ARTÍCULO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

Factores socio-psicológicos que afectan al desgaste profesional de los trabajadores sociales /DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7114581

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Resumen

El objetivo del artículo es establecer el nivel de agotamiento profesional y evaluarlo en el contexto de las características socioprofesionales de los trabajadores sociales en Rusia. Las características cuantitativas del problema estudiado se examinan utilizando el método de encuesta en forma de cuestionarios formalizados y pruebas. Los autores parten de la idea de que la profesión de trabajador social, que presupone el contacto directo con personas en situaciones vitales difíciles, es claramente uno de los trabajos más propicios para el desarrollo del síndrome de desgaste profesional y así lo considera la sociedad. El bajo nivel salarial combinado con la fuerte carga emocional son factores que contribuyen a la desorganización profesional del trabajador. Se constata que, en las condiciones específicas de Rusia, las características generales de los trabajadores sociales suponen no sólo el deseo de continuar la actividad profesional dentro de la especialidad elegida, sino también un porcentaje relativamente bajo de personas, en las que se puede encontrar un alto grado de burnout profesional.

Palabras clave: trabajador social, agotamiento, estrés, actividad profesional.

Abstract
Socio-psychological factors affecting professional burnout among social workers

The aim of the article is to establish the level of professional burnout and assess it in the context of social-professional characteristics of social workers in Russia. The quantitative characteristics of the studied problem are examined using the survey method in the form of formalized questionnaires and testing. The authors proceed from the notion that the profession of a social worker, which presupposes direct contact with people in difficult life situations, is clearly one of the jobs that are the most conducive to the development of professional burnout syndrome and is viewed by society as such. Low pay grade combined with severe emotional load serve as factors contributing to the professional disorganization of a worker. It is found that in the specific conditions of Russia, the general characteristics of social workers assume not only a desire to continue professional activity within the chosen specialty but also a relatively low percentage of people, in whom a high degree of professional burnout can be found.
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1.- Introduction

Burnout first became a subject of research in the 1970s. In the same period, there formed two general directions in the study of this phenomenon, equally traceable both in psychological research on burnout and in studies that can be classified as socio-psychological (Poulsen, 2009: 21).

The first direction of research examines burnout as a personal story of the disruption of correspondence between professional activity and the individual characteristics, skills, and abilities of the person performing it. M. Burisch (2014) argues that this approach to the problem is not mainstream at the very least but this kind of study nevertheless offers a whole range of interpretations. They give an opportunity to see burnout as a result of disappointment caused by erroneous role expectations (Lauderdale, 1981; Maher, 1983), a mismatch between these expectations and reality (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980), or an imbalance of effort and reward (Siegrist, 1996). Essentially, this is a personalistic perspective, in which the focus lies on identifying the qualities of a person that contribute to the formation of burnout symptoms. Among them, for example, are unstable self-esteem, dependence of self-identification on successful fulfillment of a single social role, striving to achieve goals solely by one's own actions, etc. (Burisch, 2014).

The second direction focuses on the organization of professional activity itself. It is considered that imperfection of the social environment leads to a complex of symptoms that is usually referred to as "burnout". This exact approach is embodied by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1986), which remains one of the primary instruments for diagnosing burnout to date (Lizano, 2015). Research by C. Maslach, M.P. Leiter, and S.E. Jackson outlines a more or less universally recognized list of the symptoms of burnout, on the one hand, and the organizational factors contributing to their emergence on the other. The list of symptoms includes emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. The organizational factors are represented by work overload, lack of control over professional activity, insufficient reward, breakdown of community, lack of fairness, and conflicting values in professional activity (Maslach & Leiter, 1997: 38-60). A view of professional activity that corresponds to this understanding of burnout concentrates, first of all, on those properties and traits that predetermine the dehumanization of a worker, suppress their independence, and bureaucratize the work process, not allowing them to implement it in accordance with the real needs. The degree of expression of these characteristics conditions the prevalence of burnout. Hence, this is not a matter of a violation of harmony between

professional activity and personal qualities, but rather a violation of correspondence between the essence of professional activity and the requirements imposed on it.

The problem of burnout has been studied as applied to various social groups, for the most part defined by their affiliation to a certain profession or group of professions. A considerable amount of research is also devoted to burnout in social workers (Bradley & Sutherland, 1995; Lloyd et al., 2002; Kim & Stoner, 2008; Poulsen, 2009; Lizano, 2015; Kienko, 2016; Travis et al., 2016; Chomaeva, 2018; Hussein, 2018; Gomez-García et al., 2020; Gomez-García et al., 2021; Savaya et al., 2021). In particular, T.S. Kienko (2016), using an adaptation of the MBI questionnaire, has diagnosed a high level of reduction of personal accomplishments in 47% of the surveyed employees of social service institutions. A high level of emotional exhaustion is recorded in 24% of those surveyed. However, a similar survey by G.A. Chomaeva (2018) shows a high level of burnout only in 12.5% of the respondents, while the low level is detected in 33.3%.

Foreign research demonstrates the same scatter of estimations. For instance, J. Bradley and V. Sutherland (1995) find emotional exhaustion in 38% of social workers. Meanwhile, R. Gomez-García, S. Bayon-Calvo, and J. Lucas-García (2021) report that 33.2% of Spanish social workers have high levels of emotional exhaustion, 22.1% – high levels of depersonalization, and 54.2 % – low job satisfaction. Overall, various studies on social workers detect the incidence of burnout ranging between 21 and 67% (Morse et al., 2012). Considerable prevalence of burnout among social workers is reported in an overview study by E.L. Lizano (2015). The author points out the consensus of modern researchers in assessing the relationship between burnout and the general well-being of social workers.

The aforementioned studies demonstrate the controversy that surrounds the discourse on burnout, which clearly contrasts with the presence of the concept of burnout in traditional descriptions of the current status of teachers, doctors, social workers, and representatives of other professions focused on interaction with people. In the context of social work, this implies interaction with clients, who find themselves in difficult life situations, which makes communication with them even more emotionally demanding and, presumably, requires the initial presence of higher moral motives for professional activity. It is logical to assume that the collision of this motivation with the reality of social services as a job that is extremely bureaucratized, low-paid, and deprived of the creative component contributes to the prevalence of burnout, giving reason to view social workers as victims of the social service system unfavorable for personal growth and self-actualization. When viewed in this way, the problem of burnout becomes not only a concept of solely social psychology and an individual personality deformation but a part of the lifestyle of a social worker, of their social portrait. This allows presenting burnout as a characteristic of social workers as a homogeneous social group, in a certain sense heroizing its image, making it socially attractive through the intentional or unintentional accentuation of the value conflict that accompanies it. Such an image of a social worker is the dominant version of the representation of the profession in the public

consciousness as well. Consequently, within the framework of this study, we make an attempt to consider professional burnout as an element of the social portrait of a modern social worker. The aim of the article is to establish the level of professional burnout and consider it in the context of the set of social-professional characteristics of social workers in Russia.

2. Methods

The study uses a combination of theoretical and empirical methods. The former includes theoretical analysis of the scientific literature and analysis and generalization of the experience of socio-psychological research on social workers as a social group in the existing scientific discourse. In order to assess the quantitative characteristics of the studied problem concerning the place and significance of burnout in the general socio-psychological characteristics of social workers, a survey method is used in the form of a formalized questionnaire and testing.

The collection of empirical data started in 2021. 420 social workers from the Lipetsk region of Russia took part in the study. In the realities of the social protection system of the Russian Federation, social workers should be distinguished from social protection specialists. The professional duties of social workers are associated with direct improvement of the material and living conditions of social service organization clients: purchase of food, medicines, assistance in housekeeping, registration of benefits, etc. In 2022, the survey was conducted again on a smaller sample, which consisted of 80 people from among the same social workers of the Lipetsk region. While in the first case, the sample size was close to the total number of social security system employees in the region, the second survey was intended to address a much smaller number of workers.

This largely eliminated the perception of the survey as a formal event, which could have significantly influenced the outcome of the small group survey. Another factor to consider is the temporal distance between the surveys, which in itself is sufficient to allow for detectable differences between the results. The first survey was administered at the end of the first wave of the coronavirus infection in Russia, which was an undeniable shock to the entire social protection system. By the time of the second survey, the coronavirus restrictions had already been in effect in one form or another for almost two years, and the system had to fully adapt to the changed conditions. On the other hand, the coronavirus pandemic was no longer seen as a key determinant of the social situation, including the home-based social services that constituted the basis of respondents' professional responsibilities.

The survey deliberately did not include questions concerning the situation in social services during the pandemic. The respondents were also not explicitly asked to identify the impact of changes in conditions due to the spread of coronavirus on professional self-image, as well as the place and role of the social safety net in society.

The respondents were offered a questionnaire consisting of six questions designed to obtain formal data and general assessments of their professional activities, as well as

a questionnaire assessing the level of professional burnout (PB). The Russian version of the MBI, adapted for specialists in socionomic professions, was used for testing (Vodopianova et al., 2013). The first Russian-language version of the questionnaire was developed based on the burnout model by C. Maslach and S.E. Jackson and validated in 2002 (Vodopianova & Starchenkova, 2005). The questionnaire consists of 3 subscales (emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA)), which were again standardized by the authors of the adaptation in 2013 (Vodopianova et al., 2013) for samples of women and men. Emotional exhaustion manifests itself in emotional tension, fatigue, and an inability to find resources for emotional recovery. Depersonalization is associated with cynicism, increased problems in communicating with colleagues and clients, and negative reactions to others. Finally, the reduction of personal accomplishments refers to a negative attitude toward one's accomplishments in the profession. High scores on the first two scales and low scores on the third scale correspond to a high level of burnout.

Social work in Russia is almost exclusively a female profession, which is duly reflected in the study. Taking into account the specifics of the sample population, we used questionnaire scales designed for women's studies. Mean values and standard deviations were determined for each scale, as well as for the integral score (Int.BS) of professional burnout, which was calculated according to the formula:

Int.BS = 4.386 + 0,1155EE + 0.1747DP − 0.0998PA (Vodopianova et al., 2013).

The use of the validated Russian version of the questionnaire makes it possible to account for the national specificity of the sample and to rule out possible errors caused by the corresponding differences (Schaufeli & Van Dierendonck, 1995). The empirical data were processed and analyzed using the SPSS version 22 software-analytical complex.

3. Results

The surveyed social workers are women, mostly between 35 and 68 years old. The distribution of respondents by age, level of education, and work experience is shown in Table 1. The respondents' answers to questions about their attitudes towards their profession are given in Table 2.

The data obtained provide a good illustration of the image of social workers working in provincial Russia. These are women, in most cases of pre-retirement age, with relatively little work experience. What draws attention is the high level of university education (38.3%), which contrasts with the limited qualification requirements for the profession. It corresponds to the share of people with higher education among employed women in Russia as a whole, which was 39% in 2019 (Federal State Statistics Service, 2020: 33). In this particular case, the explanation should be sought in the small number of high-skill jobs available in the city and region, combined with the accessibility and spread of higher education in recent decades. We can also predict a further increase in this indicator in subsequent years. As might have been expected, no significant

differences are found in any of the assessed indicators between the two rounds of surveys conducted a year apart.

Table 1

Distribution of respondents by age, education, and work experience

	2021 (N=420)		2022 (N=80)	
	N	%	N	%
AGE				
18–34 years old	31	7.4	12	15
35–68 years old	389	92.6	68	85
EDUCATION				
Incomplete secondary	46	11	–	–
Elementary vocational (college)	95	22.6	14	17.5
Secondary vocational (college)	118	28.1	31	38.8
Higher (university)	161	38.3	35	43.8
EXPERIENCE IN THE PROFESSION OF "SOCIAL WORKER"				
less than 1 year	62	14.8	3	3.8
1–5 years	111	26.4	16	20
6–10 years	69	16.4	23	28.8
11–15 years	63	15	24	30
16–20 years	46	11	9	11.3
21–24 years	31	7.4	2	2.5
25–30 years	38	9	3	3.8

Source: Authors development

Table 2

Distribution of answers to questions about attitudes toward the profession

	2021 (N=420)		2022 (N=80)	
	N	%	N	%
FOR WHAT REASONS DID YOU CHOOSE THIS JOB? (multiple choice)				
Like the content of the work	96	22.8	51	63.8
Satisfied with the level of pay	114	27.1	23	28.8
Convenient schedule	161	33.5	26	32.5
No other more suitable job	29	6.9	37	46.3
I want to help people	272	64.8	58	72.5
Other	10	2.4	–	–
ARE YOU SATISFIED WITH YOUR WORK OVERALL? (single choice)				
Yes	214	51	31	38.8
More likely yes	133	31.7	42	52.5
More likely no	31	7.4	2	2.5

Mo	42	10	7	8.8
Difficult to answer	–	–	–	–
WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE? (single choice)				
To continue to work as a social worker	343	81.7	61	76.3
To change occupation in the near future	14	3.3	2	2.5
Other	63	15	17	21.3

Source: Authors development

The interpretation of questions on attitudes towards the profession appears to be more complicated. The data show the distribution of answers preferred by respondents, but, as we noted earlier, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the sincerity of the choices in a relatively small team of employees. In view of the characteristics of the sample, this factor predominantly plays a major role in the first survey. It is also necessary to account for the initially low expectations from the job, which is traditionally considered unprestigious and remains low-paying. Considering the data of the first survey, against this background, there is an extremely high level of job satisfaction (options "yes" and "more likely yes" in total constitute 82.7% of responses) and a high prevalence of the socially approved option "I want to help people" (64.8 %) in the question about the reasons for choosing the job. It should be noted that only 22.8% of social workers point to the content of work as the reason for their choice. The intent of most respondents (81.7%) to continue working in their profession is largely indicative of the challenging situation in the labor market.

Comparing these results with those obtained in the second survey, we can highlight some differences. Firstly, a much greater portion of the respondents indicate that they like the content of their work (63.8% compared to 22.8% in the first survey). At the same time, there is a significant increase in the percentage of those saying there are no other more suitable jobs (46.3% vs. 6.9%). Both differences can to some extent be explained by the factors mentioned above: conscious or unconscious reflection of the pandemic situation and the absence of mass sampling of workers for the second survey. At the same time, it is quite symptomatic that the option "I want to help people" remains just as popular, demonstrating a strong association of "striving to help" with the general idea of a social worker. Given the practically unchanged percentage of respondents who are completely satisfied or rather satisfied with their jobs (82.7% in the first survey and 91.3% in the second), changes could hardly be expected in this case.

Professional burnout itself is assessed via a separate questionnaire. In addition to determining mean values and standard deviations for each of the scales and the integral score (Table 3), the results of each respondent are ranked according to the three levels of expression of the respective indicator: low, medium, and high (Table 4).

Table 3
Primary descriptive statistics

	2021 (N=420)		2022 (N=80)	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	20.79	8.775	22.17	6.754
Depersonalization (DP)	8.52	5.370	9.02	4.504
Personal Accomplishment (PA)	33.24	7.895	29.76	9.021
Integral Burnout Score (Int.BS)	4.96	2.178	5.12	1.781

Source: Authors development

Table 4
Distribution of burnout parameters

	2021 (N=420)		2022 (N=80)	
	N	%	N	%
EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION (EE)				
Low	103	24.5	17	21.3
Average	266	63.3	44	55
High	51	12.1	19	23.8
DEPERSONALIZATION (DP)				
Low	132	31.4	21	26.3
Average	267	63.6	47	58.8
High	21	5	12	15
PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT (PA)				
Low	72	17.1	29	36.3
Average	299	71.2	42	52.5
High	49	11.7	9	11.3
INTEGRAL BURNOUT SCORE (Int.BS)				
Low	145	34.5	31	38.8
Average	228	54.3	36	45
High	47	11.2	13	16.3

Source: Authors development

Overall, the results of the first survey demonstrate that only 11.2% of the participants can be considered as having a high degree of burnout. The majority (54.3%) show an average degree of professional burnout and only a slightly smaller number of social workers have a low level (34.5%). Results by individual criteria have a similar distribution. There is a significant predominance of the average level of personal accomplishments (71.2%), which can be explained by the insignificant potential for professional growth in the position of a social worker, which stimulates the choice of average options when answering questions related to professional achievements.

Considering the changes found when comparing the results of the two surveys, we should highlight two points that could be significant. First, the second survey shows a much higher percentage of social workers with low values on the scale of reduction of personal accomplishments (36.3% in contrast to 17.1% in the first survey). Meanwhile, this change is almost exclusively shaped by a reduction in the share of respondents showing the average level of reduction of personal accomplishments. The share of respondents at the high level on this scale remains practically unchanged (11.7% and 11.3%, respectively). Secondly, there is a significant aggravation of the emotional exhaustion of social workers. The high level of this scale in the first survey is diagnosed in 12.1% of respondents, while the second survey identifies 23.8% of people with this level of emotional exhaustion. Thus, on the whole, we are detecting a synchronous increase in the level of self-assessment of personal accomplishments and the level of emotional exhaustion. An unambiguous explanation for this can hardly be found within the data obtained in the surveys, which forces us to limit ourselves to a simple statement. It may be suggested that this combination could be a reflection of the time when the coronavirus pandemic, which has greatly increased the relevance of direct targeted social support, started to give way to other key events in social history. The pandemic experience is gradually transforming from an extraordinary circumstance to a routine and habitual one, although still significant. Increased job satisfaction in such a situation is accompanied by an increased level of emotional burnout.

4. Discussion

The obtained results can be compared to both the general tendencies in the study of professional burnout and to the available private results of research on professional burnout among social workers. Furthermore, the conducted study gives an opportunity to draw up a picture of the attitude to professional activity characteristic of social workers in a provincial Russian region, which can be considered a contribution to the currently available array of sociological and social psychological data about this field of professional activity. In this case, burnout can act as one of the key indicators reflecting not only the actual "psychological syndrome that develops in response to chronic emotional and interpersonal job stressors" (Maslach, 2015: 929), but also, indirectly, the degree of social workers' involvement in their professional duties, their satisfaction with working conditions and job prospects.

First and foremost, we should mention that most of the studies that have touched on the motivation of social workers contain statements about the significant prevalence of altruistic motives. This is observed both among active social workers (Fisher, 2009; Rackauskiene et al., 2013) and among students pursuing the specialty (Christie & Kruk, 1998; Liedgren & Elvhage, 2015; Bozek et al., 2017). Although the results of our survey do not give grounds to unequivocally assert the real predominance of such motives, the large number of "I want to help people" responses to the question about the reasons for choosing the profession is symptomatic. At the very least, this suggests a consensus among the sampled social workers regarding the motivation they are expected to have for choosing this field of professional activity, and that providing help and support to

those in need is clearly interpreted in connection with social work as an intrinsic motive essential to a professional.

According to the results of the first survey conducted in 2021, a high level of professional burnout is diagnosed in 11.2% of the respondents (according to the integral index of professional burnout), which already indicates a somewhat significant spread of this phenomenon. In the second survey, burnout syndrome is detected in 16.3% of the respondents. At the same time, in both cases, about half of the respondents demonstrate the average level of burnout, and about a third – the low level. Another important finding is that the absolute majority of the surveyed social workers plan to continue working in their profession.

Comparing our findings to those previously reported in Russian and foreign papers, we can argue that the results obtained in our study are painting a much more favorable picture compared to the majority of earlier studies. The results of our research indicating a relatively small proportion of persons with a pronounced burnout syndrome can be attributed both to a relatively limited list of job responsibilities of the social workers involved in the study and the absence of career aspirations and prospects in most of them.

It should also be pointed out that the juxtaposition of job satisfaction and the degree of burnout refers to the relationship, the non-obviousness of which has already been noted before. In particular, we can mention the study by H. Jahrami et al. (2013), which reveals an insignificant connection between job satisfaction and emotional burnout. Similar results are obtained in the study of the relationship between job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion in health care workers by M.E.L. Iglesias and R.B. de Bengoa Vallejo (2013).

5. Conclusion

Analyzing modern research, we can distinguish three conditions (factors) of the presence or absence of professional burnout: the personal factor (the feeling of personal importance at work, possibility of professional advancement, autonomy, and level of control by the management); the role factor (a conflict of roles and role uncertainty, as well as professional situations in which joint actions of employees are largely uncoordinated); the organizational factor (unclear functional relationships between employees, the style of management that does not allow for independence).

The profession of a social worker, which implies direct contact with people in a difficult life situation, defined by personal or social problems, is evidently one of the most conducive to the development of professional burnout syndrome. Low pay grade in combination with considerable emotional load serve as factors that contribute to the professional disorganization of a worker. Nevertheless, the study finds that in the specific conditions of the Russian province, the general characteristic of social workers assumes not only the desire to continue working in the chosen specialty but also quite a low percentage of people showing high levels of professional burnout compared to previous

studies. The latter statement, however, does not negate the challenges of the job duties of social workers or the problems associated with the organization of their work in Russia. Interpretation of even that relatively small amount of data gathered and systematized in the present study remains ambiguous and requires further work to develop consistent language for describing the profession and personality of a social protection professional, as well as the relationship between burnout and its individual components with the efficiency of services provided and the perspectives of an individual within the professional sphere.

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