RECONSTRUCTION OF THE CONTEXT OF COPING WITH OCCUPATIONAL STRESS EXPERIENCED BY SPECIALISTS OF SOCIAL WELFARE PROFESSIONS IN SOCIALLY AND CULTURALLY DIVERSE ENVIRONMENT

Daiva Alifanovienė, Odeta Šapelytė, Darius Gerulaitis
Šiauliai University, Lithuania

Abstract

The article deals with the reconstruction of the context of coping with occupational stress experienced by social welfare specialists in different socio-cultural environments. It is aimed to reveal the contexts of the possibilities to cope with stress and of consequences of stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions of Lithuania and *Great Britain* (N=10). The professionals' experience was analysed using a qualitative data collection method (semi-structured *interview*), employing open-ended questions by the assessment areas foreseen by the researchers and formulated upon the analysis of scientific literature and the authors' research, disclosing the peculiarities of experienced occupational stress and possibilities of coping with it. The research data were analysed employing the content analysis method, using the open coding procedure; validation of the research data was performed using an expert method. Reconstruction of the multilayered context of socio-cultural diversity of social welfare specialists of Lithuanian and Great Britain highlighted ambiguous semantics of stress coping possibilities: the success of coping with occupational stress possibly depends on the interaction between the variables of a personality (intrapersonal) and social environment (interpersonal). Stressful situations affect both personally and professionally, causing changes in specialists' emotions, cognitive activity, behaviour, aggravating relationships with colleagues and reducing work efficiency.

Keywords: occupational stress, coping with stress, consequences of stress, professionals of social welfare system

Introduction

Current political, economic, demographic and social conditions in the development of European countries make it hardly possible to avoid stressful situations. High stress or long-term stress are harmful due to exhaustion of the organism; on the other hand, *stressful situations* mobilize internal resources of the organism and are a condition of survival. In the

recent period, professional activities of *social welfare sphere specialists* (social workers, their assistants, education support specialists, etc.) are undergoing significant changes: new information technologies, fast pace and scope of the professional activity, constant legal, methodological-methodical change and reforms of the social sphere, fluctuations in the scope of activity and instability of a reward.

These changes undoubtedly *promote improvement of the social sphere*, better quality of services, their accessibility, timeliness and coverage. This is provided for in the documents analyzing economic, social and cultural development of our country (Trends of the development of Lithuanian scientific research, experimental (social, cultural) development and development of innovations (smart specializations) for years 2014-2020, Lithuania's Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030"), outlining the most important trends of innovation which are likely to reach the biggest breakthrough.

On the other hand, the reformation of a large, emerging, emotionally sensitive and personalized sphere is hardly likely to take place smoothly and without affecting the professionals working in this sphere *personally* and *professionally*. Scientific research shows that the social sphere specialists experience *stress* relatively strongly, the social environment transforms from the low-level stress environment into the *medium-level stress* or even *high-level stress* environment and that the relative balance of correspondence between the *personality* and the *environment* is increasingly violated. Students and professionals working in this field are not trained to recognize, evaluate, *manage* and *cope with stress,* and they learn this auto-didactically from experience (Bubelienė & Merkys, 2010; Moran & Hughes).

Scientists' research reveals that the expectations, requirements *of personality traits and the social context*, their mismatch and subjective assessment often become the fields of tension and cause stress. Stress and its management are an evolving, dynamic, ever-changing process, which takes place due to the constant *interaction between the human* and *the social environment*, which is worth analyzing in the context of the personality's *internal* and *external* variables. Different personalities can treat the same social situations differently: in some cases, the experienced interactions become threatening; while in other cases, it is a challenge for the personality's and professional development. The authors analyze the mismatch of the variables of the personality (traits, values, abilities) and the environment (organizational culture, professional requirements, material reward), presupposing stressful situations, possible consequences, their management and coping (Lazarus, 2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Edwards & Cooper, 1990, Edwards & Billsbery, 2010; Moran & Hughes, 2006; Ridder & Karssens, 2010).

The analysis of the context of causes, manifestation of stress, its coping strategies in the works of our country's scientists is not a new theoretical-empirical phenomenon. The analysis of the occupational stress situation of teachers (Bubelienė & Merkys, 2012; Bulotaitė & Lepeškienė, 2006; Kepalaitė, 2013), teachers of higher education institutions (Loikienė & Pileckaitė-Markovienė, 2013), social workers (Kiaunytė, 2013; Lazutka, Skučienė, Žalimienė, Vareikytė, & Kazakevičiūtė, 2008), nursing staff (Katarskis & Perminas, 2012; Rovas, Lapėnienė, & Baltrušaitytė, 2012), statutory workers, security specialists (Bandzevičienė, Birbilaitė, & Diržytė, 2009; Burba, Sitnikovas, & Lankaitė, 2014; Jeffrey, Burba, Žukauskas, Rukšėnas, & Grigaliūnienė, 2009) has been performed, disclosing multidimensional relations between different demographic variables characterising these professionals (gender, age, qualification, etc.) and professional activity peculiarities that are potentially relevant to management of stressful situations. It should be noted that in the context of the empirical

research in this field, clinical psychological quantitative research on stress manifestation, stress coping prevail and there is a lack of the analysis of this problem using other, qualitative research approaches, opening up the possibilities for a likely more open and less structured review of the occupational stress field in the social, psychological and cultural aspects.

Social, economic, and cultural contexts of Lithuania and Great Britain are possibly significant for such a sensitive human life sphere as the social sphere and for its professionals' occupational stress, its consequences and coping possibilities. This is also confirmed by the authors' research on social sphere professionals not only in Lithuania's social space but also in other Baltic and Scandinavian countries. The problem of this research presupposes problem questions opening up a relatively new space of research on coping with stress: *What contexts of occupational stress, its consequences and possibilities of coping with stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions in our country and Great Britain come to prominence? What ways used by the professionals of these countries help to cope with stressful situations encountered in their professional activity? What social meanings does the attitude of these professionals' construct, according to which social reality is possibly constructed?*

The research aim is to disclose the contexts of possibilities of coping with stress and of consequences of stress experienced by the specialists of social welfare professions of Lithuania and *Great Britain*.

The research object is the contexts of possibilities of coping with stress and of consequences of stress experienced by the specialists of social welfare professions of Lithuania and *Great Britain* in the aspect of subjective experiences.

Research Sample and Methodology

The respondents (N=10) were chosen employing the purposive convenience non-probability sampling method; they work in social welfare institutions of Lithuania and *Great Britain,* hold a university degree and have at least 2 years of work experience, which is likely to ensure the experience in the field of social welfare, links of specialists with various spectrum problems, potential stressful situations in the professional activity. The entire set of research participants is homogeneous – the research was attended by women only.

To analyze the specialists' experience, a qualitative data collection method (semi-structured *interview* in writing) was chosen, using open-ended questions according to the researchers' foreseen assessment areas, which were formulated after analyzing scientific literature and authors' research revealing the peculiarities of experienced stress and the possibilities of coping with it (Bubelienė & Merkys, 2012; Valickas, Grakauskas, & Želvienė, 2010; Kepalaitė, 2013; Kriukova, 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The content of the responses, which formed the basis of the study, was divided into corresponding diagnostic areas, which were broken down into categories (diagnostic indicators), notional statements were selected. The rating for every category was identified by calculating the frequency of notional statements in the category. In the course of the research, the context of coping with stress experienced by the specialists of social welfare professions, their experience, their attitude to the stress experienced in the professional activity, possibilities and ways of coping with it unfolded. The research data were handled using the content analysis method, employing the open coding procedure (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2003). The qualitative research data were validated using the expert method. This allowed us to seek a more exhaustive presentation of the research, a more accurate analysis of the empirical qualitative research data and interpretation of the results.

The Analysis of Research Results

During the research, the possibilities of coping with occupational stress experienced by the specialists of social welfare professions of Lithuania and Great Britain in the contexts of their subjective experiences were analysed. We analyzed social meanings constructed by these professionals' attitude and social reality that is possibly constructed on the basis of the latter. The first and second tables present the opinion about the possibilities of coping with stress in the professional activity expressed by the professionals of Lithuania and the United Kingdom: how they behave in stressful situations and what strategies and ways of stress coping they use to reduce or cope with stress in the professional activity. The first and second tables present the opinion of the professionals of Lithuania and the United Kingdom about stress coping strategies in the professional activity.

Table 1. Occupational stress coping strategies of social welfare specialists of Lithuania (N=5)

Category	Subcategory	Examples of statements	No. of statements
Intrapersonal stress coping	Physical stress coping	*"...I do sports...", "...Sport. Helps...", "...Just sleep..."*	6
	Change of the environment	*"...I go somewhere..."* *"...I walk in the fresh air..."*	4
	Self-persuasion	*"...I would persuade myself that these were just work problems...", "...everything will pass..."*	3
	Self-control	*"...I calm down myself...", "...to control my emotions..."*	3
	Individual problem solving	*"...I look for the solution of problems...", "...solving a problem..."*	3
	Spiritual mediations	*"...a prayer...", "... spiritual relaxation..."*	2
Interpersonal and societarian stress coping	Colleagues' support	*"...I get help from colleagues who support...", "...I talk, we discuss what happened...", "...I get advice, comfort...", "...the manager's understanding..."*	10
	Consultations with specialists	*"...consultations with psychologists...","...I consult other specialists..."*	4
	Supervision	*"...Supervision...", "...useful supervisions..."*	3
	Family support	*"...the family calms down...", "...I can confide in them..."*	3

Table 2. Occupational stress coping strategies of social welfare specialists of the United Kingdom (N=5)

Category	Subcategory	Examples of statements	No. of statements
Intrapersonal stress coping	Physical stress coping	*"...yoga exercises...", "...movement helps to clean oneself from bad emotions, stress..."*	5
	Self-control	*"...I find positive things, not only negative...", "...I don't take everything personally..."*	5
	Change of the environment	*"...I make a five-minute break, go elsewhere...", "...I leave where I can stay calmly..."*	4
	Self-persuasion	*"...by thoughts to calm myself...", "...I try to not to think about anything..."*	3
	Individual problem solving	*"...problem solving...", "...by all means to cope with problems..."*	3
	Spiritual mediations	*"...I meditate...", "...close my eyes and don't think about anything..."*	2
Interpersonal and societarian stress coping	Colleagues' support	*"... colleagues support...", "...suggest how the problem could be solved...", "...mutual support...", "...trust in each other..."*	11
	Consultations with specialists	*"...consultations with a psychologist...", "...to involve other professionals..."*	4
	Supervision	*"...a review with team members...", "...reflections on action, supervision..."*	3

The analysis of subjective experiences of professionals of Lithuania (N=41) and the United Kingdom (N=40) highlights **intrapersonal** (N=43) and **interpersonal** (N=38) categories of stress coping strategies, which have a number of subcategories in their content. The meanings constructed on the basis of informants' opinion reveal integral inner and outer contexts, which are significant and contain an arsenal of ways to cope with stress, helping professionals of different countries to manage it.

The generalized semantic units that came to prominence in the course of the research reveal that the social welfare specialists of both countries are trying to cope with stressful situations and difficulties in their professional activities by using **internal (intrapersonal)** resources: physical ways (N=11) *("sport helps", "just sleep", "yoga exercises")*, by changing the environment (N=8) *("I walk in the fresh air", "I leave where I can stay calmly")*, convincing themselves (N=6) *("by thoughts I calm down myself", "everything will pass")*, by self-control (N=8) *("I find positive things, not only negative", "to control my emotions")*, spiritual mediations (N=4) *("I meditate", "spiritual relaxation", "prayer")*, problem solving (N=6) *("I look for the solution of problems")*.

Analyzing informants' subjective experiences, it was revealed that professionals also tried to cope with stress using **external (interpersonal)** space resources: colleagues' support (N=21) *("I get advice, comfort", "I get assistance from colleagues who support")*, consultations with specialists (N=8) *("consultations with psychologists", "I consult other specialists")*, supervision (N=6), *("reflection on action, supervision")*, family support (N=3) *("I can confide in them")*.

Reconstruction of the context in which social welfare specialists of both countries cope with stressful situations highlights generalized semantic units, disclosing the importance of

resources of **intrapersonal** and **interpersonal** stress coping levels for successful development of professional activities. Disturbed or inadequate use of available resources of these levels can increase the specialist's vulnerability. The stressful events themselves rarely become a cause of inappropriate social psychological functioning; only the inappropriate interaction of internal and external variables while trying to cope with the stressor can lead to unsuccessful professional integration. Coping with stress also depends on both intrapersonal (of the personality-internal) and interpersonal (of social support-external) factors that can both reduce and increase stress. Interpersonal factors depend on the disposition of the specialist's personality: ***searches for coping*** *("I solve problems", "I look for the solution of problems")* or ***avoidance, diverting the attention*** *("I leave somewhere", "I close my eyes and don't think about anything")*. Interpersonal factors determine the search for ***interactions*** with **professionals** and **non-professionals**. Informants point out the importance of consultations, event analysis, reflection *("consultations with psychologists, other specialists", "review with team members", "reflection on action, supervision")*, the significance of social support and assistance of the family and non-specialists also come to prominence *("the family calms down", "I can confide in them")*.

The analysis of the data of social sphere employees of both countries highlights the efforts to control stress at intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, combining personal efforts and positive possibilities of the social environment. This way, the research participants' efforts to analyze this phenomenon in the context of the interaction between the personality and social environment, which consists of numerous variables and cannot be explained by the stimulatory-reactive standpoint alone (Lazarus, Folkman, 1984), come to prominence.

During the research, we analyzed the consequences of occupational stress experienced by the specialists of social welfare professions of Lithuania and Great Britain in their professional activity in the contexts of their subjective experiences. The third and fourth tables present the opinions of the professionals of Lithuania and the United Kingdom about the consequences of stress experienced in the professional activity: How does stress influence the professionals' personality development and how does this affect their professional activity?

Table 3. Consequences of occupational stress experienced by social welfare specialists of Lithuania (N=5)

Category	Subcategory	Examples of statements	No. of statements
Negative consequences for personality development	Behavioural changes	*"...I don't want to socialise with anyone... I dissociate myself..."*	5
	Physical health disorders	*"I feel fatigue...", "...I feel nauseated..."*	4
	Outpouring of emotions	*"...I feel anger...", "...I'm annoyed inside, angry..."*	3
	Changes in the cognitive activity	*"...I work slower...", "...it makes me think whether I have a job I want...", "...I promise to change my job..."*	3
Consequences of stress for work quality	Inefficient work	*"... quality of my work isn't so good", "...I don't want to go to work..."*	5
	Stress as a catalyst for action	*"... strengthens me, I know how to react next time...", "...I learned..."*	2
	Relationships with colleagues	*"...relationships with colleagues and the manager worsen...", "...we socialize less"*	2

Table 3. Consequences of occupational stress experienced by social welfare specialists of the United Kingdom (N=5)

Category	Subcategory	Examples of statements	No. of statements
Negative consequences for personality development	Physical health disorders	*"... increase in blood pressure...", "...I have a headache..."*	6
	Changes in the cognitive activity	*"...it is difficult to make a decision...", "... I can't stop thinking about the problem event..."*	6
	Outpouring of emotions	*"...I am in a bad mood...", "...sadness...", "...I can confide only in the family...", "...I can weep out..."*	5
	Behavioural changes	*"... it's hard to do something else...", "... behaviour changes, I distance myself..."*	2
Consequences of stress for work quality	Inefficient work	*"...I'm worried about mistakes...", "...work suffers..."*	3
	Relationships with colleagues	*"...relationships with colleagues...", "... colleagues turn away..."*	2

Reconstruction of the context of possible consequences of stress experienced by social welfare specialists of Lithuania (N=24) and the United Kingdom (N=24) in their professional acitivity, highlights the categories of **negative consequences for the personality** (N=34) and **quality of work** (N=14), which are to be reduced to several subcategories.

Based on the opinion of research participants, the context of **consequences** of stress **for the personality** is reduced to several semantic units described by sub-categories: physical health disorders (N=10) *("the increase in blood pressure", "I have a headache", "I feel fatigue"),* changes in the cognitive activity (N=9) (*"I work slower", "I can't stop thinking about the problem event"*), behavioural changes (N=7) (*"I don't want to socialise with anyone", "I dissociate myself"*), outpouring of emotions (N=8) *("I am in a bad mood", "I can weep out").*

Subjective experiences of social welfare professionals presuppose the context of **consequences** of stress **for quality of work** (N=14), which highlights the following generalized semantic units: inefficient work (N=8) (*"quality of my work isn't so good", "worry about mistakes"*), changed relationships with colleagues (N=4) (*"relationships with colleagues and the manager worsen", "we socialize less"*), stress as a catalyst (N=2) *("strengthens me, I know how to react next time").* The latter category is to be regarded as positive stress (eustress), which mobilizes for work, helps to cope with difficulties and enables efficient professional activity.

Summarizing the context of consequences caused by stress experienced by social sphere specialists in their professional activities, it comes to prominence that informants perceive stress on the one hand, as a negative, threatening phenomenon, affecting work quality and positive interpersonal relations and on the other hand, it can also be assessed as a positive process, mobilizing specialists for action, coping with difficulties and search for the new ways out.

Generalisations
- Continuing political, economic, social changes in our country, continuous juridical, methodological-methodical change of the social welfare system inevitably create the field

of tensions and stress in the emotionally sensitive, personalized community of professionals of this sphere. Efforts to effectively reduce these social tensions, constructively control stress experienced by specialists in their professional activity in our country and Great Britain are not always successful. The context of occupational stress, its consequences and possibilities of coping with stress experienced by the specialists of social welfare professions of these countries, the analysis of stress manifestation should be investigated more exhaustively.

- Reconstruction of the multilayered context of socio-cultural diversity of social welfare specialists of Lithuania and Great Britain highlighted ambiguous semantics of stress coping possibilities. The analysis of the research data enables to state that successful stress coping of the specialists of both countries possibly depends on the interaction between the variables of the personality (intrapersonal) and the social environment (interpersonal). The incorrespondence of this interaction aggravates specialists' abilities to recognize, evaluate, control and cope with stress in the professional activity; all the more that such things are not taught to these professionals.

- Summarizing the presented semantic units, it comes to prominence that the difficulties in the systematic restructuring of the social sphere are not perceived by the informants unambiguously. On the one hand, stressful situations affect the employees of this sphere personally and professionally, causing changes in the specialists' emotions, cognitive activities, behaviour, aggravating relationships with colleagues and decreasing work efficiency; on the other hand, stressful situations are to be assessed positively as a factor mobilizing for the breakthrough, progress and search for solutions.

References

Bandzevičienė, R., Birbilaitė, S., & Diržytė, A. (2009). Kriminalinės policijos pareigūnų stresas, jo įveika ir vidinė darna [Stress, Coping And Coherence in Criminal Police Officers]. Socialinių mokslų studijos *[Social Science Studies], 4*(8), 21-37.

Bubelienė, D. & Merkys, G. (2012). Pedagogų streso socialinis konstravimas ir jo atspindžiai profesinėje spaudoje [Social Construction of Teachers' Stress and Its Reflections in the Professional Press]. *Acta Paedagogica Vilnensia, 29,* 100-110.

Bulotaitė, L. & Lepeškienė, V. (2006). Mokytojų stresas ir jo įveikimo strategijos [*Teachers' stress and coping strategies]. Pedagogika [Pedagogy], 84,* 48-51.

Burba, B., Sitnikovas, O., & Lankaitė, D. (2014). Streso pasireiškimas, dažniausi stresą sukeliantys veiksniai, distreso valdymas tarp Lietuvos apsaugos darbuotojų [*Manifestation of Stress, most Common Stressogenic Factors, Distress Management among Security Employees of Lithuania]. Medicinos teorija ir praktika [Theory and Practice of Medicine], 20* (1), 14-20.

Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Edwards, J. R. & Cooper, C. L. (1990). The Person-Environment Fit Approach to Stress: Recurring Problems and Some Suggested Solutions. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 11,* 293-307.

Edwards, J. A. & Billsbery, J. (2000). Testing a Multidimensional Theory of Person-Environment Fit. *Journal of Managerial Issues, 22,* 4, 476-493.

Grakauskas, Ž. (2004). Stresas ir elgesio savireguliacija: teorinės sąveikos problemos [Stress and Self-Regulation: Theoretical Interaction Problems]. *Psichologija: mokslo darbai [Psychology: Scientific Works], 29,* 74-87.

Jeffrey, T., Burba, B., Žukauskas, G., Rukšėnas, O., & Grigaliūnienė, V. (2009). A study of stress affecting police officers in Lithuania. *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health, 11*(4), 205-214.

Katarskis, A. & Perminas, A. (2013). Slaugytojų subjektyviai suvokiamo streso bei vilties išgyvenimo sąsajos [Health Care Nurses' Subjectively Perceived Stress Connections with Their Hope Experience Level]. *Jaunųjų mokslininkų psichologų darbai [Journal of Young Scientists Psychologists], (2),* 5-7.

Kepalaitė, A. (2013). Socialinių pedagogų stresas ir jo įveikos sąsajos [Correlation of Social Pedagogues' Stress and the Coping with It]. *Ugdymo psichologija [Educational Psychology]*, *24*, 27-34.

Kiaunytė, A. (2012). Socialinių darbuotojų profesinio streso rizika konfliktų sprendimo situacijoje: supervizijos taikymo aspektas [Social Worker's Professional Stress Risk in the Situation of

Conflict Solution: Aspects of Application of Supervision]. *Visuomenės sveikata [Public Health], 1,* 51-57.

Kriukova, T. L. (2010). *Metody izucheniya sovladayushchego povedeniya: tri koping-shkaly [Methods of Coping Research: Three Coping Scales]*. Kostroma.

Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2003). *InterViews – Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing.* Sage Publications.

Lazarus, R. S. (2000). Toward Better Research on Stress and Coping. *American Psychologist, 55*(6), 665-673. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.6.665

Lazarus, R. S. & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, Appraisal and Coping*. New York: Springer Publisher Company, Inc.

Lazutka, R., Skučienė, D., Žalimienė, L., Vareikytė, A., & Kazakevičiūtė, J. (2008). Socialinių darbuotojų profesinės rizikos veiksniai [Social Workers' Occupational Risks Factors]. *Socialinis darbas [Social Work], 7*(3), 71-86.

Lithuania's Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030". Retrieved from: https://www.docdroid.net/ERhjMs3/en-lietuva2030.pdf

Loikienė, O. & Pileckaitė-Markovienė, M. (2013). Aukštųjų mokyklų dėstytojų ir bendrojo ugdymo mokyklų mokytojų darbe patiriamo streso įveikos stiliai [The Styles of Coping with Stress at Work Among High School Teachers and Higher Education Institution Lecturers]. *Pedagogika [Pedagogy], 109*, 78-85.

Moran, C. C. & Hughes, L. P. (2006). Coping with Stress: Social Work Students and Humour. *Social Work Education, 25*, 5, 501-517, DOI: 10.1080/02615470600738890

Ridder, D. & Karssens, J. (2010). Owing to the Force of Circumstances? The Impact of Situational Features and Personal Characteristics on Coping Patterns Across Situations. *Psychology and Health 18*(2), 217-236. DOI: 10.1080/0887044021000044242

Rovas, L., Lapėnienė, J., & Baltrušaitytė, R. (2012). Slaugytojų darbe patiriamas stresas ir jo įveika [Stress Experienced at Work by Nurses and Coping with It]. *Visuomenės sveikata [Public Health], 1,* 80-85.

Šeibokaitė, L., Endriulaitienė, A., & Markšaitytė, R. (2009). Subjektyvus lietuvių emigrantų sveikatos vertinimas ir nusiskundimai sveikata [Self-Rated Health and Health Complaints of Lithuanian Emigrants]. *Visuomenės sveikata [Public Health], 2* (45), 28-4.

Valickas, G., Grakauskas, Ž., & Želvienė., P. (2010). Patobulinto keturių faktorių streso įveikos klausimyno psichometriniai rodikliai [The Psychometric Indicators of the Improved Four Factors of Coping with Stress Questionnaire]. *Psichologija [Psychology], 41*, 96-110

Weiss, S. & Molitor, N. (2012). *Jobstress. Stress at work*. Retrieved from: http://www. apa.org/helpcenter/job-stress.aspx.

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE CONTEXT OF COPING WITH OCCUPATIONAL STRESS EXPERIENCED BY SPECIALISTS OF SOCIAL WELFARE PROFESSIONS IN SOCIALLY AND CULTURALLY DIVERSE ENVIRONMENT

Summary

Daiva Alifanovienė, Odeta Šapelytė, Darius Gerulaitis
Šiauliai University, Lithuania

Current political, economic, demographic and social conditions in the development of European countries make it hardly possible to avoid stressful situations. High stress or long-term stress are harmful due to exhaustion of the organism; on the other hand, *stressful situations* mobilize internal resources of the organism and are a condition of survival. In the recent period, professional activities of *social welfare sphere specialists* (social workers, their assistants, education support specialists, etc.) are undergoing significant changes: new information technologies, fast pace and scope of the professional activity, constant legal, methodological-methodical change and reforms of the social sphere, fluctuations in the scope of activity and instability of a reward.

Different social, economic, and cultural contexts are possibly significant for such a sensitive human life sphere as the social sphere and for its professionals' occupational stress, its consequences and coping possibilities. This is also confirmed by the authors' research on social sphere professionals not only in Lithuania's social space but also in other Baltic and Scandinavian countries. The problem of this research presupposes problem questions opening up a relatively new space of research on coping with stress: *What contexts of occupational stress, its consequences and possibilities of coping with stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions in our country and Great Britain come to prominence? What ways used by the professionals of these countries help to cope with stressful situations encountered in their professional activity? What social meanings does the attitude of these professionals' construct, according to which social reality is possibly constructed?*

The research aim is to disclose the contexts of possibilities of coping with stress and of consequences of stress experienced by the specialists of social welfare professions of Lithuania and *Great Britain*.

The research object is the contexts of possibilities of coping with stress and of consequences of stress experienced by the specialists of social welfare professions of Lithuania and *Great Britain* in the aspect of subjective experiences.

The respondents (N=10) were chosen employing the purposive convenience non-probability sampling method; they work in social welfare institutions of Lithuania and *Great Britain,* hold a university degree and have at least 2 years of work experience, which is likely to ensure the experience in the field of social welfare, links of specialists with various spectrum problems, potential stressful situations in the professional activity. The entire set of research participants is homogeneous – the research was attended by women only.

To analyze the specialists' experience, a qualitative data collection method (semi-structured *interview* in writing) was chosen, using open-ended questions according to the researchers' foreseen assessment areas, which were formulated after analyzing scientific literature and authors' research revealing the peculiarities of experienced stress and the possibilities of coping with it (Bubelienė & Merkys, 2012; Valickas, Grakauskas, & Želvienė, 2010; Kepalaitė, 2013; Kriukova, 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The content of the responses, which formed the basis of the study, was divided into corresponding diagnostic areas, which were broken down into categories (diagnostic indicators), notional statements were selected. In the course of the research, the context of coping with stress experienced by the specialists of social welfare professions, their experience, their attitude to the stress experienced in the professional activity, possibilities and ways of coping with it unfolded. The research data were handled using the content analysis method, employing the open coding procedure (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2003). The qualitative research data were validated using the expert method.

It can be stated that continuing political, economic, social changes in our country, continuous juridical, methodological-methodical change of the social welfare system inevitably create the field of tensions and stress in the emotionally sensitive, personalized community of professionals of this sphere. Efforts to effectively reduce these social tensions, constructively control stress experienced by specialists in their professional activity in our country and Great Britain are not always successful. The context of occupational stress, its consequences and possibilities of coping with stress experienced by the specialists of social welfare professions of these countries, the analysis of stress manifestation should be investigated more exhaustively. Reconstruction of the multilayered context of socio-cultural diversity of social welfare specialists of Lithuania and Great Britain highlighted ambiguous semantics of stress coping possibilities. The analysis of the research data enables to state that successful stress coping of the specialists of both countries possibly depends on the interaction between the variables of the personality (intrapersonal) and the social environment (interpersonal). The incorrespondence of this interaction aggravates specialists' abilities to recognize, evaluate, control and cope with stress in the professional activity; all the more that such things are not taught to these professionals. Summarizing the presented semantic units, it comes to prominence that the difficulties in the systematic restructuring of the social sphere are not perceived by the informants unambiguously. On the one hand, stressful situations affect the employees of this sphere personally and professionally, causing changes in the specialists' emotions, cognitive activities, behaviour, aggravating relationships with colleagues and decreasing work efficiency; on the other hand, stressful situations are to be assessed positively as a factor mobilizing for the breakthrough, progress and search for solutions.

Corresponding author's email: odeta.sapelyte@su.lt