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An Examination of the Experiences Gained by of Social Workers Volunteering in the Kahramanmaraş-Centered Earthquakes *Gönüllü ya da Görevli Sosyal Hizmet Uzmanlarının Kahramanmaraş Merkezli Depremlerden Edindikleri Deneyimlerin İncelenmesi /*

Abstract

This study explores the experiences of social workers who volunteered or were assigned to provide support after the devastating 7.7 and 7.6 magnitude earthquakes in Kahramanmaraş. The earthquakes caused significant loss of life and property across ten provinces, with social workers playing a key role in offering psychosocial support. The study focuses on their emotional reactions to the disaster, motivations for going to the affected areas, the challenges they faced, the coping strategies they used, and the roles they took on. It is a qualitative study using a phenomenological approach. The participants are 20 social workers from public institutions and non-governmental organizations, selected through snowball sampling. Data were collected via in-depth interviews and analysed with qualitative data software. The results show that social workers encountered severe destruction and emotional difficulties in the disaster area. This study aims to enhance the understanding of social workers' roles in disasters and to assist in preparation for future crises. It also aims to offer valuable insights for policymakers to improve disaster management and emergency interventions.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Kahramanmaraş'ta meydana gelen 7.7 ve 7.6 büyüklüğündeki yıkıcı depremlerin ardından gönüllü olarak ya da görevlendirilerek destek sunan sosyal hizmet uzmanlarının deneyimlerini incelemektedir. Depremler, on ilde büyük can ve mal kaybına yol açmış, sosyal hizmet uzmanları ise psikososyal destek sağlama konusunda önemli roller üstlenmiştir. Çalışma, uzmanların afete verdikleri duygusal tepkilere, afet bölgesine gitme motivasyonlarına, karşılaştıkları zorluklara, başa çıkma stratejilerine ve üstlendikleri rollere odaklanmaktadır. Fenomenolojik yaklaşım kullanılan bu niteliksel araştırmada, kamu kurumları ve sivil toplum kuruluşlarında görev yapan 20 sosyal hizmet uzmanı, kartopu örnekleme yöntemiyle seçilmiştir. Veriler derinlemesine görüşmelerle toplanmış ve nitel veri analiz yazılımı ile analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, sosyal hizmet uzmanlarının afet bölgesinde ciddi yıkımlarla ve duygusal zorluklarla karşılaştığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çalışma, afetlerde sosyal hizmet uzmanlarının rollerine dair anlayışı derinleştirmeyi ve gelecekteki krizlere hazırlık konusunda katkı sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca, politika yapımcılar için afet yönetimi ve acil müdahalelerin iyileştirilmesine yönelik değerli bilgileri sağlamayı hedeflemektedir.

Keywords

Disaster Management, Social Work in Disasters, Earthquake, Social Work Intervention

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Introduction

Throughout history, societies have faced unexpected natural disasters and have had to cope with their devastating consequences. Earthquakes, as disasters which occur suddenly and create large-scale impact, not only cause physical destruction but also profoundly affect the psychosocial well-being of individuals and communities (Tierney, 2014; Norris et al., 2002). In particular, the traumatic experiences caused by disasters highlight the importance of social support systems, psychological resilience, and community-level coping mechanisms (Bonanno, 2004; Ungar, 2011).

Due to its geographical location, Turkey is among the regions with the highest earthquake risk in the world. Indeed, large-scale disasters such as the 1999 Marmara Earthquake not only resulted in tens of thousands of deaths but also strongly demonstrated the necessity of developing disaster management policies. Building on these experiences, the Turkey Disaster Response Plan (TAMP) was prepared in 2013, aiming to enhance institutional capacity in disaster response processes (AFAD, 2013).

Nevertheless, despite these arrangements, the earthquakes that struck on February 6, 2023, with their epicenter in KahramanmaraŐ, constituted a major test for disaster management. Directly affecting 11 provinces, this catastrophe claimed the lives of more than 50,000 people and displaced millions (AFAD, 2023). A disaster of this scale has generated not only physical destruction but also a form of “collective trauma” that must be addressed through its psychosocial dimensions (Norris et al., 2002; Zakour & Harrell, 2010).

In the aftermath of disasters, social services play a critical role in supporting the recovery of individuals and communities. Psychosocial support, crisis intervention, strengthening resilience, and facilitating social reconstruction are among the core responsibilities of the social work profession (Dominelli, 2012; Mathbor, 2007). In this context, understanding the challenges encountered by social workers during disaster interventions, as well as the coping mechanisms they develop, is crucial both for professional practice and for the advancement of disaster policies (Pyles, 2017; Regehr & Bober, 2005).

This study aims to examine the experiences of social workers who volunteered in the aftermath of the February 6, 2023 KahramanmaraŐ-centered earthquakes, thereby providing a more comprehensive account of the role of social work in disaster contexts. In doing so, it is expected to contribute to the literature on post-disaster social work and to inform the planning of future intervention processes.

Conceptual Framework

Disasters, whether natural or human-induced, are destructive events that disrupt individuals’ lives, the functioning of society, and ecological balance. Emerging suddenly, such catastrophes cause significant loss of life and property, often exceeding the capacity of local resources

and making external assistance indispensable (Akdur, 2001; UNISDR, 2009). In these crises, addressing not only physical needs but also supporting the psychosocial well-being of individuals and communities is of critical importance (Norris et al., 2002; Bonanno, 2004).

Social work is a discipline that seeks to create change at the individual, family, group, and community levels, aiming to enhance social welfare and respond to human needs. In this context, social workers not only address immediate needs during disasters but also play an active role in long-term recovery processes (Dominelli, 2012). Social work practice focuses on strengthening coping mechanisms at the micro level, enhancing resilience of families and groups at the mezzo level, and reducing social inequalities while shaping social policies at the macro level (Kongar, 1972; Mathbor, 2007).

Within the disaster context, social work functions not only as an intervention but also as a preventive and preparatory mechanism. Vulnerable groups—such as children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and disadvantaged populations—are disproportionately affected by disasters and therefore require targeted psychosocial support programs (Tomanbay, 1999). In this regard, social workers undertake a holistic, systems-based assessment of individuals and communities within the contexts of family, workplace, and environment (Yaman, 2015).

One of the most significant approaches in disaster-related social work is the empowerment-oriented model. This approach encourages individuals and communities to recognize their own strengths and to develop coping capacities by utilizing these strengths in crisis conditions (Weick et al., 1989; Houston, 2015). Empowerment also entails mobilizing social capital, building networks of solidarity, and strengthening community-based resilience (Mathbor, 2007; Ungar, 2011).

In Turkey, the role of social work in the disaster context became particularly visible after the 1999 Marmara Earthquake. During this period, professional challenges faced by social workers in the field—such as secondary trauma, burnout, and emotional burden—were frequently emphasized in the literature (Regehr & Bober, 2005; Tuncay, 2004). At the same time, engaging in disaster response also provides social workers with a sense of professional fulfillment and an opportunity to contribute to societal well-being (Pyles, 2017; Yaman & Akyurt, 2013). In disaster situations, social workers deliver psychosocial support at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Their roles include needs assessment, raising awareness, evaluating vulnerable groups, and providing psychological first aid. According to the Ministry of Family and Social Services (2020), social workers also establish psychosocial support tents, deliver mental health services, and engage in long-term counseling planning. Grounded in the principles of solidarity and equality, social work aims to promote well-being, reduce social inequalities, and support community recovery during disasters (IFSW, 2014).

In this context, examining the experiences of social workers in disasters is important not only for understanding professional resilience at the individual level but also for evaluating processes of community recovery (IFSW, 2014; Zakour & Harrell, 2010). Particularly in the post-disaster period, the psychological preparedness, emotional resilience, and contributions

of social workers to recovery hold a critical place in advancing the social work literature and providing guidance for policymakers.

Method

This study was designed within the qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative research seeks to deeply understand social phenomena in their natural settings and to reveal participants' meaning-making processes from their own perspectives (Creswell, 2013). In line with this aim, the study adopted a phenomenological approach, one of the qualitative research methods. Phenomenology focuses on understanding individuals' perceptions and emotions related to their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This method enables a deeper exploration of participants' worlds and provides insights into their subjective realities (Van Manen, 1990). The qualitative data of the study were analyzed using the MAXQDA Pro 2020 software.

The main rationale for adopting the phenomenological approach in this study was its capacity to holistically capture the lived experiences of social workers who were on duty during the February 6 earthquakes. Previous studies have demonstrated that phenomenology is particularly effective in disaster research, as it can uncover the subjective meanings and coping strategies of professionals working in highly stressful environments (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Padgett, 2016). Furthermore, phenomenological research has frequently been employed in trauma and crisis contexts to examine the emotional resilience, ethical dilemmas, and professional reflections of social workers and healthcare professionals (Gilgun, 2012; Giorgi, 2009). Positioning the present study within this body of research secures methodological consistency and enhances the validity of its findings.

Beyond its theoretical strength, phenomenology has been effectively applied in disaster and social work research to capture the lived experiences of both professionals and communities. For example, Houston (2015) employed a phenomenological approach to investigate how communities construct resilience narratives following large-scale disasters, demonstrating the method's effectiveness in illuminating the emotional and social dimensions of recovery. Similarly, Drolet et al. (2015) used phenomenology to analyze social workers' field experiences during the Alberta floods, highlighting not only the challenges arising from disaster interventions but also processes of professional development. These studies confirm the appropriateness of phenomenology as a methodology for examining the complexities of professional practice under extreme conditions.

Phenomenology has also been frequently used to explore the personal and emotional experiences of professionals on the frontlines of disaster response. Mutch (2015), in his study of educators' roles following the Christchurch earthquakes in New Zealand, demonstrated how phenomenological research can reveal the dynamic interaction between professional responsibilities and personal resilience. These findings align directly with the focus of the present study, as social workers engaged in the Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquakes were similarly

tasked with fulfilling professional obligations while managing the emotional challenges they faced. Thus, situating this research within the growing literature on phenomenological disaster studies reinforces the validity of the method and enables the analysis not only to describe but also to deeply interpret participants' lived realities.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Ankara University on September 4, 2024, under protocol number 1505149. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and with local legal regulations. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study and gave their written informed consent. Participants also granted explicit permission for the use of the data they shared during the research in scientific publications.

Participants

The participant group of this study consisted of 20 social workers who, following the February 6, 2023 earthquakes, either volunteered in the disaster region, were officially assigned, or transitioned between these two statuses during the process, and who also agreed to participate voluntarily in the research. Access to participants was facilitated through the Social Workers' Association, which served as an intermediary, and a snowball sampling method was employed using the association's communication networks. In-depth interviews were chosen as the data collection method. These interviews were conducted at times determined by the participants, in settings convenient for them, and either online or face-to-face depending on their preferences. In line with ethical principles, the real names of all social workers interviewed were kept confidential, and pseudonyms derived from tree names were used in reporting.

A detailed profile of participants' sociodemographic and professional characteristics was compiled. Of the 20 participants, 5 were women (25%) and 15 were men (75%). Their ages ranged from 23 to 60, with a mean age of 39.4. Regarding marital status, 9 participants were married (45%), while 11 were single (55%). In terms of education, 9 held bachelor's degrees, 9 held master's degrees, and 2 were pursuing doctoral studies. Concerning their mode of arrival to the disaster zone, 13 participants (65%) went entirely as volunteers, 5 (25%) through official assignment, and 2 (10%) began as volunteers but were later officially deployed. In terms of prior experience, 11 participants (55%) had previously worked in disaster or emergency response contexts, whereas 9 (45%) were serving in a disaster area for the first time.

The geographical distribution of participants' assignments focused on provinces that experienced the most severe destruction. Accordingly, 5 participants served in Kahramanmaraş, 8 in Adıyaman, and 7 in Hatay. These provinces were selected because they were more heavily affected compared to other regions. Regarding duration of stay, 5 participants remained in the field for 10 days, while 15 stayed for one month (30 days). Considering the geographical context of their assignments, the 5 participants deployed for 10 days served in rural areas, whereas the 15 participants assigned for one month worked in urban areas. Institutional

distribution was as follows: 6 participants were employed in universities, 11 in the Ministry of Family and Social Services, 2 in the Ministry of Health, and 1 in a municipality.

Data Collection Tools

In this study, a sociodemographic information form and an in-depth interview guide, developed after reviewing the relevant literature, were used. The sociodemographic information form, prepared by the researcher, was designed to collect social and demographic information about the participants, such as age, gender, education level, occupation, income level, and marital status. This form provides a general profile of the participants, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the data.

The in-depth interview guide was divided into three main sections to examine the participants' experiences before, during, and after their assignments. The first section focuses on decision-making processes and preparations; the second section addresses emotions experienced during the assignment and the challenges encountered; and the third section explores the changes experienced after the assignment. This three-stage structure reflects the phenomenological principle of capturing both the temporal and emotional flow of lived experiences (Seidman, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

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Research Process

During the research process, participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary, and an Informed Consent Form was signed before the in-depth interviews began. The interviews lasted between 30 to 50 minutes. Participants expressed that sharing their experiences helped them feel more at ease. Support was provided in cases where they encountered difficulties, and any questions they preferred not to answer were skipped. A table of categories is presented below (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Category Table

Social Workers	Pre-mission	What did they feel? Preparation process Expectations
	Order of Duty	Problems experienced Feelings, thoughts nad and observations Coping mechanisms
	Post-mission	Changes Psychosocial support needs
	Future Plans	What did they learn? Personel and professional attachments

In preparing the main analytical categories of the study, four overarching themes were identified: Pre-mission, Order of Duty, Post-mission, and Future Plans.

The Pre-mission (1) category included the preparation process, modes of deployment, feelings and thoughts prior to the mission, and expectations. These were organized into three subcategories: What did they feel?, Preparation process, and Expectations.

The Order of Duty (2) category encompassed field conditions and challenges encountered, the associated feelings and professional observations, and coping strategies. These contents were analyzed under three subcategories: Problems experienced, Feelings, thoughts and observations, and Coping mechanisms.

The Post-mission (3) category focused on changes in professional perspectives and the need for psychosocial support. These were addressed under two subcategories: Changes and Psychosocial support needs.

Finally, the Future Plans (4) category examined what participants had learned from these experiences and their recommendations for change at both professional and societal levels. Two subcategories were created for this theme: What did they learn? and Personal and professional attachments.

These categories were developed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA Pro 2020, taking into account participants' narratives and reflections.

Results

In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 social workers who volunteered or were officially assigned to the provinces affected by the February 6th earthquakes. These interviews were analysed under four main themes reflecting the participants' experiences: "Pre-mission," "Order of Duty," "Post-mission," and "Future Plans."

Pre-mission

This section examines the pre-assignment situations of the social workers who went to the regions affected by the earthquakes, through three subthemes: "What Did They Feel?," "Preparation Process," and "Expectations." The social workers' emotional states, preparations, and expectations were analysed through their narratives.

What Did They Feel? All the social workers who participated in the interviews stated that they experienced intense sadness and fear when they received the news of the earthquake. Similarly, studies show that individuals who receive news of a disaster experience anxiety and shock (Norris et al., 2002). Some social workers mentioned that they initially found it hard to believe the news, thinking that the earthquake was a small-scale event, but they experienced great shock once they learned its true magnitude. These kinds of reactions emerge because of post-disaster trauma (Mathbor, 2007).

“Sadness... I never thought it would be this big. As I saw the scale of the destruction and loss of life over time, I became deeply saddened...” (Poplar-16)

“I couldn’t believe it. It felt like a movie scene. I couldn’t grasp it for a while...” (Hornbeam-4)

Social workers who tried to reach the affected areas expressed feelings of anxiety and worry. Some workers with previous disaster experience stated that they felt a desire to go to the region, thinking their past experiences might be helpful (Pyles, 2017; Zakour & Harrell, 2003).

“With a mixture of sadness, I immediately wanted to go to those areas.” (Yellow Pine-5)

When social workers first heard the news of the earthquake, they reported experiencing profound shock, disbelief, sadness, and anxiety. Similar responses are also highlighted in the literature; for example, a lack of social support among disaster response teams has been found to be associated with anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Lenferink et al., 2018). Furthermore, support mechanisms aimed at protecting the psychological well-being of workers are often inadequate, which negatively affects professional resilience (Brooks et al., 2019).

Preparation Process: Before heading to the regions affected by the earthquake, the social workers stated that they primarily focused on physical preparations. However, some of them mentioned that they were unable to prepare sufficiently due to the short time they had to decide. Psychologically, they emphasized that they relied on their professional experience and prepared by sharing their experiences with their teams (Yaman, 2015).

“In terms of physical preparation, we made some adjustments according to the season and our profession. We shared our experiences with my team throughout the journey...” (Mimosa-2)

“Considering the harsh winter conditions, I tried to obtain clothes that would keep us warm...” (Blue Spruce-20)

Participants emphasized that, during the preparation process, priority was given to physical readiness, while psychological preparedness was insufficient. The literature indicates that psychosocial preparations conducted prior to deployment are effective in enhancing emotional resilience (Nicholls & Lepore, 2015). In addition, systematic reviews have shown that interventions such as psychoeducation, mindfulness, and psychological first aid for disaster response workers improve individual resilience and psychosocial well-being (Lehman et al., 2025). The importance of self-care strategies in the field has also been underscored, particularly when supported by experience and appropriate training (Yücel et al., 2024).

Expectations: During the interviews, the social workers expressed that they hoped to meet the basic needs of the people affected by the earthquake (Mathbor, 2007). Among their expectations were fulfilling their roles as social service professionals effectively, providing psychosocial support services, and carrying out the necessary interventions (Norris et al., 2002).

“I hope what I can do is, of course, practice my profession and, in addition, be able to help people...” (Cypress-12)

“I hoped to be helpful to people and do my best. I was assigned to provide psychosocial support...” (Acacia-6)

The primary expectation of the social workers was to help the individuals who experienced the earthquake in every possible way. In addition to meeting their basic needs, providing psychosocial support as part of the social work profession was one of their most important expectations.

Before deployment to the disaster zone, participants stated that their main expectations were to meet basic humanitarian needs, provide psychosocial support, and fulfill their professional roles effectively. In line with this, the literature emphasizes the centrality of social workers' roles in assisting affected individuals, contributing to resilience, and participating in post-crisis reconstruction processes (Crawford, 2021). Moreover, the presence of social support during disaster response has been strongly linked to reduced anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Lenferink et al., 2018).

Order of Duty

This section addresses the problems, emotions, thoughts, observations, and coping mechanisms that social workers encountered in the earthquake zones. The experiences of the social workers serving as volunteers or being assigned to the disaster area were analysed under three subthemes: “Problems Experienced,” “Feelings, Thoughts, and Observations,” and “Coping Mechanisms.”

Problems Experienced: One of the most significant problems highlighted by the social workers during the interviews was the lack of inter-institutional coordination. As found by Zakour and Harrell (2003), the social workers mentioned experiencing difficulties due to disorder, unclear job descriptions, and communication breakdowns in crisis situations. They also criticized the management of processes, stating that it was not sufficiently effective.

“Lack of coordination, feelings of helplessness, and not being able to reach people made me feel angry toward public institutions...” (Fir-19)

“During the interviews with the earthquake survivors, hearing the screams of people trapped under the rubble was very psychologically challenging for me. Additionally, working with people who lacked sufficient professional knowledge was another difficulty...” (Wisteria-1)

Social workers who participated in the interviews reported experiencing significant difficulties in disaster zones due to lack of coordination among institutions, communication breakdowns, and unclear role definitions. The literature similarly notes that the fragmented structure of post-disaster social service systems and the absence of interagency collaboration hinder the effective delivery of services (HHS Committee, 2013).

Feelings, Thoughts, and Observations: As a result of the in-depth interviews, it was determined that social workers experienced two primary emotions: professional satisfaction and helplessness. It was observed that practicing their profession provided them with inner peace, the happiness of being supportive, and a sense of relief from helping others. However, some social workers expressed that they were unable to fully practice their profession, while others felt inadequate, which led to feelings of helplessness. Additionally, it was found that the social workers worked with vulnerable groups such as children, elderly individuals, people with disabilities, and women.

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“The comfort of having done my job... I felt inner peace, a sense of calm, because I helped someone and supported those in need. I felt at ease...” (Apple-11)

“Helplessness; I realized that you are completely alone, with no state organization to support or supervise you...” (Beech-17)

During professional practice in the field, social workers described experiencing both inner peace and a sense of professional fulfillment, while simultaneously struggling with feelings of inadequacy and helplessness. Such contradictory emotions—on the one hand, the satisfaction of providing support, and on the other, the emotional burden of witnessing suffering—are frequently documented in the social work literature (Ruiz-Fernández et al., 2021).

Coping Mechanisms: The in-depth interviews revealed that social workers working in the earthquake areas used various coping mechanisms. These mechanisms included self-efficacy, problem-solving approaches based on past experiences, and strong coping strategies (Özmete and Pak,2024).

“We used our professional skills. We tried to overcome the problems together with our team members in our social environment.” (Juniper-7)

Moreover, the social workers adopted a solution-focused approach through interpersonal relationships and professional training, using motivation-boosting methods and overcoming challenges effectively with supervisor support, which helped them use their professional skills.

“We went as a team. We healed each other. We did a kind of group work among ourselves...”
(Cedar-8)

According to the interview findings, social workers coped by strengthening their sense of self-efficacy, adopting problem-solving approaches based on prior experience, and employing resilience-based strategies (Özmete, 2023). Participants also emphasized that solidarity within the team and access to supervision support enhanced their motivation and facilitated the effective use of professional skills. In line with this, the literature demonstrates that social support and coping strategies mediate post-traumatic growth, while self-care practices reduce compassion fatigue and increase professional satisfaction (Liu et al., 2014).

Post-mission

Under this heading, the mental changes and psychosocial support needs of social workers who completed their duties in the earthquake-affected areas are examined under two subthemes: “Changes” and “Psychosocial Support Needs”.

Changes: In the interviews, social workers expressed that after leaving the earthquake-affected areas, they desired to spend more time with their families and tried to adjust to normal life following the chaotic environment they had experienced. Kongar (1972) stated that, in the post-disaster period, social workers realized the importance of their professional training, experienced emotional ups and downs during their return, and felt anxiety related to the earthquake.

“My perspective on life changed. The fact that the world is a temporary place came to the forefront again. When you see so much death, you realize how empty life is. We grew as individuals. We experienced in ten days what we would not have seen in ten years at a desk. It was a professional experience...” (Oak-13)

“I made a transition from materialism to spirituality. My perspective on life changed. The material things we have do not stay with us. Our house, our car does not stay with us; only memories stay with us...” (Pine-10)

They mentioned that they had matured both personally and professionally, that their capacity to cope with challenges had increased, and that they had gained a deeper understanding of the importance of their profession.

Upon returning from the disaster zone, interview participants described the process of reintegrating into their normal daily routines as accompanied by a desire to focus more on family, the development of a renewed awareness of life, and a sense of both personal and professional growth. Similarly, social workers engaged in the Canterbury earthquakes reported experiencing personal development and gaining professional insight in the context of post-traumatic growth (Seto et al., 2019).

Psychosocial Support Needs: Some of the social workers interviewed stated that they felt their psychological resilience was sufficient, while others mentioned that they had received professional support. Additionally, some social workers shared that they received support from psychologists, while others mentioned that they had self-healed.

“We held a group event through the association. I believe that sharing experiences and emotions was beneficial...” (Maple-3)

“Yes, I needed psychosocial support. I realized that some of the stories shared by my clients and some of the scenes I witnessed negatively affected me...” (Cypress-12)

Güler (2017) examined the emotional difficulties and psychological resilience experienced by social workers after disasters, stating that receiving professional support positively affects individual recovery processes.

While some participants indicated that their psychological resilience was sufficient, others stated that they recovered primarily through group sharing and professional support. Research conducted after the Great East Japan Earthquake highlighted that, in the long term, individual support, group interventions, and psychosocial assistance provided to MHPSS practitioners proved highly beneficial. The literature also emphasizes the positive impact of social support and self-care strategies on psychosocial recovery (Seto et al., 2019).

Future Plans

This section analyzes what participants have learned from their experiences, the impact of these experiences on their personal and professional lives, and their future plans. These are examined under two sub-themes: “What Did They Learn?” and “Personal and Professional Attachments.”

What Did They Learn?: Participants stated that despite the negative aspects of their disaster experiences, they had gained significant professional insights (Regehr and Bober, 2005). They emphasized the importance of preparation before going to the affected areas and expressed that they now know how to prepare for similar situations. They also mentioned their plans to participate in disaster response processes in the future.

“I started to think that sharing my professional experiences at every opportunity is very important. My belief that all professionals should be prepared for such situations has become much stronger.” (Chestnut-14)

Social workers reported gaining profound professional insights from their earthquake experiences. They emphasized that preparedness is critical and stated that in the future they would approach similar situations with greater planning and awareness. These observations are consistent with findings in the literature: O’Leary and Tsui (2023) note that crisis experiences can enhance social workers’ resilience and intervention capacity. Moreover, among volunteers in the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes, post-traumatic growth has been associated with positive changes such as strengthened self-efficacy, a renewed life philosophy, and deeper awareness in social relationships (Demiröz, Kılıç, & Demiröz Yıldırım, 2025).

Personal and Professional Attachments: Participants mentioned that based on their earthquake experiences, they considered moving to lower-risk areas or to detached houses, that they were determined not to postpone their decisions, and that they were focused on living in the present. Some participants, who believed in the effectiveness of social services, started to make career plans, while others expressed a hopeless attitude, saying they had no expectations for the future. On the other hand, some participants who believed that society had become more conscious/ aware? had positive expectations for the future.

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“Sometimes, challenging conditions speed up growth. You learn to look at events from different perspectives. Even in moments when I thought there was no solution, I gained the perspective that finding solutions and being active in the field are fundamental elements of the social work profession.” (Redwood-15)

Aksoy and Kabasakal (2023) evaluated the role of social services in societal recovery after disasters, noting that experts’ expectations for the future are shaped by their psychological states.

Participants also reported shifts in their risk perceptions, an increased orientation toward living “in the moment,” and a tendency to shape their careers more directly around social work. These reflections point to an ongoing redefinition of professional identity. This aligns with international examples: studies from New Zealand demonstrate that social workers reinforced their professional commitment after disasters through community rebuilding efforts, supervision, and debriefing processes (Hay et al., 2022). At the same time, research on the Kahramanmaraş earthquake has identified experiences of compassion fatigue among social workers, along with the development of coping strategies to manage this emotional burden (Yılkan, 2025).

Discussion

This study examined the experiences of 20 social workers who served in the disaster zones either as volunteers or through official assignments following the February 6, 2023 KahramanmaraŐ earthquakes. The findings revealed four major themes: pre-mission, order of duty, post-mission, and future plans. When integrated with prior disaster and social work literature, the key issues highlighted include preparedness, emotional resilience, and the psychosocial roles of social workers.

The decision of social workers to serve in disaster areas was shaped by both professional commitment and personal motivation. As Pyles (2017) and Zakour and Harrell (2010) suggest, prior disaster experience instills confidence and enhances willingness to serve. In this study, participants with previous disaster experience reported being more motivated to contribute, while those without such experience expressed greater anxiety. Consistent with the findings of Erdener and Erbay (2019), professional experience emerged as a determining factor in preparedness and effectiveness. Additionally, 65% of the participants chose to serve voluntarily, reflecting a strong sense of professional responsibility (Ramazano, 2016). The results further indicate that more experienced participants were more effective in drawing on past disaster experiences. Moreover, volunteers who remained in the field for longer periods articulated a stronger sense of professional responsibility compared to those who served for shorter durations.

Institutional shortcomings in preparedness were also evident. Frequent duty rotations, insufficient pre-deployment training, and limited briefing sessions negatively impacted the continuity of psychosocial support services. Norris et al. (2002) also emphasize the critical importance of coordinated systems that reduce uncertainty and ensure continuity in disaster interventions. Accordingly, the development of structured pre-disaster training and limitations on frequent rotations would strengthen professional capacity.

Participants reported that upon encountering the scale of destruction, they initially experienced fear, sadness, and helplessness. However, many noted that their professional training helped them cope in chaotic conditions. This finding aligns with Kobasa's (1979) theory of "hardiness," which posits that individuals cope with adversity by drawing upon commitment, control, and challenge. Similarly, Bonanno (2004) and Ungar (2011) highlight that resilience is not merely an individual trait but also a process shaped by social and institutional support. While social workers initially experienced emotions such as sadness, fear, and shock, they ultimately found motivation to go to the disaster zone by relying on their professional training. Although the challenges affected their personal lives, they were also perceived as contributing to professional growth (Terzi, 2008). Aydemir (2012) underscores the importance of psychosocial support in the aftermath of disasters, while Kılıĝ and G ll oĝlu (2015) analyze the psychological impacts of uncertainty and loss. Based on the study data,

some participants considered relocating to less risky regions, whereas others regarded the disaster experience as an opportunity for professional development. This perception was particularly pronounced among social workers affiliated with universities.

The magnitude of the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes extended the disaster's impact beyond the directly affected provinces, generating widespread national repercussions. Multiple disasters and chaotic conditions amplified challenges, especially for less experienced aid workers (Bıçakçı & Ergüney, 2023). The study also revealed that social workers who served for shorter durations reported greater difficulties.

In the field, social workers provided psychosocial support to disadvantaged groups, fulfilling critical professional roles as emphasized by Tuncay (2004) and Dominelli (2012). However, as Regehr and Bober (2005) caution, intensive exposure also carries risks of secondary trauma and burnout. Participants described experiencing both fatigue and professional growth, a dual experience consistent with Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) literature on post-traumatic growth. Furthermore, as highlighted by Aktaş (2003), group-based activities and peer sharing played a crucial role in alleviating emotional burdens.

Upon returning from their assignments, participants reported experiencing both burnout and psychological vulnerability, alongside enhanced professional maturity. While some sought professional psychological support, others relied on family ties and social networks as self-healing mechanisms. This duality parallels Aydemir's (2012) findings on the importance of psychosocial support for professionals in post-disaster contexts.

Participants also described changes in their life perspectives, reporting a shift from material values toward spirituality and a stronger emphasis on family bonds. These reflections resonate with Norris et al.'s (2002) conceptualization of "collective trauma" and Zakour and Harrell's (2010) findings on the societal impacts of disasters.

Disaster experiences further shaped participants' outlook on the future. While some considered relocating to less risky areas, others expressed a stronger commitment to serving in future disasters. As Aksoy and Kabasakal (2023) argue, professionals' expectations are shaped by both their psychological states and professional roles.

Participants highlighted a deeper understanding of the importance of preparedness and emphasized that these experiences strengthened their motivation to share professional knowledge. These findings align with Mathbor's (2007) empowerment-based social work approach. Moreover, the variation in outcomes across provinces and lengths of service underscores the necessity of accounting for contextual factors in disaster research, as emphasized by Tierney (2014).

This study demonstrates that social workers play an indispensable role in disaster interventions, though they also face significant challenges. Priority must be given to institutionalizing pre-disaster training and resilience programs (IFSW, 2014). In addition, limiting rotations and ensuring continuity would enhance the effectiveness of psychosocial services. Implementing post-mission supervision and psychosocial support programs would

mitigate risks of secondary trauma. Finally, integrating empowerment- and resilience-based theoretical frameworks into disaster policies would strengthen both professional effectiveness and community recovery (Weick et al., 1989; Houston, 2015).

Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of social workers who served voluntarily or through official assignments in the disaster zones affecting 11 provinces following the February 6, 2023, Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquakes. The study also demonstrates that, despite initial coordination deficiencies, these social workers provided psychosocial support with professional expertise and resilience, emerging from the process with both emotional challenges and professional maturity. In-depth interviews revealed that social workers confronted extensive destruction, widespread suffering, and complex psychosocial needs.

The initial chaos and lack of coordination hindered the effective organization of interventions. Participants with personal connections to the affected regions experienced heightened concern for their families and communities, while those with prior disaster experience were motivated to serve, believing their knowledge and skills would be beneficial (Pyles, 2017; Zakour & Harrell, 2003; Erdener & Erbay, 2019).

Although most participants felt physically prepared, some were unable to fully prepare due to the sudden nature of their deployment. Professional expertise, teamwork, and adherence to ethical standards were critical for providing psychosocial support and meeting urgent needs. The scale of the earthquake and subsequent aftershocks, affecting large populations, underscored the importance of institutional coordination (Norris et al., 2002; Bonanno, 2004; Dominelli, 2012). Participants reported experiencing both emotional challenges and professional growth, consistent with the concepts of post-traumatic growth and professional maturity (Regehr & Bober, 2005; Terzi, 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

The findings support several policy and practice implications regarding disaster preparedness and social work interventions. Proactive measures such as urban planning, enforcement of construction regulations, and integration of geological warnings are critical for mitigating disaster impacts. Disaster preparedness should encompass risk assessments, emergency plans, and regular drills, while early resilience-building programs should be provided to children (Tierney, 2014; Ungar, 2011). For effective disaster management, public institutions, NGOs, and professional organizations must be pre-trained, with clear coordination mechanisms for search and rescue, health, and social services. Information sharing and public awareness should be facilitated through modern communication technologies, and volunteer engagement should be systematically supported. In this context, social work plays a crucial role in enhancing community resilience, promoting psychosocial recovery, and empowering vulnerable groups (Mathbor, 2007; Houston, 2015; IFSW, 2014).

Although these findings are limited by the sample size and geographic scope, they make significant contributions to the field of disaster social work. In conclusion, social workers are not only providers of immediate support in disaster response but also key actors in promoting long-term community recovery and post-traumatic growth. When empirical findings are integrated with theoretical frameworks of resilience, empowerment, and disaster social work, it becomes evident that structured policies, ongoing professional training, and cross-sector collaboration are essential for enhancing both individual and societal resilience in future disasters.

This study highlights the challenges experienced in post-disaster social work interventions. Future research could expand these findings by conducting comparative studies across different types of disasters (e.g., floods, fires) or professional groups (e.g., psychologists, physicians). Additionally, there is a need for quantitative studies measuring the effectiveness of the psychosocial support interventions provided.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that social workers are not merely ‘responders’ to the destruction caused by disasters but central ‘actors’ in the construction of community recovery and resilience. Building a society prepared for future disasters requires recognizing this central role of social work and implementing structured and sustainable policies accordingly.

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