THE ANALYSIS OF THE CONTEXTS OF COPING WITH THE STRESS EXPERIENCED BY SOCIAL WELFARE PROFESSIONALS: EXPERIENCE OF LITHUANIA AND SCANDINAVIAN COUNTRIES[1]

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Abstract

The article deals with stress and coping with the stress experienced by social welfare professionals in different social and cultural contexts. The comparison of inter-professional stressogenity shows that the greatest stress is experienced by the representatives of social sphere professions. The main aim of the article is to disclose the contexts of possibilities for coping with the stress experienced by social welfare professionals in Lithuania and Scandinavian countries. Specialists' (N=12) experience was analysed employing the qualitative data collection method (semi-structured written *interview*), using open-ended questions according to assessment areas foreseen by the researchers. Reconstructing the context of coping with the stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions of these countries, certain differences showed up: Lithuanian social welfare professionals use the most affordable ways for stress coping in the intrapersonal (physical and emotional) area. Due to a more favourable socio-economic situation in the country, Scandinavian informants have a wider range of stress management possibilities in terms of affordability, content and choice.

Keywords: *contexts of coping with the stress, social welfare professionals, intrapersonal – interpersonal stress level.*

Introduction

The analysis of the context of stress, its features and coping possibilities is a multidisciplinary concept that is relevant both in everyday life practice and for scientists of

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many branches of science. The coping with stress is closely related to external and internal resources and processes of meeting the needs of a person and community (Rout & Rout, 1993).

There are quite many studies on the phenomenon of stress and the coping with stress both in Lithuania and on a world scale (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Folkman & Moskovwitz, 2004; Kriukova, 2010; Grakauskas & Valickas, 2006; Bubelienė & Merkys, 2009, 2012). Analysing specialists of social welfare professions, the field of their professional activity is formed in the social environment and involves interactions person–person. This space provides a favourable context for emergence of stressful situations. The comparison of inter-professional stressogenity shows that the greatest stress is experienced by the representatives of social sphere professions (public sector, services, education, social welfare) (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998).

In addition to communication with clients, the requirements for professionals working in the sector of social welfare, education services provision and time resources (lack) are also a source of stress (Karivand & Heiman, 2005).

The coping with stress is treated as a stabilising factor that can help a specialist to psychologically adapt to stressful events (Walton, 2002). Scientific literature presents various ways and methods used by professionals to cope with stress, which encompass effective time management, social support, positive reappraisal and engagement in leisure activities (Coffey, Dugdill, & Tattersall, 2004). Scientists also distinguish emotion-based coping, accepting responsibility, cognitive and planned problem solving methods (Bamuhair, Farhan et al., 2005).

According to the theoretical analysis of the phenomenon, stress and the coping with stress of social welfare professionals are usually related to resources and/ or their shortage (Anderson, 2000). Specialists feel a lack of support, methods and/ or ways of work with clients (Lawren, 2016). There is also a lack of time required for effective performance of activities. Some studies performed by Scandinavian authors (Borritz, Rugulies, Bjorner et al., 2006) show that a social worker also feels the impact of the image and related unrealistic expectations on experienced stress.

The research problem presupposes problem questions for the area of research: *What contexts of possibilities for coping with stress experienced by social welfare professionals in Lithuania and Scandinavian countries show up? What ways used by the professionals of these countries help to cope with stressful situations encountered in professional activities?*

The research aim is to disclose the contexts of possibilities for coping with stress experienced by social welfare professionals in Lithuania and Scandinavian countries.

The research subject is the contexts of possibilities for coping with stress experienced by social welfare professionals in Lithuania and Scandinavian countries in the aspect of subjective experiences.

Research Sample and Methodology

Using the purposive convenience non-probability sampling method, respondents (N=12) were selected from social welfare institutions (social services, educational institutions) in Lithuania and Scandinavian countries (Sweden). Respondents' university education and at least 2 years of work experience were likely to ensure experience in the social welfare area, specialists' links with a wide spectrum of problems and possible stressful situations in professional activities. This is also ensured by the age of research participants, which varies from 26 to 60 years in the group of specialists of social welfare services of Lithuania and ranges from 35 to 44 years in the Scandinavian (Swedish) group. The group of research participants

was formed grounding on the snowball method according to informants' recommendations. The entire set of research participants is homogeneous; i.e. only women took part in the research.

Specialists' experience was analysed employing the qualitative data collection method (semi-structured written *interview*), using open-ended questions according to assessment areas foreseen by the researchers, which were formulated upon the analysis of scientific literature and authors' studies, disclosing the characteristics of experienced stress and the possibilities to cope with it (Bubelienė & Merkys, 2012; Valickas, Grakauskas, & Želvienė, 2010; Kepalaitė, 2013; Kriukova 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The research data was processed using the content analysis method (Guba, Lincoln, 1994). This involves categorisation of empirical indicators: the statements were grouped (categorised) by the researchers according to their semantic similarity (similarity of meaning), and, subsequently, categories were formed giving them a name reflecting the essence of the category. Seeking to reduce the data subjectivity factor, the categories were formed by 7 research participants who were treated as experts. They were the ones who grouped statements according to their semantic meaning and named grouped statements in group discussions. This enabled to seek a more detailed presentation of the study, a more precise analysis of the empirical qualitative research data and interpretation of the results.

In the course of the research, the context of coping with the stress experienced by social welfare professionals, their experience, the attitude to the stress experienced in professional performance, possibilities and ways to cope with stress unfolded. All research data (categories, subcategories, statements illustrating them and their frequency) is presented in tables following the rating principle (from the most frequently to the least frequently mentioned statements).

The Analysis of Research Results

In the course of the research, we analysed the possibilities of coping with the stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions in Lithuania and Scandinavian countries (Sweden) in the contexts of their subjective experiences. We wanted to find out the ways of coping with stressful situations used by the professionals of these countries, which are likely to help to cope with difficulties, reduce internal tension, regain spiritual balance and to allow them to seek personal and professional self-actualisation (Table 1).

Table 1. The experience of Lithuanian social welfare professionals: the context of the coping with stress

Category	Subcategory	Examples of proving statements	Frequency of statements
Individual coping with stress	*Emotional coping with stress*	*"...I am looking for a positive, I see not a half empty but a half full glass of delicious juice ...", "...reading books...", "...engaging in my favourite activities...", "I use my humour and iron...."*	17
	Physical coping with stress	*"...A walk in nature or physical work...", "... sport...", "...I strictly regulate my agenda...", "Sometimes even just sleep...", "...sitting near the fire..."*	9

Social-group coping with stress	Social support	*"...I try to solve all problems through communication, speaking...", "... conversation with family members...", "...mutual support groups...", "...art, music therapy..."*	10
Simulation of the solution of a stressful situation	Distinguishing of priorities of activities	*"...I try to pick out the most important jobs and those jobs that are more necessary for students, not for inspectors...", "...when I'm not at work, I don't answer my office phone, I don't read emails at weekends...", "... I try to pick out what is the most important ..."*	5
	Situation analysis	*"...situation analysis..."*	2
Avoidance to solve problems	Retreat from a stressful situation	*"Being stressed, I use retreat if possible..."*	3

The analysis of data obtained using the qualitative semi-structured interview enables to disclose the contexts of possibilities for coping with the stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions in Lithuania and Scandinavian countries (Sweden). Having analysed specialists' subjective experiences, the generalised semantic units highlight the most common contexts of specialists' strategies to cope with stress in their professional activities. These contexts can be relatively divided into *individual (physical and emotional) and social-group coping with stress, simulation of the solution of a stressful situation (distinguishing priorities, analysing the situation) and the retreat from the situation causing stress.*

The analysis of subjective experiences of social welfare professionals in Lithuania and Scandinavian countries (Sweden) enables to disclose that professionals try to cope with stress in their professional activities at different levels: **intrapersonal individual** (N=26) or **interpersonal social-group** level (N=10) and choose **a constructive way directed towards solution of the problem** (N=7) or simply **a retreat from the problem** (N=3) (Pikūnas & Palujanskienė, 2005; Kriukova, 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Reconstructing **the intrapersonal individual** (N=26) space to cope with stress, it is reduced to several subcategories: **physical** (N=9) **and emotional** (N=17). In the contexts of subjective experiences of Lithuanian specialists of social welfare professions, individual (**physical:** *"A walk in nature, physical work, sport, sleep, sitting near the fire"* and **emotional**: *"I'm looking for a positive in many things, I see not a half empty but a half full glass of delicious juice, engaging in my favourite activities"*) efforts to cope with stress are disclosed. An active individual position, a positive attitude to stressful situations and optimism enable specialists to feel themselves as leaders of their lives and careers, to accept challenges, look for appropriate solutions (Krohne, 2001; Lazarus, 2000).

Analysing the subjective experience of the coping with professional stress experienced by the specialists' group, both intrapersonal and **interpersonal** level efforts, encompassing contexts of support of the **social group** (N=10), show up. The statements of specialists of social welfare professions of our country disclose the multifaceted content of this context (*"I try to solve all problems through communication, speaking, conversation with family members, mutual support groups, art, music therapy"*). This presupposes a broad area of social group support which is successfully used by professionals in stressful situations, starting with communication, family members' support and extending to participation in self-help groups or in art, music or other therapeutic groups.

Stress emergence factors and levels of the coping with stress can be relatively divided to **internal-intrapersonal** (human personality) and **social-interpersonal** (social environment, interpersonal relations) (Bandzienė, 2009; Pikūnas & Palujanskienė, 2005). The analysis of research data enables to state that specialists of social welfare professions of our country try to cope with stressful situations individually, using the most affordable possibilities: walks, sports, physical work, reading books, etc.

Subcategories **distinguishing of priorities of activities** (N=5) and **situation analysis** (N=2), which can be illustrated by statements: "*I try to pick out the most important jobs, situation analysis*", are to be assigned to the group of semantic units that describes the informants' experience of **solving stressful situations** (N=7).

Analysing the experience of social welfare specialists coping with stress, avoidance to solve problems also showed up (N=3). Informants described it as a retreat from stressful situations ("*Being stressed, I use retreat if possible*").

It is possible to cope with stressful situations in professional activities by simulating various ways of coping. This context of Lithuanian specialists' subjective experience is poorly developed. They state that in stressful situations they try to analyse difficult situations, set priorities. Some professionals generally avoid addressing stressful situations by simply retreating from them.

Table 2. The experience of Scandinavian (Swedish) social welfare professionals: the context of the coping with stress

Category	Subcategory	Examples of proving statements	Frequency of statements
Individual coping with stress	*Physical coping with stress*	"...Sport...", "...I used to climb mountains ...", "...I go to ski parks...", "I travelled very much...", "...I invest in trips...", "I used to go to beauty treatments..."	9
	Emotional coping with stress	"...I relax listening to music...", "...I go to the theatre...", "...self-improvement..."	12
Social-group coping with stress	*Communication*	"...Family support is very important...", "...I'm trying to talk...", "...we talk with the like-minded, analyse difficult situations and our actions..."	8
Simulation of the solution of a stressful situation	*Distinguishing of priorities*	"... I try to disassociate from by-work ...", "... I pick out the first things..."	5
	Situation analysis, application of methods	"...situation analysis...", "...I use the "aquarium" technique which I learned while studying at the university: in a stressful situation, you imagine being surrounded by aquarium glass..."	4
	Assistance of health and other specialists	"...I do not exclude the possibility of addressing specialists in the future, if this helps me to do my job better and live life where there is not so much "work-related" stress...", "...I love living in this country – it's a tradition of supervisions..."	4
	Colleagues' assistance, support	"...colleagues doing the same job helped...", "...I talk with my colleagues about possible variants of solutions..."	4

Reconstructing Scandinavian (Swedish) social welfare specialists' **intrapersonal-individual** (N=21) space to cope with stress, it is reduced to several subcategories: **physical** (N=9) and **emotional** (N=12). Scandinavian professionals' subjective individual physical (trips, going to ski parks, beauty treatments, etc.) and emotional (listening to music, theatre, beauty treatments, self-improvement) experiences disclose qualitative differences between tension and stress management strategies used by specialists of these countries. Due to a more favourable socio-economic situation in the country, Scandinavian informants have a wider range of possibilities for intrapersonal (physical and emotional) discharge in terms of affordability, content, choice possibilities, which enables them to reduce tension and seek better work results (Valickas, Grakauskas, & Želvienė, 2010).

Interpersonal level strategies for coping with stress include the content of support of the **social group** (N=8) ("*family support is very important", "we talk with the like-minded"*). This presupposes the context of social group support which is basically limited to social support of family members and co-workers. These are undoubtedly important but insufficient social support constituents (Pikūnas & Palujanskienė, 2005; Želvys, 2003). The context of interpersonal coping with stress through social support is relevant both simulating the possible solution of the problem and in order to reduce tension, give vent to one's emotions. Such strategies for coping with stress are to be regarded as if an intermediate link that is directed towards and serves for the person's emotional discharge on the one hand and for simulation of the solution of the difficult situation, on the other (Endler & Parker, 1990).

The subjective analysis of the coping with stress experienced by the specialists of social welfare professions enabled to distinguish the context of **simulation of the solution of stressful situations** (N=17), which is disclosed by several subcategories: *distinguishing of priorities, situation analysis, application of methods, assistance of health and other specialists, colleagues' assistance, support*. This group of generalised semantic units highlights informants' cognitive efforts to analyse the situation, use appropriate methods, disassociate from secondary matters *("I pick out the first things", "I use the "aquarium" technique")*. Simulating the solution of difficult situations, specialists use their colleagues' knowledge, other specialists' assistance as well as modern stress management methods, such as supervision *("I talk with my colleagues about possible variants of solutions", "I love living in this country – it's a tradition of supervisions")*.

Reconstruction of the context of **simulation of solutions of stressful situations** of social welfare professionals highlights both search for the individual best way out of the situation and search for other specialists' intensive participation, which is likely to facilitate the solution of the situation. The rallying of an intensive social network, involvement of specialists of different areas are to be considered a constructive strategy to cope with stress, all the more so because reasons causing stress (or situations) are often complex in their nature. Simulation of solutions of stressful situations presupposes the professional's actions directed to the solution of the problem, which can change the relation between the person who has a problem and the environment (Lazarus, 2000, Valickas, Grakauskas, & Želvienė, 2010).

Conclusions

1. Intensive political, social and economic changes in the countries of the European Union, changing contexts in old and new states of this union inevitably create tension fields and stressful situations in various areas of social life, including the particularly vulnerable social welfare area. The ability of professionals of this area in Lithuania and Scandinavian

countries (Sweden) to cope with stressful situations is likely to have a positive impact on assurance of the society's stability and well-being. Theoretical and praxeological contexts of these areas are insufficiently explored.

2. Reconstructing the context of the coping with the stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions of these countries, certain differences showed up. Lithuanian informants use the most affordable ways to cope with stress in the intrapersonal (physical and emotional) area. Due to a more favourable socio-economic situation in the country, Scandinavian informants have a wider range of stress management possibilities in terms of affordability, content and choice.

3. Summarising the semantic units provided by the specialists of both countries, it appears that informants try to cope with stress in their professional activities in the interpersonal space: Scandinavian specialists use assistance of the family and the like-minded, while Lithuanian informants also participate in the activities of other social groups (self-help, therapeutic).

4. The context of simulation of the solution of stressful situations discloses differences between the analysed countries. Lithuania's possibly young and insufficiently developed social welfare area creates poorer choices for solutions. This is likely to presuppose Lithuanian social welfare specialists' avoidance to solve stressful situations. In Scandinavia, the space of choices of stress management possibilities directed to the solution of the problem is broader, encompassing not only the situation analysis, prioritisation but also colleagues', other professionals' knowledge, the use of specific methods.

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Summary

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According to the theoretical analysis of the phenomenon, stress and coping with stress of social welfare professionals are usually related to resources and/ or their shortage (Anderson, 2000). Specialists feel a lack of support, methods and/ or ways of work with clients (Lawren, 2016). There is also a lack of time required for effective performance of activities. Some studies performed by Scandinavian authors (Borritz, Rugulies, Bjorner et al., 2006) show that a social worker also feels the impact of the image and related unrealistic expectations on experienced stress. The research problem presupposes problem questions for the space of research: *What contexts of possibilities for coping with stress experienced by social welfare professionals in Lithuania and Scandinavian countries show up? What ways used by the professionals of these countries help to cope with stressful situations encountered in professional activities?*

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