



Behind the case files: The psychological toll of investigating sexual and corporal abuse in South African schools

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Abstract – This study explored the psychological toll experienced by South African Council for Educators (SACE) investigators responsible for handling cases of sexual and corporal abuse in schools. Guided by a transformative research paradigm and employing a qualitative approach, the study adopted a Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) design to foreground investigators' lived experiences and co-generate actionable insights. Sixteen investigators (six females, ten males) from six provinces were purposively sampled for semi-structured interviews, which were transcribed and thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Findings revealed profound psychological strain shaped by seven interrelated themes: threats to personal safety and security, vicarious trauma and emotional overload, secondary traumatization through repeated exposure to sensitive cases, systemic obstruction and lack of interdepartmental collaboration, role overload and professional burnout, ethical dissonance and moral injury, and helplessness resulting from inadequate training and dysfunctional institutional systems. These experiences were exacerbated by insufficient psychosocial support and organizational inefficiencies, often leaving investigators isolated, emotionally exhausted, and vulnerable to secondary traumatic stress and moral injury. The study highlights the urgent need for systemic reforms, including structured psychosocial support, formal debriefing, clear role delineation, interdepartmental coordination, and enhanced training in trauma-informed investigative practices. By amplifying the voices of an often-overlooked professional group, this research underscores the psychological risks inherent in child abuse investigations and advocates for organisational interventions that protect SACE investigators' well-being while strengthening accountability in school-based abuse cases.

Keywords: Moral injury, Participatory action research, Psychological distress, SACE investigators, Secondary traumatic stress, Vicarious trauma

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I. INTRODUCTION

INVESTIGATING cases of sexual and corporal abuse in schools is a profoundly distressing and emotionally demanding responsibility, particularly within the South African context where such incidents remain alarmingly prevalent. South African schools continue to be sites of significant violations of children's rights, with both sexual abuse and corporal punishment persisting despite legal prohibitions. According to the South African Council for Educators (SACE) and the Department of Basic Education (DBE), thousands of allegations of educator misconduct involving physical and sexual abuse are reported annually (South African Council for Educators [SACE], 2020; DBE, 2019). SACE Investigators working on these cases, whether internal to education departments, part of statutory bodies, or operating within legal frameworks, are routinely exposed to harrowing details, traumatic narratives, and secondary victimisation, which can have serious psychological consequences.

Research shows that professionals tasked with investigating child abuse cases are at high risk of experiencing vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and even symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Gottfried & Bride, 2018; Baird & Kracen, 2006). These mental health impacts are often exacerbated by organisational factors such as lack of institutional support, excessive caseloads, and limited access to psychological counselling (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). In South

Africa, investigators are further burdened by complex socio-cultural and legal dynamics, including community resistance, fear of retaliation, and inadequate protective mechanisms for whistle-blowers and complainants (Mathews et al., 2016; Richter & Dawes, 2008).

The psychological toll on investigators is intensified by the emotional dissonance of having to maintain professional objectivity while simultaneously demonstrating empathy toward victims and survivors. This emotional labour characterised by the regulation and suppression of personal emotions to meet the demands of the role, often remains unacknowledged, yet it is a significant contributor to emotional exhaustion, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue (Hensel et al., 2015; Molnar et al., 2017). Although trauma-informed care frameworks have increasingly prioritised the needs of survivors, considerably less attention has been directed toward the mental health and occupational well-being of professionals responsible for managing and investigating these cases (Redmond et al., 2022). As a result, many investigators face cumulative psychological strain without adequate institutional or psychosocial support systems.

This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of investigators who handle cases of sexual and corporal abuse in South African schools. Through a qualitative lens, it aims to illuminate the psychosocial burdens, coping strategies, and institutional gaps affecting these professionals. By foregrounding their voices, the research intends to contribute to a broader understanding of occupational trauma in child protection work and advocate for more responsive, trauma-informed systems that protect not only victims but also those who fight for justice

on their behalf.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Investigating cases of sexual and corporal abuse in schools is a profoundly challenging and emotionally taxing responsibility. Although significant attention has been paid to the psychological impact of abuse on victims, the mental health of those tasked with investigating such cases, particularly in the education sector, has received relatively limited scholarly attention, especially in the Global South. This review draws on recent literature to explore the psychological effects of investigating school-based abuse, the institutional context of such investigations in South Africa, and the broader phenomenon of secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma among professionals in child protection roles.

School-based abuse in the South African context

South African schools remain sites of concern regarding the safety and protection of learners, with both sexual abuse and corporal punishment persisting despite legal prohibitions. Research by Mathews and Gould (2018) highlights that South Africa continues to face systemic failures in safeguarding children within educational environments, where power imbalances and silence around abuse often enable perpetrators. The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention's 2012 and 2021 national school violence studies have shown that a substantial proportion of learners experience violence from teachers, peers, and other authority figures (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention [CJCP], 2021). Despite the South African Schools Act outlawing corporal punishment and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, in 2007, criminalising sexual misconduct, underreporting and delayed responses remain prevalent (SACE, 2022).

Investigators, often drawn from education departments, regulatory bodies such as the SACE, and social service agencies, are regularly exposed to traumatic disclosures, required to assess the credibility of testimonies, and must navigate emotionally charged interactions with learners, caregivers, and school personnel. These responsibilities place significant emotional demands on them, particularly in cases involving child abuse and neglect. The psychological burden is exacerbated by limited institutional support, insufficient trauma-informed training, and a lack of structured debriefing mechanisms (Cortis & Katz, 2022). Without adequate systemic safeguards, these professionals are at increased risk of vicarious trauma, emotional exhaustion, and burnout.

Psychological consequences of investigating abuse

Professionals engaged in the investigation of child abuse and trauma-related incidents frequently report symptoms associated with vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. Vicarious trauma refers to the internal transformation that occurs in individuals who empathically engage with others' trauma and gradually absorb their emotional suffering (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Howarth, 2021). More recent studies confirm that exposure to repeated traumatic narratives can alter investigators' worldview, personal relationships, and mental health functioning (MacDonald et al., 2022). Professionals involved in child abuse investigations are frequently exposed to emotionally distressing material, leading to high rates of secondary traumatic stress and burnout, particularly when institutional support is inadequate (Vang et al., 2022). In South Africa, these challenges are intensified by poor intersectoral coordination, resource constraints, and overwhelming caseloads (Mashego et al., 2023). A qualitative study of child protection social workers in Gauteng revealed feelings of helplessness, frustration, and personal insecurity, with some reporting threats from community members during investigations, further compounding their emotional burden (Strydom et al., 2017). These systemic and contextual stressors significantly undermine the well-being and effectiveness of those tasked with protecting vulnerable children.

Institutional and emotional labour dynamics

The concept of emotional labour is highly relevant to the experiences

of abuse investigators. Hochschild (2012) defines emotional labour as the effort involved in managing personal emotions to fulfil the emotional requirements of a professional role. For investigators handling abuse cases, this entails maintaining emotional control while navigating distressing disclosures, adversarial environments, and often insufficient institutional support. Contemporary research highlights that unacknowledged and unsupported emotional labour significantly contributes to burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue among professionals in trauma-exposed roles (Guerzoni, 2020; Molnar et al., 2020).

Investigators in South Africa often describe their roles as emotionally isolating, with limited access to debriefing structures or psychological support. Research shows that frontline child protection workers frequently experience emotional exhaustion and secondary traumatic stress due to chronic exposure to trauma and insufficient organisational care (Sprang et al., 2011). Neglecting their psychosocial well-being contributes to burnout, diminished effectiveness, and high turnover rates (Fouché & Le Roux, 2018). Scholars have called for the integration of trauma-informed practices not only in support of survivors but also to safeguard the mental health of professionals working in such emotionally demanding environments (Shatto et al., 2023). The literature clearly reveals a concerning gap in support structures for professionals investigating sexual and corporal abuse in schools. While the emotional and psychological effects on survivors have justifiably been prioritised, the well-being of investigators remains under-researched, especially in the South African context. Existing studies, however, provide a strong foundation for understanding the phenomenon of vicarious trauma and burnout among this group. This study, therefore, seeks to fill an important gap by exploring the lived experiences and emotional tolls these professionals face, aiming to inform more responsive and supportive systems of practice.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Secondary traumatic stress theory

This study draws on Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) Theory, developed by Charles Figley (1995), which offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how professionals who work with trauma survivors, such as abuse investigators, may themselves develop symptoms akin to PTSD. These symptoms can arise through empathic engagement and sustained exposure to others' traumatic experiences, particularly in emotionally charged cases involving sexual or corporal abuse of children. STS theory underscores the phenomenon of emotional contagion, whereby professionals internalise the trauma of those they serve, leading to manifestations such as intrusive thoughts, nightmares, emotional numbing or detachment, anxiety, irritability, depression, professional burnout, and diminished occupational functioning. In the context of this study, SACE investigators are frequently exposed to distressing learner disclosures, graphic evidence, and institutional inertia, which heighten their vulnerability to STS. The theory thus elucidates how chronic emotional exposure, in the absence of adequate psychological support, may culminate in cumulative psychological distress. STS theory is also well-aligned with the study's transformative paradigm, as it highlights the structural contributors to occupational trauma, including institutional neglect, societal silence around abuse, and the chronic under-resourcing of child protection systems. Furthermore, it complements our qualitative approach by offering a psychosocial lens through which to interpret the emotional experiences of SACE investigators. Beyond interpretation, the theory informs practical recommendations, such as implementing trauma-informed organisational practices, establishing routine debriefing protocols, and providing investigators with access to mental health support. Secondary Traumatic Stress Theory is particularly relevant to this study because SACE investigators are routinely exposed to learners' accounts of abuse, distressing evidence, and emotionally charged environments. The theory provides a robust lens for understanding how sustained empathic engagement with traumatised children can

precipitate PTSD-like symptoms among investigators themselves. It thus offers an explanatory framework for interpreting participants' emotional experiences and situating their distress within broader occupational and structural conditions.

IV. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study explored the psychological toll experienced by SACE investigators tasked with investigating cases of sexual and corporal abuse in South African schools.

V. METHODS

Research paradigm

This study is grounded in the transformative research paradigm, which is particularly appropriate for research that seeks to challenge social injustice and amplify the voices of marginalised or silenced groups (Mertens, 2010). Given the emotional and psychological toll borne by investigators of school-based abuse in South Africa, a group often overlooked in educational discourse, a transformative approach was selected to highlight their lived realities and stimulate systemic reform. The paradigm acknowledges the influence of power, culture, and context on the research process and outcomes, and aims to co-create knowledge that is both meaningful and emancipatory for participants (Sweetman et al., 2010).

Research approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted to facilitate in-depth exploration of investigators' personal experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses in their professional roles. Qualitative methods are well-suited to studies that focus on complex, contextually embedded phenomena and seek to generate understanding rather than generalisable findings (Dodgson, 2017). By privileging narrative and subjective meaning, this approach enabled the study to uncover the psychological burden and coping mechanisms that would likely remain hidden in quantitative designs.

Participatory action learning and action research design

This study employed a Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) design, which combines participatory engagement with reflective learning and social change (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). PALAR is particularly useful for transformative studies as it treats participants as co-learners and co-researchers, thereby fostering agency and dialogic knowledge creation. In this study, investigators were not only data sources but also active contributors to the collective reflection process, validating the findings and proposing recommendations to improve institutional support and their well-being.

Participants

Sixteen SACE investigators were purposively selected from six South African provinces, including 6 from Gauteng, 3 from KwaZulu-Natal, and 1 from the Eastern Cape. Two were from the Western Cape, Free State, and Limpopo, respectively. These comprised six females and ten males. Participants were selected based on their professional experience in investigating cases of sexual and corporal abuse within school settings. This sampling approach enabled a balanced representation across gender, age, and work experience, while ensuring the inclusion of individuals with rich, context-specific insights into the research problem (Palinkas et al., 2015). Geographic diversity further contributed to a comprehensive understanding of institutional responses and psychosocial stressors across varied provincial contexts.

Data collection methods

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, a qualitative method that offers both consistency and flexibility. This approach allows researchers to explore participants' individual perspectives in depth while maintaining a structured framework across interviews. Semi-structured interviews are particularly well-suited for exploring sensitive topics such as trauma and emotional distress, as they help establish rapport and provide participants with the space to articulate their experiences in their own terms (Brinkmann, 2018). All

interviews were conducted face-to-face by one of the study authors, who was responsible for data collection. Each session lasted approximately 40 to 65 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent.

Research sites

The research sites for this study comprised the professional contexts of South African Council for Educators (SACE) investigators from six provinces of South Africa: Gauteng, Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape, Eastern Cape, and the Free State. These sites represent diverse socio-cultural, economic, and institutional environments in which SACE investigators operate while responding to cases of educator misconduct, including those involving abuse and professional transgressions. Including multiple provinces enabled the study to capture variations in investigative practice across urban, peri-urban, and rural contexts.

Although participants were drawn from across the country, the majority were based in Gauteng Province due to its proximity to the researcher and the logistical feasibility of access. Gauteng also hosts a high concentration of schools and reported cases, making it a particularly active site for SACE investigations. This geographic spread enhanced the data's contextual richness while balancing practical considerations for fieldwork. Collectively, these sites provided a comprehensive national perspective on the lived experiences of SACE investigators working within varied provincial and institutional settings.

Data analysis

The collected data were uploaded to Google Drive and shared with a professional transcriber, who returned the completed transcripts for analysis. The data were then analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Thematic analysis is particularly well-suited to qualitative research in health and trauma contexts, as it offers both flexibility and analytical depth (Nowell et al., 2017). A combination of inductive and deductive coding was employed, enabling themes to emerge organically from the data while being guided by theoretical frameworks on secondary trauma and emotional labour.

Ethical considerations

To conduct this study, ethical clearance was first obtained from the Wits Human Research Ethics Committee Non-Medical (Protocol Number: H25/03/22), and permission was secured from the SACE. A professional transcriber was contracted following data collection, and they provided a signed confidentiality agreement affirming their commitment to ethical handling of the data. Given the emotionally sensitive nature of the research, participants received comprehensive information sheets and provided written informed consent before interviews commenced. Confidentiality was rigorously maintained, with pseudonyms used to protect participants' identities. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. To safeguard participants' well-being, emotional support resources were offered, and referrals to counselling services were provided where necessary (Houghton et al., 2010).

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Threats to personal safety and security

At the top of the list of psychological tolls experienced by SACE investigators were threats to personal safety and security. This concern was primarily expressed by investigators who are relatively new to handling such cases. However, it is noteworthy that those with extensive investigative experience reported that they have never felt threatened, having developed safe and effective methods for managing interactions with alleged perpetrators. Below are some of the views they shared.

"Another major challenge is the issue of personal safety, especially for us as investigators. When we conduct these investigations, we are often sent to unfamiliar areas, and we do not know how safe the environment is or whether

the individuals involved might be dangerous. The moment people find out that someone from SACE is present, they immediately feel threatened. They assume we are there to take away their jobs, which can lead to unpredictable and potentially hostile reactions" (P 4).

"For example, if you are assigned, let us say I am staying in Limpopo, if you are assigned a case in KZN and you do not even know the place, you just go there. Now, your first concern is, if these people know that I am going to come and put up here and be accommodated here, maybe the case is going to drag on for the whole day, and then I must come and put up here again before I leave tomorrow. So, you can see that there is a potential threat. That is why at some stage..." (P12).

The excerpts above indicate that SACE investigators encounter threats that precipitate chronic stress and hypervigilance, core manifestations of secondary traumatic stress (STS), a condition in which professionals repeatedly exposed to others' trauma and danger exhibit symptoms akin to PTSD (Figley, 1995; Cieslak et al., 2014). This phenomenon can be interpreted through the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, which posits that stress responses are shaped by the appraisal of threats and the perceived availability of coping resources (Biggs et al., 2017). For investigators, perceived threats are amplified by factors such as conspicuous vehicle branding and limited protective measures, which reduce their sense of control. Empirical evidence suggests that safety-related stressors, particularly in child protection and disciplinary contexts, are strongly correlated with burnout and emotional exhaustion (Sprang et al., 2019). In the absence of targeted organisational interventions, such as revising visibility protocols and offering structured psychological support, both investigator well-being and investigative effectiveness may be jeopardised. Notably, several investigators expressed heightened anxiety stemming from fears of retaliation by accused individuals or their associates, further compounding their psychological burden.

Vicarious trauma and emotional overload

Investigators engaged in abuse cases are at heightened risk of experiencing vicarious trauma, a phenomenon arising from repeated exposure to the traumatic narratives of victims (Figley, 1995). This emotional toll can accumulate over time, leading to unprocessed emotional residue that manifests as compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, or burnout, impairing both personal well-being and professional functioning (Cieslak et al., 2014). Within this context, the experiences of investigators reveal how unmitigated exposure to trauma results in significant psychological strain. Some of the participants shared the following:

"After days of extensive travel and long hours in the field, we often feel both physically and emotionally drained, and it can be challenging to maintain our energy for the tasks ahead" (P10).

The excerpts indicate that SACE investigators endure vicarious trauma and emotional overload, exacerbated by the absence of adequate psychosocial support.

Secondary traumatisation through exposure to graphic and sensitive cases

Investigators handling sexual and corporal abuse cases are repeatedly exposed to graphic details and traumatic narratives, placing them at risk of secondary traumatic stress (STS), a form of psychological distress that arises from indirect exposure to others' trauma (Figley, 1995; Cieslak et al., 2014). This exposure often triggers emotional numbing, helplessness, and intrusive thoughts, particularly when investigators lack structured psychosocial support or debriefing opportunities (Bride & Kintzle, 2011). From the perspective of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), these experiences are appraised as overwhelming when perceived coping resources are insufficient, heightening vulnerability to burnout and empathy fatigue. Over time, unprocessed emotional strain can impair professional functioning and well-being, underscoring the need for organisational interventions such as regular supervision, peer support, and resilience training to mitigate the cumulative impact of secondary trauma (Molnar et al., 2020).

Participants expressed how emotionally overwhelming it was to

engage with traumatised children without adequate training or professional support. One investigator explained,

"You are not trained to talk to these small children. You do not even know how to approach it, or somebody's been molested" (P4).

Another added,

"And to that learner... maybe sometimes it was just like they agreed to have sex. So... you are still very young. You cannot consent to sex. So, you do not even know how to approach it" (P14).

This lack of specialised skills often led to emotionally taxing interactions, as one participant noted: "You will end up asking, 'They say he raped you. What happened?' Such things" (P3).

These excerpts reflect the emotional burden of repeatedly hearing explicit and distressing accounts from learners, often without the presence of professional intermediaries. One participant admitted feeling unprepared and emotionally overwhelmed when interviewing children who had experienced sexual abuse. At the same time, another described the helplessness of witnessing a child withdraw their testimony out of fear:

"It is heartbreaking... you feel completely helpless, like you are failing them or even becoming part of the problem" (P7).

Collectively, these narratives illustrate how repeated exposure to sensitive and graphic cases can engender profound emotional strain, further highlighting the urgent need for psychosocial support structures for investigators.

Psychological distress from systemic obstruction and lack of collaboration

Participants described substantial psychological distress stemming from systemic obstruction and a lack of collaboration among key stakeholders during investigations. Investigators reported that some principals deliberately shielded accused educators, often due to personal relationships, which not only hindered the pursuit of justice but also left investigators feeling unsupported, isolated, and demoralised. Such obstruction was compounded when parents, sometimes influenced by school leadership, refused to cooperate or withdrew from cases to "avoid disturbance" to their children, as one investigator explained:

"Especially when the principal has a close relationship with the educator involved... I insisted on meeting the parents myself to explain the purpose of the investigation. When they came, it was obvious they had already made up their minds not to proceed" (P4).

The emotional toll intensified when learners, initially willing to provide evidence, retracted their cooperation due to fear or intimidation from the accused, leaving investigators powerless to guarantee their safety:

"Most of the time, they will threaten these learners... on the day of the hearing, they won't want to proceed. Some of you would see that they are terrified. They do not want to say anything. And as SACE, we cannot even guarantee their safety" (P8).

Beyond the school level, systemic barriers included weak interdepartmental collaboration between SACE, the Department of Education, the South African Police Service, and the Department of Social Development. Investigators reported that a lack of formal coordination allowed perpetrators to evade accountability by moving between provinces without detection:

"If maybe they were willing to work with us, a lot of things would have been prevented because we found out that an educator committed an offence here in Gauteng. They moved to the Eastern Cape... But when you try to check where this person is working, you cannot even get that information" (P4).

Collectively, these circumstances reflect organizational betrayal and systemic inefficiencies that intensify emotional exhaustion and moral distress among investigators. When protective systems fail to collaborate effectively, investigators confront not only the trauma of the cases they manage but also the demoralising realisation that institutional barriers perpetuate harm and impede justice. This aligns with classical and contemporary research on secondary traumatic stress (STS), which arises from empathetic engagement with trauma (Figley,

1995) and is exacerbated by inadequate organisational support (Bride et al., 2007).

Investigators' role overload and professional burnout

The findings of this study reveal that investigators frequently experience role overload, which contributes to chronic professional burnout. Participants described being solely responsible for initiating, prosecuting, following up, handling appeals, and maintaining extensive administrative documentation. One investigator noted,

"You are the one who starts the case, follows it up, writes all the reports, and even prepares for the hearings; there is no break." The other one would be in instances where, say, a learner, because of our backlog, our turnaround period, since we are understaffed, seriously understaffed" (P12).

This multiplicity of tasks reflects a lack of role distinction between investigators and prosecutors, resulting in cognitive strain and extreme fatigue. Such role ambiguity is widely recognised in the literature as a risk factor for psychological distress and decreased job satisfaction in high-demand professions (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Participants also reported that unrealistic deadlines and high-performance expectations further intensified their stress levels. As one participant explained,

"They want all the reports ready by the end of the week, even when you are still on the road collecting evidence" (P5).

This constant pressure fosters emotional depletion and a sense of helplessness, core indicators of professional burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2019). The combination of high workload and insufficient structural support mirrors findings in other high-stress investigative and social service roles, where chronic exposure to emotionally demanding work without organisational relief mechanisms leads to sustained burnout and reduced professional efficacy (Kim & Stoner, 2008). These findings underscore the urgent need for clear role delineation, balanced workload distribution, and the introduction of institutional measures such as structured debriefing and psychosocial support to mitigate the risk of burnout among investigators.

Dissonance and moral injury

Ethical dissonance and moral injury arise when investigators are compelled to pursue cases despite having insufficient evidence or acting against their professional conscience, leading to psychological strain. Participants described inner conflict when learners who initially agreed to testify later withdrew due to fear, leaving investigators feeling powerless to protect them. As one participant explained,

"Sometimes the learner during investigation is willing... but on the day of the hearing, they won't want to proceed" (P7).

while another noted,

"As SACE, we cannot even guarantee their safety... we will just say it is fine if you do not want to proceed" (P6).

This aligns with the literature on moral injury, which occurs when professionals are compelled to act in ways that violate their ethical principles or witness harm that they are unable to prevent, often leading to feelings of guilt, frustration, and emotional exhaustion (Litz et al., 2009; Dean et al., 2019). In child protection and investigative contexts, such unresolved ethical tension can contribute to long-term moral distress and burnout (Papazoglou et al., 2020).

Helplessness due to inadequate training and system failures

Participants highlighted feelings of helplessness arising from insufficient training to manage traumatised children and the inefficiency of existing systems. New investigators often enter the field without adequate preparation to conduct sensitive interviews or navigate the emotional complexities of child-related investigations. The inability to communicate effectively with victims not only impedes evidence collection but also intensifies professional self-doubt and emotional strain (Bride et al., 2024). Additionally, dysfunctional tracking systems exacerbate this helplessness by obstructing case follow-up and accountability; as one participant noted, the system serves only registration purposes and fails to support the investigative workflow. Such structural deficiencies align with research on organisational stress, which shows that inadequate training and

resource gaps reduce professional efficacy and heighten burnout in high-stakes investigative roles (Figley & Ludick, 2017; van der Velden et al., 2020). When institutional tools and skills are insufficient, investigators feel ineffective, which can erode their sense of professional purpose and contribute to moral injury.

VII. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study collectively reveal that SACE investigators experience profound psychological strain arising from a combination of personal, organisational, and systemic stressors. Repeated exposure to traumatic narratives and graphic abuse cases places investigators at heightened risk of secondary traumatic stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout. Threats to personal safety at unfamiliar investigation sites contribute to chronic hypervigilance and anxiety. Systemic obstructions such as non-cooperative principals, weak interdepartmental collaboration, and dysfunctional tracking systems foster feelings of helplessness, moral injury, and organisational betrayal, further undermining investigators' well-being and professional efficacy. Collectively, these findings underscore that the psychological toll on investigators is both cumulative and multidimensional, underscoring the urgent need for institutional reforms, including structured psychosocial support, role clarification, enhanced safety protocols, and interagency collaboration to safeguard both investigator well-being and the integrity of child protection processes. Based on these findings, this study recommends that SACE implement comprehensive organisational and systemic interventions to mitigate the psychological toll on investigators. Priority should be given to establishing structured psychosocial support mechanisms, including routine debriefing sessions, access to professional counselling, and peer-support programs to address secondary traumatic stress and emotional exhaustion. Clear role delineation and workload redistribution are necessary to reduce role overload, as well as providing specialised training in child-sensitive interviewing and trauma-informed investigation practices. Safety protocols should be strengthened by reconsidering the use of branded vehicles, offering risk assessments for high-threat areas, and providing personal safety training. Furthermore, enhancing interdepartmental collaboration with the Department of Education, the South African Police Service, and Social Development, supported by integrated tracking systems, would improve case follow-up and reduce systemic obstruction. Collectively, these interventions would not only safeguard investigators' mental health but also enhance the efficiency and integrity of the investigative process.

VIII. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this article.

IX. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available upon request.

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