Exploring the Quality of Work Life among Public Health Pharmacists in Davao City: An In-depth Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

Background: Stress-related work significantly affects the health and job performance of pharmacy professionals, with implications extending to patient care and workplace dynamics.

Objective: The study aimed to explore the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of public health pharmacists in Davao City, Philippines.

Methods: A phenomenological qualitative research design was employed, and data were collected through focused group discussions with 10 public health pharmacists selected using snowball sampling.

Results: Thematic analysis revealed nine essential themes: five related to lived experiences (job fulfillment and satisfaction, integrity and proactive behavior, interpersonal dynamics, emotional well-being, and work-life quality), two coping mechanisms (interpersonal relationships and work-life balance), and two learning insights (personal well-being and professional growth).

Conclusion: Despite the challenges faced, the participants developed strategies to overcome them, as identified under the "coping mechanisms" theme. The findings offer valuable insights into the experiences and well-being of public health pharmacists, which can inform policies and interventions aimed at supporting and enhancing their work-life quality.

Keywords*: Public health, Public Health Pharmacists, Pharmacy, Quality of Work Life*

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Introduction

Stress-related work has become a significant concern among healthcare professionals, including pharmacists, due to its detrimental effects on health, job performance, and patient care outcomes (Gaither et al., 2014). Persistent workplace stress can lead to burnout, which has been linked to increased medical errors, reduced collaboration with colleagues, and lower patient satisfaction (American Psychological Association, 2023; Smith, 2022). Across the healthcare sector, issues such as burnout, dissatisfaction, and understaffing remain prevalent, indicating broader challenges related to the quality of work life (QWL) (Kesti et al., 2023).

Evidence from both international and local studies underscores the magnitude of this problem. In Saudi Arabia, 43.5% of pharmacists experience job-related stress (Almogbel, 2021), and 61.2% report high levels of burnout, which is among the highest rates in healthcare (Jones et al., 2017). Similar patterns are observed in Ethiopia and the Philippines, where pharmacists report suboptimal job satisfaction and persistent stress-related concerns (Berassa et al., 2021; Yanesa et al., 2022). Although Filipino pharmacists recognize the importance of continuing professional development, actual participation remains low (Bacayo, 2017), suggesting that deeper systemic and organizational issues may hinder professional growth and well-being.

In the Philippine context, public health pharmacists play a vital role in ensuring medication safety, promoting rational drug use, and supporting public health initiatives. However, they often face multiple job demands such as administrative workload, limited resources, and role ambiguity, which can compromise both their well-being and work performance. Despite these challenges, there remains a lack of focused studies exploring the quality of work life of public health pharmacists in Davao City. Understanding their lived experiences is essential for identifying the factors that influence stress, job satisfaction, and coping strategies within the public healthcare system.

To examine these dynamics, this study draws upon the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model, Personal Construct Theory, and Lewin's Field Theory of Learning. The JD-R Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) posits that the balance between job demands and available resources is a key determinant of stress and motivation. Kelly's Personal Construct Theory emphasizes how individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences (Cherry, 2023), while Lewin's Field Theory highlights how behavior results from the interaction between individuals and their environments (Practical Psychology, 2023). Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive perspective on how public health pharmacists perceive and manage their work-life experiences.

Previous research has identified several factors affecting QWL among healthcare professionals—such as workload, interpersonal conflict, organizational culture, emotional well-being, and work–home balance (Eslami et al., 2015; Koinis et al., 2015; Joosen et al., 2015). In the pharmacy sector, limited autonomy, administrative burden, and insufficient institutional support have been cited as sources of stress (Schommer et al., 2022; Chuah et al., 2023). Conversely, positive workplace relationships, integrity, and supportive leadership have been shown to enhance job satisfaction and professional fulfillment (Rodríguez & Juričić, 2018; Miklich et al., 2016).

Given these realities, it becomes imperative to explore how public health pharmacists in Davao City experience and navigate their work environments. By understanding their stressors, coping mechanisms, and learning insights, this study aims to provide evidence that can guide policymakers, educators, and healthcare administrators in designing interventions to improve work-life quality, promote well-being, and ultimately enhance healthcare service delivery.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research approach, specifically a phenomenological method, to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of public health pharmacists in Davao City regarding their quality of work life. As described by Crossman (2020), qualitative research involves the use of non-numeric data to understand social realities and experiences. Through this approach, the study captured the subjective narratives of pharmacists to gain a deeper understanding of how their work, aspirations, and personal lives intersect. Creswell (2013) emphasized that phenomenological research seeks to understand the essence of lived experiences as described by individuals. This design provided a comprehensive understanding of how pharmacists manage workplace challenges, stress, and emotional well-being. Data were collected through focused group discussions (FGDs), complemented by in-depth interviews to ensure clarity and depth of responses, in line with Hales et al. (2022).

Research Participants

The study involved ten public health pharmacists employed in Davao City, comprising six pharmacists hired by Local Government Units (LGUs) and four by the Department of Health (DOH). Participants, ranging from early to older adulthood, were selected through snowball sampling, with assistance from the Chief Pharmacist of the City Health Office and the Officer-in-Charge of the DOH to ensure appropriate coordination and adherence to privacy protocols. Although snowball sampling may introduce some degree of selection bias due to reliance on professional networks, the approach was deemed appropriate for this study's qualitative and exploratory nature. The inclusion of ten participants provided sufficient depth and diversity of perspectives to achieve data saturation, ensuring that the range of experiences relevant to the research objectives was adequately captured. All ten participants took part in the focus group discussions, with follow-up in-depth interviews conducted to clarify and enrich emerging themes.

Role of the Researchers

The researchers were responsible for conducting the study and ensuring the accurate capture and interpretation of data. During FGDs and interviews, they acted as facilitators and interviewers. They were also responsible for transcribing and analyzing the audio recordings, identifying themes, and interpreting the findings. To ensure objectivity, the researchers engaged in bracketing their preconceptions and assumptions. With guidance from an external facilitator, the researchers reviewed and validated emerging themes, supporting their interpretations with participant narratives and relevant literature.

Data Sources

The study utilized focus group discussions and in-depth interviews to gather rich qualitative data on the lived experiences of public health pharmacists in Davao City. These methods were selected to explore both shared and individual perspectives on factors influencing their quality of work life, such as stressors, coping strategies, and workplace dynamics. Focus group discussions encouraged interactive exchange and collective reflection among participants, while in-depth interviews provided a private space for deeper, more personal insights. To ensure credibility and completeness of the data, all sessions were both audio-recorded and documented through detailed note-taking.

Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was developed by the researchers and validated by experts in qualitative research. The guide consisted of open-ended questions aligned with the study's objectives and was designed to encourage participants to speak freely and in detail. The use of this instrument facilitated a conversational yet focused discussion, allowing the emergence of new themes. According to DeJonckheere and Vaugn (2019), semi-structured interviews are well-suited for qualitative research due to their flexibility and capacity to yield rich data. Ruslin et al. (2022) supported this by emphasizing that such interviews allow for exploration of complex topics while maintaining alignment with research goals.

Data Collection

The data collection process was conducted following ethical approval from the UIC-Research Ethics Committee and permission from institutional authorities. The researchers collaborated with designated personnel from the City Health Office and the Department of Health to recruit participants. Informed consent, written in both English and Filipino, was obtained from all participants. This ensured that participants were fully aware of their rights, the study's objectives, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Focused group discussions were held in secure venues approved by relevant authorities, with all participants consenting to audio recording. In-depth interviews were conducted only when clarification of FGD responses was needed. Audio recordings were stored securely and transcribed by the researchers for further analysis. The identities of participants were anonymized throughout the process to protect confidentiality and ensure compliance with ethical standards.

Data Analysis

`Thematic analysis was employed to examine the data collected from FGDs and in-depth interviews. This method involved familiarization with the data through repeated listening and transcript reading, followed by the generation of initial codes to represent meaningful features. Codes were then organized into themes that captured patterns and insights across the data set. These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. According to Simons (2013), thematic analysis is a methodical approach for identifying themes in qualitative data. Delve and Limpaecher (2020) noted that it allows researchers to recognize recurring concepts and transform them into coherent themes. Snelgrove and Vaismoradi (2019) highlighted the value of thematic analysis in promoting understanding of complex phenomena for practical applications in education, research, and policy development.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researchers applied established qualitative validation criteria as discussed by Mandal (2018). Credibility was ensured by using validated instruments and triangulation through adviser and panel feedback. Dependability was addressed by maintaining detailed documentation of procedures, including recorded interviews and field notes, to promote consistency. Confirmability was enhanced by limiting researcher bias through respondent verification and systematic documentation of analytic decisions. Transferability was achieved by providing comprehensive contextual details about the participants and settings, allowing for the assessment of the applicability of the findings to other contexts. These efforts collectively ensured that the study's findings were rigorous, reliable, and grounded in participants' lived experiences.

Ethical Statement

The participation of the participants in this study was voluntary. Before the study, the researchers secured ethical clearance from the University of the Immaculate Conception Research Ethics Committee (UIC-REC). This study followed the ethical considerations guidelines that adhered to 10 elements, namely, social value; informed consent; vulnerability of research participants; risks, benefits, and safety; privacy and confidentiality of information; justice; transparency; qualifications of the researcher; adequacy of facilities; and community involvement as stipulated in the ICF.

Results

This section presents and interprets the findings derived from the focused group discussions and in-depth interviews with public health pharmacists in Davao City. The thematic analysis of the data revealed a total of nine essential themes, which are summarized and detailed in three main tables corresponding to the study's objectives.

Five essential themes emerged from the lived experiences of public health pharmacists and are presented in Table 1. These themes are: job fulfillment and satisfaction, integrity and proactive behavior, interpersonal dynamics, emotional well-being, and work-life quality.

Table 1.
Lived Experiences of Public Health Pharmacists

Essential Themes	Core Ideas
JOB FULFILLMENT AND SATISFACTION	Compensation
	Benefits
	Current Position and Feeling Underrated
	Performance Ratings For Contract Renewal
INTEGRITY AND PROACTIVE BEHAVIOR	Ease of Work
INTERPERSONAL DYNAMIC	Relationship with Head and Colleagues
	Personal Experience with Patients
	Problems in Dealing with Patients

EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING	Feeling Overwhelmed and Stressed
WORK-LIFE QUALITY	Work Performance
	Problems with Abuse Related to Your Work
	Problems Related to the Administration

"Compensation […] since I am 28 28-year regular employee, so…contented naman ako is just this year na feel ko talaga ang inflation so I felt na […] na sana with the work…. with the responsibilities that I have. I think I deserve i-raise parang ganun, so dapat magkaroon siguro kami nag raise not just for me but also for the rest of the LGU hired or City Health hired na pharmacists." (Compensation [...] I have been a regular employee for 28 years...I am already content. It is just that this year I really feel the inflation, so I felt that [...] that hopefully with the work.... with the responsibilities that I have. I think I deserve a raise, so maybe we should get a raise not just for me but also for the rest of the LGU-hired or City Health-hired pharmacists.) P6

"Generally speaking, before di masyadong mabigat ang trabaho medyo ngayon lang; ma balance yung [...] work-life, [...] work life, family, and life balance." (Generally speaking, before, the work was not too heavy, but now it is. As the head of the pharmacist section, I assumed that the burden seemed quite heavy. However, [...] before this, the work is a bit light, and then the ahhh…work-life, [...] work life, family and life balance can be balanced.) P6

"First few months, I was really adjusting [...] kasi gina hila ito sa CHO, you have responsibilities" (First few months, I was really adjusting [...] because it is being dragged to CHO because you have responsibilities.) P8

The interpersonal dynamic theme reflected how relationships with colleagues and patients influenced pharmacists' professional satisfaction. Emotional well-being was reported to be strongly influenced by the work environment. Supportive interpersonal relationships mitigated stress, while negative interactions increased it. Even under a heavy workload, participants highlighted how good relationships with colleagues and approachable supervisors improved emotional outcomes. Work-life quality, as expressed in the fifth theme under Table 1, encapsulated the pharmacists' reflections on performance, abuse, and administrative burdens. While some felt their work had a meaningful public impact, others shared experiences of being disrespected, pressured by patients, or unsupported by administrative systems.

Regarding coping mechanisms, Table 2 presents two primary themes: interpersonal relationships and work-life balance. Participants emphasized the importance

of social support and collegial discussions in managing stress. They shared that being able to talk openly with colleagues helped them feel understood and supported. In terms of work-life balance, participants described strategies such as listening to music, time management, and practicing self-awareness.

Table 2.
Coping Mechanisms of Public Health Pharmacists

Essential Themes	Core Ideas
Interpersonal relationship	Social support
	Collegial discourse
Work-Life Balance	Listening to music
	Time management
	Stress Management

Lastly, participants shared their learning insights, which are presented in Table 3: Learning Insights of Public Health Pharmacists. Two major themes emerged: personal well-being and professional growth. Under the category of personal well-being, participants reflected on managing expectations, practicing open-mindedness, setting boundaries, and prioritizing self-care. They acknowledged that part of sustaining long-term careers in public health involved being realistic about placements, understanding one's limitations, and avoiding emotional overextension.

Table 3.
Learning Insights of Public Health Pharmacists

Essential Themes	Core Ideas
Personal Well-being	Managing Expectations
	Open Mindedness
	Setting Boundaries
	Self-Assessment

	Self Care
	Purpose and Alignment
	Lifestyle Compatibility
Professional Growth	Self-Awareness
	Adapting Work Environment
	Mutual Reciprocity

Professional growth was associated with self-awareness, adapting to varied environments, and embracing reciprocity in workplace relationships. Participants described how learning to say "no," recognizing personal limits, and adjusting to diverse communities helped them thrive in the public health sector. In summary, the data reveal that public health pharmacists in Davao City experience a multifaceted quality of work life shaped by both internal resilience and external systemic factors. While fulfillment is derived from purpose, relationships, and growth, it is often constrained by limited resources, high patient expectations, and administrative inefficiencies. Despite these challenges, pharmacists employ diverse coping strategies and demonstrate adaptive learning, underscoring the potential for targeted interventions to enhance work-life quality and support pharmacist well-being. These findings offer valuable insights for enhancing policy, training, and human resource management within the public health pharmacy sector.

Discussion

In the study, participants expressed both satisfaction and disappointment in their roles. Fulfillment was tied to compensation, benefits, and recognition; however, some shared concerns about outdated salary grades and a lack of financial incentives despite years of service, echoing the concerns raised by Caponnetto et al. (2022), Deriba et al. (2017), and Al-Jumaili et al. (2023).

The interpersonal dynamic theme reflected how relationships with colleagues and patients influenced pharmacists' professional satisfaction. Positive dynamics, especially with supportive supervisors and respectful patients, fostered a sense of belonging and fulfillment (Almogbel, 2021; Weiss et al., 2023). However, some also shared challenging encounters, including misunderstandings, demands, and unrealistic expectations from patients, consistent with the stressors noted by Eslami et al. (2015), Lan et al. (2020), and Haumschild et al. (2015). These tensions, though challenging, were often seen as learning opportunities that contributed to personal and professional growth.

Emotional well-being was reported to be strongly influenced by the work environment. Supportive interpersonal relationships mitigated stress, while negative

interactions increased it. Even under a heavy workload, participants highlighted how good relationships with colleagues and approachable supervisors improved emotional outcomes. These insights confirm the assertions of Schommer et al. (2022), Caponnetto et al. (2022), and Weiss et al. (2023) that emotional well-being is shaped not solely by task demands but also by relational support within the workplace.

Work-life quality, as expressed in the fifth theme under Table 1, encapsulated the pharmacists' reflections on performance, abuse, and administrative burdens. While some felt their work had meaningful public impact, others shared experiences of being disrespected, pressured by patients, or unsupported by administrative systems. Participants cited inadequate staffing, financial reimbursement delays, and limited institutional support as key barriers to the delivery of quality services. These findings align with the studies of Haase (2020), Reed (2023), and Aldaiji et al. (2022), which have noted how systemic issues, such as resource scarcity and administrative inefficiencies, negatively impact the capacity and morale of healthcare professionals.

Regarding coping mechanisms, Table 2 presents two primary themes: interpersonal relationships and work-life balance. Participants emphasized the importance of social support and collegial discussions in managing stress. They shared that being able to talk openly with colleagues helped them feel understood and supported. This coping strategy aligns with the findings of the Canadian Mental Health Association (2018) and Cooks-Campbell (2022), which assert that peer support enhances resilience and promotes emotional well-being.

In terms of work-life balance, participants described strategies such as listening to music, time management, and practicing self-awareness. Music was used as a daily stress reliever, especially in high-pressure settings, supporting Collins (2021), who noted its psychological benefits in workplace contexts. Some participants emphasized the importance of adhering to a strict separation between work and personal time, echoing the findings of Kashyap (2024) and Bertin (2016), who reported that maintaining personal boundaries and engaging in structured rest contribute to healthier coping and prevent burnout.

Lastly, participants shared their learning insights, which are presented in Table 3: Learning Insights of Public Health Pharmacists. Two major themes emerged: personal well-being and professional growth. Under the category of personal well-being, participants reflected on managing expectations, practicing open-mindedness, setting boundaries, and prioritizing self-care. They acknowledged that part of sustaining long-term careers in public health involved being realistic about placements, understanding one's limitations, and avoiding emotional overextension. These insights align with those of Howell et al. (2015), Sanfilippo (2023), and Panda (2021), who have emphasized the role of self-regulation and mindfulness in promoting well-being.

Professional growth was associated with self-awareness, adapting to varied environments, and embracing reciprocity in workplace relationships. Participants described how learning to say "no," recognizing personal limits, and adjusting to diverse communities helped them thrive in the public health sector. Their accounts support Zastrow (2021) and Chuah et al. (2023), who argue that flexibility and emotional intelligence are key to long-term success in complex healthcare systems. The narratives also highlight the relevance of the Job Demands-Resources Model, the Field Theory of Learning, and the Personal Construct Theory in understanding how pharmacists construct meaning from their work experiences and manage their professional identity.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and learning insights of public health pharmacists in Davao City, revealing that while pharmacists find meaning and fulfillment in their roles, they face significant challenges related to compensation, workload, interpersonal dynamics, and administrative limitations. The quality of workplace relationships, organizational support, and personal coping strategies profoundly influences their ability to maintain integrity, emotional well-being, and professional growth. The findings underscore the importance of fostering supportive work environments, implementing responsive human resource policies, and encouraging continuous learning to improve the quality of work life for public health pharmacists, ultimately contributing to better healthcare outcomes.

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