

THE ANALYSIS OF CONTEXTS OF STRESS EXPERIENCED BY SOCIAL WELFARE PROFESSIONALS: EXPERIENCE OF LITHUANIA, LATVIA AND GREAT BRITAIN

Daiva Alifanoviene

Siauliai University, Lithuania

Odetta Sapelyte

Siauliai University, Lithuania

Kristina Rudytė

Siauliai University, Lithuania

Rita Orska

Rezekne Academy of Technologies, Latvia

Abstract. *The article deals with stress experienced by social welfare professionals in different sociocultural context. The comparison of inter-professional stressogenity shows that the greatest stress is experienced by the representatives of social sphere professions (as social workers, pedagogues). The main aim of the article is to disclose the contexts of stress experienced by social welfare professionals in Baltic countries (Lithuania and Latvia) and Great Britain. Professionals' experiences were analysed employing the qualitative approach (semi-structured written interview was used). Reconstructing the context of the stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions of these countries, certain differences showed up.*

Keywords: *manifestation of stress, factors causing stress, social sphere specialists.*

Introduction

Manifestation of stress and stress coping strategies are to be regarded as relevant areas of scientific research in both theoretical and praxeological aspects. Links of coping with stress with extrinsic and intrinsic resources of an individual and community are obvious and are an object of many scientific studies (Rout & Rout, 1993; Bubnys & Petrošiūtė, 2008; Bubeliene & Merkys, 2010, 2012; Lawren, 2016, and ect.).

Traditionally, stress as well as occupational stress are positioned as a lack of personalized response to psychosocial and psychophysical loads falling on an individual. Acknowledging that there is no overall unifying perception of manifestation of stress in different professions and its coping strategies,

attention is also paid to the importance of differentiation of the said phenomena in order to construct adequate preventive measures for the representatives of concrete professions (Kepalaitė, 2013). Although the number of such studies is increasing, there is still a lack of research focusing on specialists of social welfare professions (social pedagogues, social workers). More often research is conducted on the spread of stress in the communities of teachers (Bulotaitė & Lapeškieienė, 2006; Bubelienė & Merkys, 2012), officials (Bandzevičienė et al., 2010; Norkus et al., 2014), nurses (Galdikienė, 2007; Burgess et al., 2010; Istomina et al., 2011; Laranjeira, 2011) and other professions. Studies involving specialists of social welfare professions are more often oriented to the assessment of occupational aspects of their life quality (Bubnys & Petrošiūtė, 2008), peculiarities of experienced anxiety (Alifanovienė & Vaitkevičienė, 2007; Alifanovienė, Vaitkevičienė, & Lučinskaitė, 2012), causes of occupational fatigue (Leliūgienė, Rupšienė, & Baušytė, 2003), prerequisites for coping with the burnout syndrome and its prevention (Vaicėkauskienė, 2014). There is a tendency to investigate stress experienced by social workers already in the context of the supervision perspective (Naujanienė, 2010; Dirgėlienė, 2010, 2013; Kiaunytė, 2012).

It should be noted that in the space of Europe, and especially of the Baltic States, clinical psychological quantitative research on stress manifestation and its coping prevail (Folkman & Maskovič, 2004; Kepalaitė, 2013; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015; Valickas, Grakauskas, & Želvienė, 2010).

The issue of social workers' safety came to the fore recently. Various incidents from other social work specialists' daily work experience show that in Latvia and Lithuania, professionals face safety-threatening risks in their practice. Social workers have referred to the topicality of safety issues, as 72 % of the surveyed professionals have heard of cases or they themselves have faced safety threats in their practice (Razgale, Dīķe, & Geiba 2015). When monitoring families and individuals, social workers have to deal with tuberculosis sufferers that directly pose a risk of contracting this dangerous disease, aggressive drug addicts or individuals under the influence of alcohol, people with mental disabilities whose behaviour is difficult to predict. The work of social caregivers who take care of elderly people is challenging both psychologically and physically, causing prolonged stress and occupational burnout. Reception of visitors is also emotionally gruelling: usually calming down a client requires more time than finding a solution for his problem, as people are under tension, emotional and irritable.

There is still a lack of the analysis of this problem using other qualitative research approaches, which are most likely to open up possibilities for a broader and deeper look at the occupational stress in social and cultural aspects. Social and cultural contexts become particularly important in the activities of specialists working in socially sensitive professions, who work in person-to-person interactions that often directly depend not only on the very person but also on the economic, social and cultural situation of the country.

This presupposes a relatively new problem space: *What contexts of manifestation of stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions come to prominence in the Baltic States and Great Britain? What social meanings are constructed by these specialists' attitude, which possibly shapes social reality?*

The research aim is to disclose the contexts of manifestation of stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions of Lithuania, Latvia and Great Britain.

The research object is the contexts of manifestation of stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions of Lithuania, Latvia and Great Britain.

Research Sample and Methodology

Respondents (N=26) working in the field of social welfare and education and in the field of education in Lithuania, Latvia and Great Britain, who have university education and at least 2 years of work experience, are selected using the purposive convenience non-probability sampling.

Specialists' experience was analysed employing the qualitative method of data collection (the semi-structured *interview*), using open-ended questions according to assessment areas foreseen by the researchers, which were formulated having analysed scientific literature and authors' research that discloses the peculiarities of experienced stress and coping with it (Kriukova, 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The content of responses, which formed the basis of the study, was divided according to respective diagnostic areas, broken down into categories (diagnostic indicators), notional statements were selected. The rating for each category was identified by calculating the frequency of notional statements in the category. In the course of the research, the contexts of manifestation of stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions, their experiences, the attitude to stress experienced in the professional activity unfolded. The research data were processed applying the content analysis method, using an open coding procedure (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Guba & Lincoln). An expert method was used to validate qualitative research data. This allowed to seek a more exhaustive presentation of the study, a more precise analysis of the empirical data of the qualitative research and interpretation of results.

The Analysis of Research Results

During the research, we analyzed manifestation of stress experienced by the specialists of social welfare professions in Lithuania, Latvia and Great Britain in the contexts of their subjective experiences. We analyzed social values constructed by the attitude of these specialists and social reality that is likely to be constructed on the basis of this attitude. Table 1 presents Lithuanian and Latvian specialists' opinion about factors causing stress in the professional activity.

Table 1 **Factors Causing Stress to Social Welfare Specialists in their Professional Activities in Lithuania and Latvia (N=21)**

Category	Subcategory	Examples of proving statements	N
Broad field of professional activities in the institution	The abundance of occupational roles, poor acknowledgement and reward.	<i>a universal employee who is responsible for everything, my work is not appreciated, the salary is too low</i>	27
	Broad content of activities	<i>the content of the activity is very broad, I have to do too much work</i>	26
	Permanent changes at work	<i>first they issue requirements and later they think how they should be implemented, there is a lack of information, we only get more work</i>	20
	Unsuitable working conditions	<i>when there is no separate room, it is problematic to work, it is necessary to ensure confidentiality; we used to go to an empty classroom or another place; security risks; customer aggression; emotional and physical violence</i>	15
	Lack of time	<i>I bring work home, I can't do everything at work</i>	11
	Abundance of documentation	<i>documentation takes very much time, you have to describe each step</i>	11
	Unexpected cases	<i>unplanned situations, cases that I have to solve "here and now"</i>	6
	Work checks	<i>commissions, audits that check my work</i>	5
		Total:	121
Challenges of interpersonal relationships	Lack of cooperation between specialists and the family	<i>more complicated communication with parents, there is no progress, they always know everything better than I</i>	12
	Inappropriate communication with children	<i>communication with problem children, I don't make myself understood</i>	8

	Lack of collegial and partner relationships with management and colleagues	<i>complicated with managers, I get only instructions from them and what I did wrong, co-workers do not acknowledge</i>	6
		Total:	26
Importance of personality traits	Critical self-assessment	<i>I am too demanding and critical to myself, dissatisfied with the results I have achieved, I am too sensitive</i>	19
	Reconciliation of the professional activity and family needs	<i>I am trying not to think about work after work, I don't always succeed, the family stays somewhere</i>	13
	Intrinsic contradictions	<i>sometimes to pretend because I don't like all parents, to pretend that I want to communicate with them</i>	6
	Occupational expectations	<i>I expect too much, I'm disappointed</i>	2
			Total:

The analysis of qualitative semi-structured interview data discloses factors of occupational stress experienced by social sphere specialists of Lithuania and Latvia. The meanings constructed on the basis of their opinion enable to disclose multilayered personal, social, cultural, and educational contexts, which potentially contain stressogenic factors. The generalized semantic units that rose to prominence in the course of the research demonstrate that specialists encounter stressful situations due to factors lying in the very **personality, the social-institutional environment** and **interpersonal relationships**. It was disclosed that the abundance of institutional and interpersonal stressogenic factors had significantly outweighed factors lying in the personality.

Having analyzed specialists' subjective experiences, the generalized semantic units highlight the most characteristic stressogenic factors of the **professional activity field** (N=121). This category is further broken down into several subcategories: **the abundance of occupational roles, poor acknowledgement and reward** (N=27) (*responsible for everything, co-workers do not acknowledge, too low salary*), **broad content of activities** (N=26) (*I have to do too much work*), **permanent changes at work** (N=20) (*first they issue requirements, and later they think how they should be implemented*), **inappropriate working conditions** (N=15) (*when there is no separate room, it is problematic to work, it is necessary to ensure confidentiality*), **lack of time** (N=11) (*I bring home*), **abundance of documentation** (N=11), **unexpected cases** (N=6) and **work checks** (N=5) (*documentation takes very much time, unplanned situations, commissions that check my work*).

Reconstruction of the context of generalized semantic units of **challenges of interpersonal relationships**, (N=26) results in several subcategories: **lack of**

cooperation between specialists and the family (N=12) (*there is no progress, they always know everything better than I*), **inappropriate communication with children** (N=8) (*I cannot make myself understood*), **lack of collegial and partner relationships with management and colleagues** (N=6) (*complicated with managers, I only get instructions from them and what I did wrong*).

The analysis of subjective experiences of factors causing social welfare specialists' stress enabled to distinguish the context of the category **personality traits** (N=40), which is revealed by several subcategories: **critical self-assessment** (N=19) (*dissatisfied with the results achieved*), **reconciliation of the professional activity and family needs** (N=13) (*I try not to think about work after work*), **intrinsic contradictions** (N=6) (*you pretend sometimes because I don't like all parents*), **occupational expectations** (N=2) (*I expect too much, disappoint*).

According to authors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004), stress is perceived as a physical, emotional tension, a person's response to complex situations, where despite potentially improving social (economic, health, social, educational) conditions, stress is increasing. The analysis of the research data discloses that social sphere specialists of Lithuania and Latvia envisage most stressors in the social context, in the professional field and in the activities of the institution. These categories and the subcategories distinguished in them are characterized by the largest number of statements.

The analysis of researchers' (Bubelienė & Merkys, 2012; Pikūnas & Palujanskienė, 2005) studies on stress highlights the fact that stressogenic factors often lie at the macro social level, encompassing the country's welfare, social policy, cultural peculiarities, and that these factors come to prominence considerably less at the level of the organization and at the personal-intrapersonal level. On the other hand, it is paradoxical, but specialists who experience stressful situations try to cope with them at the individual-intrapersonal and interpersonal level. This area of research is waiting for further exhaustive studies.

In order to avoid putting social workers at risk and ensure that a social worker can protect himself when working with a client, special conditions must be created, which would provide the workers with the opportunity to recover from stress situations, effectively recuperate both physically and mentally. It is necessary to know, what needs to be addressed in practice – what additional knowledge and skills social workers must possess and which additional assisting means must be available for the professional's self-defence.

During the research, it was sought to find out factors causing stress to social welfare specialists in their professional activities in Great Britain by analyzing the contexts of their subjective experiences (Table 3).

Table 2 **Factors Causing Stress to Social Welfare Specialists in their Professional Activities in Great Britain (N=5)**

Category	Subcategory	Examples of proving statements	N
Broad field of professional activities in the institution	Broad content of activities	<i>the amount of work is constantly increasing, work becomes much more complicated</i>	13
	Lack of time	<i>everything must be done and submitted on time</i>	11
	Lack of professionalism	<i>we notice problems too late, this causes stress</i>	10
	Abundance of documentation	<i>abundance of clerical work, to prepare papers, reports</i>	5
	Indefiniteness and abundance of occupational roles	<i>I encountered obstacles due to my vague role, many roles</i>	3
	Unexpected cases	<i>unplanned situations, cases that I have to solve "here and now"</i>	2
			Total:
Challenges of interpersonal relationships	Lack of cooperation between specialists and the family	<i>It is not always possible to establish constructive relations, don't have a need to solve problems</i>	9
	Inappropriate communication with children	<i>in their eyes I am seen as an enemy; don't trust</i>	5
	Lack of collegial and partner relationships with management and colleagues	<i>didn't want to cooperate with me, didn't report problems related to students</i>	3
			Total:
Importance of personality traits	Reconciliation of professional activities and family needs	<i>I return home as if to a new world, I have many other activities after work, I feel that I harm my family</i>	6
	Critical self-assessment	<i>It isn't easy to make the most appropriate decision</i>	4
	Occupational expectations	<i>I expect too much, to think that they are still children</i>	3
			Total:

Having analyzed subjective experiences of stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions in their professional activities in Great Britain, several generalized notional units that can be used as a basis for constructing social reality of relevant stressogenic factors come to prominence. The distinguished generalised semantic units disclose the contexts of **personality traits** (N=44), **challenges of interpersonal relationships** (N=17) and a **broad**

field of professional activities (N=13), where informants experience most stress.

The analysis of semi-structured interviews demonstrates that specialists envisage a large share of stressors in **the field of professional activities**, where a number of subcategories rise to prominence: **broad content of the activity** (N=13) (*the amount of work is constantly increasing, work becomes more complex*), **lack of time** (N=11) (*you have to do everything and submit on time*), **lack of professionalism** (N=10) (*we notice problems too late, this causes stress*), **abundance of documentation** (N=5) (*the abundance of clerical work, to prepare papers, reports*), **indefiniteness and abundance of occupational roles** (N=3) (*I encountered obstacles due to my vague role, many roles*), **unexpected cases** (N=2) (*unplanned situations, cases that I have to solve “here and now”*).

Subjective experiences of social welfare professionals enabled to generalize and distinguish the category of **challenges of interpersonal relationships**, which is characterized by several subcategories: **lack of cooperation between specialists and the family** (N=9) (*it is not always possible to establish constructive relations*), **inappropriate communication with children** (N=5) (*in their eyes I am seen as enemy, don't trust*), **lack of collegial and partner relations with management and colleagues** (N=3) (*didn't want to cooperate with me, didn't report problems related to students*).

The reconstruction of the context of generalised semantic units of **personality traits** (N=13) results in several subcategories: **reconciliation of professional activities and family needs** (N=6) (*I return home as if to a new world, have many other activities after work, I feel that I hurt my family*), **critical self-assessment** (N=4) (*it's not easy to make the most appropriate decision*), **occupational expectations** (N=3) (*I expect too much, to think that they are still children*).

Reconstruction of the context of factors causing stress to social sphere professionals of Great Britain resulted in the identified importance of social sphere, institutional factors, which has evidently moved the centre of gravity from the context of the personality and interpersonal relationships.

Conclusions

1. The analysis of subjective experiences of social welfare specialists of Lithuania and Latvia enabled researchers to construct social reality in which the factors causing stress of different levels come to prominence. The research data demonstrate that these professionals provide the largest number and most concentrated statements not at the level of the personality, the intrapersonal level but at social and institutional levels,

which encompass non-smoothness at the managerial, organizational level, due to the abundance of documents and changes; broadness of specialists' activities; indefiniteness; inappropriate working conditions and permanent activity checks.

2. Safety issues are topical for social work professionals. Safety threats cause high stress and application of stress management strategies is insufficient. These issues must be addressed both from a legal point of view and from the point of view of social workers' training. It is necessary to know what needs to be addressed in practice: what additional knowledge and skills social workers must possess and which additional assisting means must be available for the professional's self-defence.
3. Reconstruction of the multilayered context of socio-cultural and educational diversity of social sphere specialists of Great Britain resulted in multiple semantics of stressogenic factors. Professionals of this country do not tend to relate factors that for the most part cause occupational stress to the space of a personality's, intrapersonal level. The centre of gravity of stressogenity is clearly concentrated at the social, institutional level, which highlights tensions of professional activities that are related to the wide scope of activities, document management, poor time management, lack of professionalism, solution of unexpected cases.

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