



Assessment of medical social workers' role and challenges in improving the quality-of-service delivery in Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University Teaching Hospital Bauchi: Medical sociology perspective

Safiyanu Ladan

Ministry of Education, Bauchi State, Nigeria

Email: safiyanaladan@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the roles and challenges of medical social workers at Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University Teaching Hospital (ATBUTH) Bauchi through a medical sociology lens. The objectives of the study are to analyze the roles of medical social workers at ATBUTH Bauchi, to identify the challenges experienced by medical social workers at ATBUTH, Bauchi and to provide strategies that will help improve the professional development of social workers. Relevant literature was reviewed and acknowledged to avoid plagiarism. The study employed a mixed-methods approach as a design of the study. Respondents were selected randomly in a stratified manner. The study used questionnaire to collect data to answer research questions, the research reveals how social factors influence the practice of medical social workers and identifies key challenges such as inadequate resources, high workloads, and emotional strain. Data were analyzed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, V27). For validity and reliability of the research tools, the tools were reviewed by a panel of experts in medical sociology and social work, ensuring the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the questions, and the same questionnaire was administered twice to a small group, with consistent results confirming stability over time to ensure reliability. The study's findings emphasized the need for systemic reforms and provide recommendations for raising awareness among healthcare teams about the importance of medical social workers to improve collaboration in patient care, and Encourage participation in relevant workshops and seminars to enhance skills and stay updated on best practices in medical social work.

Keywords: Challenge, Medical, Social, Sociology, Roles

1. Introduction

Medical social workers (MSW) serve as a critical bridge between patients, families, and the medical system, providing vital psychosocial support and ensuring that the non-medical needs of patients are met. Their role has grown in importance as healthcare systems around the world have become more complex and patient care increasingly multidisciplinary. At the Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University Teaching Hospital (ATBUTH) Bauchi, a tertiary hospital in northern Nigeria, medical social workers provide services that range from conducting psychosocial assessments and managing cases to offering crisis interventions and advocacy

for vulnerable patients. They operate in a challenging environment where social factors like poverty, low literacy levels, and limited access to healthcare services further complicate their work (Idyorough, 2018).

This study contributes to the contemporary discourse in medical sociology, examining how social structures, interactions, and institutions influence health outcomes and the work environment of healthcare professionals, including medical social workers. Medical sociology provides a comprehensive perspective on the societal factors that impact both patient outcomes and the working conditions of healthcare professionals, including medical social



workers. By analyzing the roles and challenges of medical social workers through the lens medical sociology, this study not only highlights the personal and professional difficulties faced by these workers but also contextualizes these challenges within broader social and systemic issues that permeate the healthcare sector in Nigeria.

ATBUTH Bauchi as a tertiary healthcare institution it requires multifaceted professionalism. It serves as a referral center for more complex medical cases, many of which come from surrounding rural areas where access to primary healthcare is minimal. Medical social workers are frequently required to engage with patients who have travelled long distances, often at significant personal cost, to receive care. Some of these patients may be unfamiliar with formal healthcare procedures and may experience additional psychological distress as a result. In such cases, medical social workers help to bridge the gap between healthcare providers and patients, ensuring that patients receive not just medical attention but also the necessary social and emotional support to improve their overall well-being.

The intersection of healthcare and social factors is at the core of medical sociology, which asserts that health and illness are not just biological phenomena but are also deeply rooted in social contexts. Factors such as socioeconomic status, education level, employment, and family structure play critical roles in shaping individual health outcomes. For medical social workers, understanding these factors is essential in providing effective care, as they must navigate the complexities of both the healthcare system and the societal challenges that patients bring with them. For instance, patients who lack financial resources may be unable to afford prescribed medications or follow-up care, necessitating the social worker's involvement in seeking alternative solutions, such as linking patients with

charity organizations or social welfare programs (Bichi, 2021).

Medical social workers at ATBUTH also deal with the systemic issues that plague the Nigerian healthcare system, such as chronic underfunding, shortage of medical supplies, and inadequate staffing levels. These issues exacerbate the emotional and physical demands of the profession, leading to high levels of stress and burnout among social workers. Their work environment is often characterized by limited resources, which hinders their ability to fully meet the needs of the patients. Despite these challenges, medical social workers continue to play an indispensable role in ensuring that patients receive holistic care, which includes addressing not only their medical needs but also the social, emotional, and financial factors that affect their overall well-being.

Statement of the Problem

Medical social workers (MSWs) at Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University Teaching Hospital (ATBUTH) in Bauchi play an essential role in bridging patients, families, and the healthcare system by providing psychosocial support, crisis intervention, and advocacy. Operating within a challenging context marked by poverty, limited healthcare access, and under-resourced facilities, these social workers face numerous professional and systemic obstacles, including inadequate funding, supply shortages, and staffing issues. Despite their contributions, the specific roles and challenges of MSWs in this setting are not well understood or documented, particularly regarding how these challenges affect their job performance and well-being. This study aims to address these gaps by examining the roles of MSWs, identifying their challenges, and providing insights that can inform strategies to improve their work environment and the quality of patient care.



Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Analyze the roles of medical social workers at Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University Teaching Hospital Bauchi.
2. Identify the challenges experienced by medical social workers at Abubakar Tafawa Balewa Teaching Hospital, Bauchi.
3. provide strategies that will help improve the professional development of social workers.

2. Literature Review

Roles of Medical Social Workers in Healthcare Settings

From a medical sociological perspective, health is not only the absence of disease but a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, as noted by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019). In addressing these sociological factors, Medical social workers as essential members of healthcare teams, offering a range of services that go beyond physical health to include emotional and social support. According to Keefe, Geron, and Enguidanos (2022), social workers play a vital role in coordinating care, offering counseling, and acting as intermediaries between patients and healthcare providers. Their role involves discharge planning, advocacy, and navigating the often-complex healthcare system. This has been corroborated by a study conducted by Falck (2018), which highlights that medical social workers help patients deal with the psychological impact of chronic illnesses by providing emotional support and resources for better coping strategies, aligning with the medical sociology framework which recognizes health as influenced by social environments and relationships.

In Nigeria, medical social workers have increasingly been recognized for their role in addressing these social factors, particularly for underserved populations. Okoye (2021) notes that medical social

workers are crucial in a healthcare system where socio-economic inequalities create barriers to healthcare access. This is in line with medical sociological theories such as Marxist perspectives, which emphasize how class inequality and structural barriers shape health disparities. Medical social workers, through their advocacy and support for marginalized groups, help mitigate some of these social determinants by providing essential resources and connecting patients with hospital, governmental or community aid (Ejemai, 2019).

The intersection of healthcare and social factors is at the core of medical sociology, which asserts that health and illness are not just biological phenomena but are also deeply rooted in social contexts. Factors such as socioeconomic status, education level, employment, and family structure play critical roles in shaping individual health outcomes. For medical social workers, understanding these factors is essential in providing effective care, as they must navigate the complexities of both the healthcare system and the societal challenges that patients bring with them. For instance, patients who lack financial resources may be unable to afford prescribed medications or follow-up care, necessitating the social worker's involvement in seeking alternative solutions, such as linking patients with charity organizations or social welfare programs.

Furthermore, Ambrosino et al. (2020) argue that the integration of social work into healthcare supports the bio-psychosocial model, a central concept in medical sociology. This model recognizes that health is influenced by biological, psychological, and social factors, all of which must be addressed to achieve optimal health outcomes. Medical social workers operationalize this model by addressing psychosocial concerns that medical professionals may overlook, such as mental health, family stressors, and



financial difficulties, which are critical in understanding the holistic nature of health as emphasized in medical sociology.

Challenges Faced by Medical Social Workers in the Context of Medical Sociology

Challenges faced by medical social workers are deeply embedded in sociological issues such as organizational structures, professional hierarchies, and systemic inequalities. From a medical sociological perspective, the work environment of healthcare professionals, including social workers, is often characterized by power imbalances between different professional groups. Acker and Lawrence (2021) highlighted that social workers in medical settings often face challenges related to their professional status within healthcare teams, which are typically dominated by medical practitioners. This hierarchical structure can limit the recognition of the social dimensions of health that medical social workers address, furthering the disconnect between medical sociology's emphasis on social determinants and the medical model's focus on biological factors.

In Nigeria, these challenges are compounded by broader societal and institutional issues, including underfunding, inadequate staffing, and insufficient resources. Bichi (2021) and Adebayo (2019) emphasize that the lack of proper recognition for medical social work in Nigeria stems from systemic social inequalities, which are a key focus in medical sociology. These institutional barriers reflect broader societal dynamics where healthcare systems in low-income countries often neglect the importance of addressing social determinants of health. As a result, medical social workers are often overwhelmed by high caseloads and lack the institutional support to adequately address the social conditions contributing to patients' health issues.

This lack of institutional support is a major challenge identified in the medical sociology literature, where the focus is on how health systems often prioritize curative over preventive care. Okoye (2021) noted that without proper institutional frameworks to support the integration of social services in healthcare, medical social workers are limited in their ability to contribute to the bio-psychosocial approach to healthcare, which is central to medical sociology.

Impact of Challenges on Medical Social Workers' Performance

The challenges faced by medical social workers have a direct impact on their performance and, consequently, patient care. Empirical evidence from various studies has shown that high levels of stress and burnout among healthcare workers, including medical social workers, can lead to reduced job satisfaction, lower productivity, and increased turnover rates (Kim, Ji, & Kao, 2019). Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2017) identified that burnout among healthcare professionals result in emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, all of which negatively affect job performance.

In Nigeria, the impact of these challenges is even more pronounced. The study by Abdul-Lateef, (2019) found that the inability of medical social workers to perform their duties effectively, due to institutional constraints, negatively affects the quality-of-care patients receive. Inadequate staffing, for example, leads to overburdened social workers who are unable to give adequate attention to each patient. This not only affects patient outcomes but also diminishes the role of social workers within the healthcare system. Similarly, a study by Ejikeme, (2022) indicates that burnout among social workers is linked to higher rates of service errors and decreased quality of patient care, reinforcing the need for better support systems for healthcare workers.



Coping Strategies and Institutional Support

Despite the challenges, medical social workers employ various coping mechanisms to manage the stressors of their roles. According to a study by Rutledge et al. (2019), social workers in healthcare settings use strategies such as peer support, counseling, and relaxation techniques to cope with stress. However, these coping strategies are often informal and lack institutional backing. Gray (2017) suggests that formal support systems, including supervision, counseling services, and stress management programs, are essential for mitigating the effects of burnout in healthcare workers.

In Nigeria, while there is limited empirical research on coping strategies specifically among medical social workers, studies on healthcare professionals in general indicate a lack of institutional support. Idyorough, (2018) highlights the absence of formal mechanisms for stress management and emotional support for social workers in Nigerian hospitals, which exacerbates the challenges they face. Bichi (2021) advocates for the need of policies that promote better working conditions and support for healthcare workers, including medical social workers, to improve both their well-being and the quality of care they provide.

3. Methodology

Research Design

The study used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive analysis of the roles and challenges of medical social workers at ATBUTH Bauchi, and to have a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A total of 30 medical social workers from ATBUTH were surveyed, and 10 healthcare professionals from various disciplines were interviewed. Participants

were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure that every individual in the study population had an equal chance of being selected, which enhances the representativeness of the sample.

Method of Data Collection

Structured questionnaires were used to collect data on job satisfaction, workload, and perceived challenges. The survey included Likert-scale questions and multiple-choice items. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted to gather in-depth insights into personal experiences, specific challenges, and coping strategies.

Method of Data Analysis

Data analyzed using SPSS to identify patterns, correlations, and statistical significance. Descriptive and inferential statistics used to interpret results. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was used, transcripts coded for key themes and insights related to roles and challenges. Thematic coding employed to categorize and interpret data.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1: The services (Roles) render by medical social workers and other health staff in the hospital

Services	Frequency	Percentage
Social Investigation	19	23.8
Assessment	37	46.3
Social Diagnosis	14	17.5
Counseling	10	12.5
Total	80	100.0

The table I above illustrates the range of services provided by medical social workers and other healthcare staff at ATBUTH. The most common service is Assessment, with 37 instances, accounting for 46.3% of the total services rendered. This is followed by Social Investigation, reported 19 times (23.8%), and Social Diagnosis, with 14 occurrences (17.5%). Counseling is the least common service,



occurring 10 times and comprising 12.5% of the total. The data highlights that assessment is a primary role, underscoring the importance of evaluating patients' social needs as part of comprehensive healthcare delivery. Table 1 illustrates the range of services provided by medical social workers and other healthcare staff at ATBUTH. The most common service is Assessment, with 37 instances, accounting for 46.3% of the total services rendered. This is followed by Social Investigation, reported 19 times (23.8%), and Social Diagnosis, with 14 occurrences (17.5%). Counseling is the least common service, occurring 10 times and comprising 12.5% of the total. The data highlights that assessment is a primary role, underscoring the importance of evaluating patients' social needs as part of comprehensive healthcare delivery.

Table II: Challenges faced in the course of their professional services

Challenges	Frequency	Percentage
Staff Shortage	34	43.0
Heavy Caseload	17	21.5
Inadequate Working Equipment	17	21.5
Uncooperative attitude of other team members	11	13.9
Total	79	100.0

Table II outlines the key challenges faced by medical social workers and other healthcare staff during their professional duties at ATBUTH. Staff Shortage emerges as the most significant challenge, cited 34 times and representing 43.0% of the total responses. Heavy Caseload and Inadequate Working Equipment are equally prevalent, each accounting for 17 responses or 21.5% of the total. The Uncooperative Attitude of Other Team

Members is reported less frequently, with 11 instances (13.9%). These findings indicate that staffing shortages and resource limitations are critical issues, potentially impacting the effectiveness and efficiency of medical social work services.

Table III: Strategies for dealing with stress

Stress Management	Frequency	Percentage
Relaxation	33	41.8
Sleeping	30	38.0
Medication	4	5.1
Take off	12	15.2
Total	79	100.0

Table III outlines the strategies employed by medical social workers at ATBUTH to manage stress. The data shows that the most common approach is engaging in relaxation activities, with 33 respondents (41.8%) choosing this method. Sleeping is the next preferred strategy, reported by 30 respondents (38.0%) as a way to alleviate stress. A smaller group of respondents, 4 (5.1%), manage stress by taking medication, while 12 respondents (15.2%) opt to take time off from work when needed. These results indicate a preference for non-medical methods of stress relief, highlighting the importance of rest and relaxation as primary strategies for coping with work-related stress among medical social workers and other health professionals.

Summary of Findings

The data reveals that *Assessment* is the most frequently provided service by medical social workers at ATBUTH, accounting for nearly half of their roles, indicating its centrality in patient care. Other significant services include Social Investigation and Social Diagnosis, with Counseling being less prominent. These roles emphasize the importance of addressing patients' social needs to enhance overall healthcare outcomes.



Regarding challenges, *Staff Shortage* stands out as the primary obstacle, along with substantial caseloads and a lack of adequate working equipment. These challenges hinder medical social workers' ability to fully meet patient needs. Additionally, difficulties with team cooperation, though less frequently reported, still impact their work dynamics. For managing stress, most medical social workers rely on *relaxation activities* and sleep, suggesting a preference for non-medical coping mechanisms. A smaller portion uses medication or takes time off. This preference highlights the importance of self-care methods in managing work-related stress within this demanding environment. These findings underline the need for improved staffing, better resources, and effective stress-management options to support medical social workers' contributions to patient care.

Discussion of Findings

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the roles, challenges, and coping strategies employed by medical social workers at Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University Teaching Hospital (ATBUTH), Bauchi, with findings that align closely with the study's objectives.

Roles of Medical Social Workers

In line with the first objective, the findings reveal that medical social workers at ATBUTH fulfil essential roles centered on psychosocial assessment, social investigation, diagnosis, and counseling. The prominence of *Assessment*, representing nearly half of the services provided (46.3%), underscores its foundational role in their work. Assessment allows medical social workers to identify and address patients' non-medical needs, a critical component in comprehensive patient care. Social Investigation and Social Diagnosis, which follow in frequency, point to the importance of understanding patients' backgrounds and social contexts,

especially in a region where social determinants of health—such as poverty and education levels—impact patient outcomes. Counseling, though least frequent, remains a vital service, providing emotional and mental health support to patients and families.

Challenges Faced by Medical Social Workers

Addressing the second objective, the study identifies significant challenges that hinder medical social workers in their professional roles. *Staff Shortage* emerged as the most reported challenge, accounting for 43% of responses, indicating a strain on existing personnel who must handle increasing caseloads. This shortage often results in excessive workloads, reducing the time available for thorough assessments and interventions. The equally prevalent challenges of *Heavy Caseload* and *Inadequate Working Equipment* each represent 21.5% of the responses, further complicating the work environment. These shortages not only reduce efficiency but also contribute to job dissatisfaction and potential burnout. Additionally, the *Uncooperative Attitude of Other Team Members* highlights the interdisciplinary tension that sometimes arises within healthcare settings, which can impede cohesive teamwork and limit the medical social worker's capacity to contribute effectively.

Strategies for Professional Development and Coping with Stress

The third objective is addressed through findings on coping strategies used by medical social workers, offering insight into areas for professional development. Most respondents rely on *relaxation activities* and *sleep* as primary strategies for managing stress, reflecting a preference for non-medical coping methods. These strategies highlight the need for structured support systems, such as workshops on stress management, counseling resources, and policies allowing for sufficient rest periods. Only a small portion uses



medication or takes time off, suggesting limited access to more formal means of support or a possible lack of awareness about alternative coping methods.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides valuable insights into the roles and challenges of medical social workers at ATBUTH Bauchi. By examining these issues through a medical sociology lens, the research highlights that medical social workers play a crucial role in bridging the gap between clinical care and the social determinants of health, a central focus of medical sociology. However, their work is hindered by institutional challenges, particularly in resource-limited settings like Nigeria, where healthcare systems often fail to address the broader social issues that impact health, and the intersection of social factors and healthcare delivery. Addressing systemic challenges and enhancing support for medical social workers are crucial for improving both worker well-being and patient care outcomes. It is also noted that, maintaining a balance between professional responsibilities and personal life is crucial for reducing stress and improving job satisfaction, and effective time management strategies can help social workers manage their workloads and reduce stress. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics and inform policies and practices that support healthcare professionals in Nigeria and similar contexts.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Raise awareness among healthcare teams about the importance of medical social workers to improve collaboration in patient care.
2. Establish a referral system to connect patients with community resources, helping medical social workers address social health determinants more effectively.
3. Provide necessary resources and equipment to medical social workers to facilitate their work and improve service delivery, thus mitigating challenges related to inadequate working conditions.
4. Organize regular training sessions for healthcare staff to promote teamwork and cooperation, thereby improving interpersonal relationships and reducing instances of uncooperative behavior among team members.
5. Advocate for improved funding and resources dedicated to the professional development of social workers, enabling access to advanced training and educational opportunities.
6. Encourage participation in relevant workshops and seminars to enhance skills and stay updated on best practices in medical social work.

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