services	41.0
Specialized social services	10.0
Educational centre	3.0
Hospital/Health centre	7.4
Courts	.7
Penal institutions	.7
Gerontology/Geriatrics	2.2
University: teaching/research work	2.6
Non-governmental organization	28.8
Others	3.7
Seniority in the centre	
<10 years	57.3
10 to 20 years	27.2
20,1 to 30 years	11.9
>30 years	3.7
Type of current contract	
Indefinite contract	58.7
Temporary contract	41.3
Work shift	
Day	96.6
Night	.4
Rotation	1.5
DK/DA	1.5
Type of workday	
Full-time	89.3
Part-time	10.7
Management position	
Yes	13.7
No	86.3
Coordination/Supervision position	
Yes	32.8
No	67.2
Years of work experience	
<15 years	50.8

>16 years	49.1
Professional college membership	
Yes	72.3
No	27.7
Meditative practices sometime in life	
Yes	55.4
No	44.6
Smoke	
Yes	28.0
No	72.0
Drink alcohol	
Yes	79.3
No	20.7
Excercise	
Yes	90.0
No	10.0
Leisure activities during the week	
Yes	91.9
No	8.1

DK/DA: Do not know / Do not answer

Table 2

Significant relationships between burnout dimensions, the burnout construct (BURNMEDIA), and socio-personal and work variables

		Exhaustion		Depersonalization		Efficacy		BURNMEDIA	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Educational level completed	Bachelor´s Degree					3.75	.99		
	Postgraduate Degree					4.19	1.06		
	Master´s Degree					4.15	1.04		
	PhD					2.63**	1.44		
Employment status of the couple	Employed	2.00	1.21					1.72	.80
	Unemployed	2.68*	1.21					2.12*	.83
Professional college membership	Yes	2.15*	1.23					1.81*	.80
	No	1.75	1.13					1.58	.81
Meditative practices sometime in life	Yes	2.25**	1.30	1.49*	1.18			1.86**	.85
	No	1.78	1.06	1.21	.89			1.60	.74
Work center	Public					3.75*	1.11		
	Private					4.09	.93		

Type of current contract	Indefinite contract	2.16*	1.24	1.49*	1.10
	Termporary contract	1.86	1.16	1.20	1.00
Work shift	Day			1.35	1.03
	Night			3.20*	-
	Rotation			2.80	2.40
Coordination/Supervision position	Yes	2.27*	1.26		
	No	1.93	1.18		

*p<0.05 **p<0.01***p<0.001

SD: Standard Deviation

Table 3

Significant relationships between areas of worklife, construct AWSMEDIA, and socio-personal and work variables

		Workload		Control		Reward		Justice		Values		AWSMEDIA	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Gender	Female	2.81	.78					3.04	.66			3.25	.48
	Male	3.17**	.88					3.37**	.91			3.44*	.63
Marital status	Stable partner					3.47*	.68						
	Without stable partner					3.21	.89						
Chronic disease	Yes							2.84	.61				
	No							3.13*	.72				
Period of working leave	1 - 14 days			3.29	.69								
	15 days – 1 month			3.54*	.64								
	1.1 months - 3 months			3.26	.32								
	3.1 months - 5 months			3.17	.24								
	5.1 months - 10 months			2.89	.19								
	10.1 months - 15 months			1.67	.94								

Type of centre	Community social services	2.72	.78	3.14	.67				
	Specialised social services	2.94	.72	3.68**	.57				
	Educational centre	3.29	.81	3.46	.64				
	Hospital-Health centre	3.35*	.60	3.30	.74				
	Courts	3.08	1.53	2.50	.24				
	Penal institutions	2.92	.35	4.17	.71				
	Gerontology/Geriatrics	3.22	.85	3.06	.65				
	University: teaching/research work	3.14	.48	2.52	.69				
	Non-governmental organization	2.75	.84	3.21	.77				
	Others	3.25	.95	3.40	.75				
Type of workday	Full-time							3.26	.50
	Part-time							3.45*	.49
Home-workplace proximity	Yes			3.15	.74	3.42	.61		
	No			3.39*	.65	3.61*	.67		

Coordination/Supervision position	Yes	2.68	.78				
	No	2.95**	.80				
Professional college membership	Yes	2.78	.79	3.01	.67	3.22	.48
	No	3.07**	.80	3.29**	.76	3.43**	.54

*p<0.05**p<0.01***p<0.001

SD: Standard Deviation

Table 4

Correlations between the variables of the structural model: Burnout (BURN), Six Areas of Worklife (AWS) and Mindfulness (MAAS)

	BURN	AWS	MAAS
BURN	1		
AWS	-.646**	1	
MAAS	-.463**	.413**	1

**p<.01

n.=271

Figure 1:

Structural model of relationships between the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), the Six Areas of Worklife Scale (AWS) and the Burnout Scale (BURN)