Contextos – Cooperativa para o Desenvolvimento e Coesão Social CRL
Project: 'Empowering Practitioners in Social Work from Rural Communities'
No: 2018-1-RO01-KA204-049515

CONTEXTOS

RESEARCH REPORT on the perceptions and the needs of the PSW from the rural regions in addressing the burnout phenomenon.

I - INTRODUCTION

THE VULNERABILITY OF SOCIAL WORKERS TO STRESS AND BURNOUT

Social work can be defined as *"(...) a process of help carried out by a which is part of an organised system of services (...) aimed at individuals, groups and collective subjects, inclined to activate a "change" in both the mode of the individual, group or collectivity, in the face of the problems that affect them, (...) as in the case of the the relationship between the demands of the environment and the personal, collective and institutional responses, to be activated or already available ...)"*, Ponticelli 994:23 quoted by Santos (2009:87). Social work promotes the transformation of society to the extent that it cares about groups socially disadvantaged in order to ensure their well-being. Social work is then a professional activity that is characterized by the interaction of situations in difficulty, in which the worker will have to understand the reality in which he/she is involved, Robertis (2003:75). Several authors refer to the importance of helping professions in society, and how these can be influenced by stress. All these professionals (social workers, social educators, etc.) are confronted with dark aspects of the human soul. The profession of caregiver requires sincere availability, tolerance, acceptance of others. It is then with the repetition of trauma and its intensity that the psychological and emotional forum suffers a great impact. This professionals is then doubly implicated, on the one hand, by the experience of the other in suffering and, on the other hand, by the experience itself, by the identification of an affection or behaviour, even if unconsciously, in the other, manipulating in such a way that he ends up adopting it and confirming it. But another specificity of the carer still lies in the "diversity of problems" brought in by the users themselves (Delbrouck, 2006:54-57). Social work is also characterized by the practice of the helping relationship that is established between the social worker himself and the user / client. Social work is like acting in the form of social

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intervention in the social reality. Ander-Egg (1995) adds that the social work is a modality of intervention that surpasses the social reality. Social work can also be defined as *"(...) applied science, which seeks to help people achieve an effective level of psychosocial functioning and to promote societal change by increasing the level of well-being in a society (...) the social workers facilitate interactions between individuals, and between individuals and their environment"* (Barker, 1999:455-456, cited by Santos, 2009: 64-67).

BURNOUT

Burnout is a process that develops over the years and is almost never noticed in its early stages, being its development slow and rarely acute. In the beginning it is marked by the presence of an excessive and prolonging level of tension. The *Burnout Syndrome* has been considered an important public health issue. *Burnout* has been considered a serious process of degradation of the worker's quality of life, in view of its serious implications for physical and mental health, according to Batista, (2010:504), quoted by Delbrouck (ed.), 2006:48-49. *Burnout syndrome* is one of the major current psychosocial problems, arousing interest and concern not only among the international scientific community, but also among the following entities, government and business. These concerns are due to the fact that the suffering of the individual has consequences for his state of health and also for his health performance, since there are now personal changes and/or dysfunctions and economic problems (Carlotto, 2003:15-23.). According to Carlotto (2003:15-23), the subjects who are in *burnout* have the resources to as well as the perception that something is wrong on a psychological level. In addition, they develop negative attitudes and feelings towards their subjects to whom they provide services and to colleagues, they are unhappy with themselves and dissatisfied with their work, quoted by Maslach and Jackson (1981). All these professionals (social workers, social educators, among others) are undoubtedly a profession of wear and tear due to the daily exposure of professionals to conflicts, dilemmas and requests for help from the users under analysis. The role of social workers is fundamental to stimulate the awareness of all citizens in the fight for equality against social inequalities, thus fighting for corrective and preventive measures. Social workers can intervene at various levels, that is, at the level of direct and indirect intervention, they can then intervene directly with users, families, communities, while they are in precarious situations or not and indirectly through the institutions, which expect social workers to assess the conditions of the users' social problems and identify the means and resources to solve them, Carvalho, (2012:7).

"*The vulnerability of the social service to burnout has underlying causes of*

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various kinds: some result from the specificity of social intervention, the nature of social work; others derive from the social context, social policies, the context of work where the professional is inserted and we can also point out causes of order individual, inherent to the personality of the social worker, to his framework of norms and values that are never dissociable from professional practice." (Carrera, 2011:22-23)

II - RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to identify:
- Social workers' opinions on social work as a profession, social problems and difficulties daily faced in their work, interaction ways with the people in need,
- the extent of the social workers' self-care practices, stress and frustration from failures and moral distress and explore its causes,
- the meaning of concepts like self-care and reflective practice and if those concepts are used in practice,
- social workers' needs for professional training and education,
- the extent of networking practice and the relations social workers' have with the community members, with local private or public institutions representatives (schools, local authorities, NGOs) and with other specialists from the professional community.

MEASURE

The University of Pitesti – Faculty of Educational Sciences, Social Sciences and Psychology, project coordinator, designed a questionnaire in order to study the perceptions and the needs of social work practitioners from the rural regions in addressing the *burnout* phenomenon. The construction of the questionnaire began during the project kickoff meeting, held in Pitesti (Romania) in December 2018, where all the partners involved, St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo (Bulgaria), Smart Umbrella (Greece), Associazione Dar Voce (Italy), Association for Developing Voluntary Work Novo Mesto (Slovenia), The Andalusian Municipality Fund for International Solidarity - FAMSI (Spain) and Contextos (Portugal) discussed and agreed upon the objectives of the questionnaire, the structure of the questionnaire, the research objectives stated in the project proposal and agreed to focus on explorations of:
- ➔ Social workers' perceptions on their profession;
- ➔ Sources of occupational stressor for social workers;
- ➔ Burnout symptoms among social work professionals;

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➜ Stress consequences on personal and professional life of social work professionals;
➜ Ways to improve professional activity in social work;
➜ Professional training and development needs.

Under the coordination of the University of Pitesti, project coordinator, the questionnaire was structured on four sections:

❏ The first section, including 25 closed-ended items, was designed to explore social workers' perceptions on their job, the problems and the difficulties they face in their professional activity, to identify sources of occupational stress and symptoms of burnout. The respondents have to assess the frequency they encounter the situation described in each item on a 5-point Likert scale.

❏ The second section, including 8 items, was designed to identify the satisfaction level social work professionals experience towards 7 work related aspects like: salary and rewards, promotion opportunities, work conditions, work climate etc. The eighth item was an opened-ended one and it gave the respondent the occasion to add other important satisfaction factor for him. The response scale for all the items consists in a 5-point Likert type scale, assessing the degree of satisfaction, from 1 – Very Dissatisfied to 5 – Very Satisfied.

❏ The third section included 7 possible stress consequences. The respondents could choose one or several consequences.

❏ The fourth section focused on 7 possible ways used to improve social workers' professional activity, like: emotional regulation techniques, supervision from another professional, communication with other colleagues, professional training etc. These items could be assessed on two different criteria: first according to the extent it is used and second according to the extent it is needed. The respondents could choose multiple answers. The response scale consisted in a 3-point Likert scale (1- Not at all, 2- To some extent, 3- Very much). The respondents could add other ways of improving professional activity, on the eighth opened-ended item.

❏ The last section included respondents' demographic data such as gender, age, work experience, educational level.

III - PARTICIPANTS

The sample consists of 50 social workers from rural areas. They are 11 men (22%) and 39 women (78%). Table 1 and fig. 1 show the participants' age distribution.

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Table 1. Participants' age

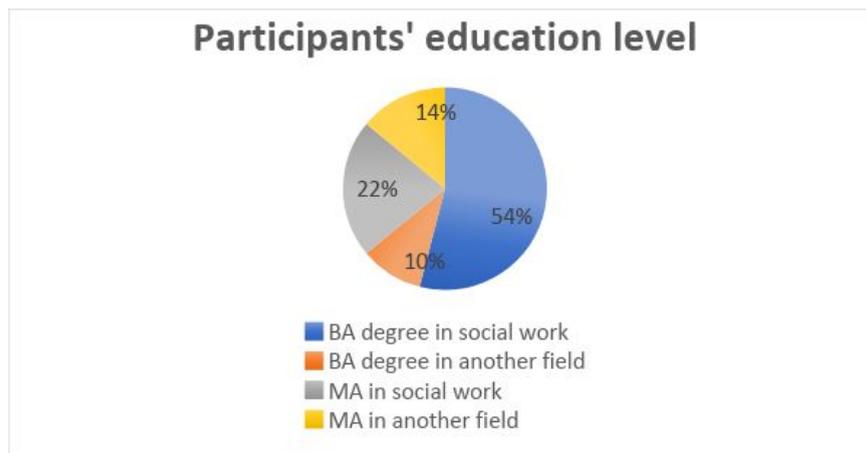|		Frequency	Percent
Valid	<25	4	08.0
	26-35	30	60.0
	36-45	14	28.0
	46-55	2	4.0
	Total	50	100.0

Fig. 1. Participants' age – percentage distribution
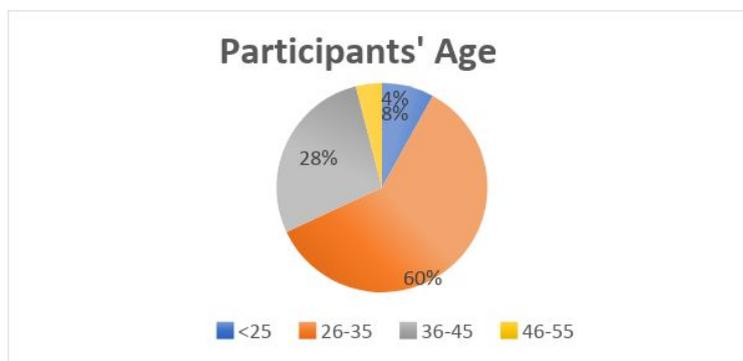
Participants' experience in Social Work ranges from 1 to 18 years (**mean=7,32**, **σ= 3,627783942**). Table 2 and fig. 2 show participants' education level.

Table 2 Participants' education level

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	BA degree in social work	27	54.0
	BA degree in another field	5	10.0
	MA in social work	11	22.0
	MA in another field	7	14.0
	Total	50	100.0

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Fig. 2. Participants' education level - percentage distribution

V - RESULTS

The first section of the survey intended to explore social workers' opinions on various aspects of their job, social problems and difficulties daily faced in their work, the sources of occupational stress.

Table 3 - Descriptive statistics for social workers' opinions on their job

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I deal very effectively with my clients' problems.	50	3	5	4,04	0,7273098321
I have the occasion to consult another professional when I have difficult cases.	50	2	5	3,64	0,8750510189
I have too much work to do.	50	3	5	4,08	0,6337449432
I have a difficult collaboration with the authorities.	50	1	5	2,28	1,08871765
I can organize my work by myself.	50	2	5	3,78	0,789988375
I feel emotionally drained from my work.	50	1	5	2,6	1,030157507
I face the lack of understanding and cooperation from my clients.	50	1	5	2,54	0,930437685
I solve the work tasks by myself.	50	2	5	3,68	0,6527805519
I feel tired when I wake up in the morning and I have to face a new work day.	50	1	5	2,46	1,198808933
I've become more callous toward people since I took this job.	50	1	5	1,96	1,228239158
I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work	50	2	5	3,78	0,789988375
I have the support of my colleagues in my activity.	50	2	5	3,84	0,8171628369
I have the support of my boss/bosses in my activity.	50	2	5	3,84	0,8171628369
My work tasks are clear to me.	50	2	5	4,18	0,7548032135

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I feel I treat some clients as if they were impersonal objects.	50	1	5	1,58	1,144463157
Working with people is really a strain for me.	50	1	5	1,96	1,049003414
I accomplish tasks which are not in my responsibility.	50	1	5	2,98	0,8449127476
I really don't care about what happens to some clients.	50	1	5	1,56	0,8121525945
I feel I need to know other professional intervention methods.	50	2	5	3,64	0,776175869
I have difficult cases to handle and solve in my work.	50	2	4	3,34	0,6580738746
I have all the resources I need to do my job.	50	2	5	3,28	0,9044109595
My work is appreciated by my colleagues.	50	2	5	3,74	0,6942915932
I feel exhilarated after working closely with my clients.	50	1	5	4,06	0,8429781995
I have to fill in many documents in my activity.	50	2	5	3,3	0,8630747124
My work is appreciated by my boss.	50	2	5	3,56	0,8609439528

According to the means from table 3 (we are interested in means closer to the extremes of the scale: lower than 2.5 and around 4 and higher, given that the theoretical mean of the scale is 3), the overall perception of social workers' on different aspects of their job is positive:

- regarding the **job and working condition**, the majority of them say that they can organise and solve the work tasks by themselves, they have all the resources they need to do their job (3,28) and the work tasks are clear to them (4,18).
- regarding the **work with their clients**, the perceptions are positive. Social workers say that they deal very effectively with the clients' problems (4,04), they are not treating some clients as if they were impersonal objects (1,58) and they haven't become more callous toward people since they took this job (1,96). Few of them say that working with people is a strain for them (1,96), and that they really don't care about what happens to some clients (1,56). They feel they have an impact on their clients (3,78) and they feel exhilarated after working closely with their clients (4,06).
- regarding their **work relations,** the social workers say that they have the support of their colleagues and boss/bosses in their activity (3,84) and that they feel that their work is appreciated by their colleagues (3,74) and boss (3,56). Davies (1998) points out that the causes of stress are the functioning of the organisations and their structure, the role of the social service and its interventions with customers, managers and directorates.

There are also **negative aspects** in social workers' opinion:
- a large workload (4,08) - I have too much work to do; the bureaucracy

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(3,30) - I have to fill in many documents in my activity; and the lack of professional tools (3,64) - I feel I need to know other professional intervention methods.

There is a high prevalence of stress and burnout in social workers and to highlight their individual and social importance, due to their potential harmful effects, not only on social workers themselves, but also on all those to whom they provide their services and with whom they deal daily. The area of intervention at various levels is considered an area of great physical and psychological distress for social workers, since from the first contact they have to intervene and seek solutions taking into account the means and techniques available for this purpose. Workload is one the the potential stress factors to be controlled, namely excessive and disordered rhythms, excessive hours of continuous work and absence of breaks. (Parreira, 2016:154-155). According to Chambel (2005:109), an individual considers that being overworked damages his health. Delbrouck (2006:54-57) refers to exhaustion as a disease arising from the relief process. Abdallah (2009:223) says that "*social workers are considered an occupational group at above-average risk of burnout*".

The second section of the survey intended to explore social workers' opinions on various sources of work satisfaction.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for the sources of work satisfaction

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Salary and rewards	50	1	5	3,32	1,019003114
Promotion opportunities	50	1	5	2,8	0,947607083
Work conditions	50	1	5	3,58	0,8592830424
Work itself	50	2	5	3,9	0,6776309272
Recognition of my work	50	1	5	3,46	0,8134080483
Work climate	50	2	5	3,97	0,7770080415
Relationship with clients	50	3	5	4,16	0,5841442372

As we can see from table 4, almost all of the means reaches 3, the theoretical mean of the scale. This means that social workers are satisfied with all the aspects listed above with the exception of their promotion opportunities (2,8) where they are rather dissatisfied. The third section of the survey explored stress consequences experienced in the last year. Table 5 show the distribution of stress consequences.

Table 5. Distribution for stress consequences

	COUNT	%
Low Motivation For Work	12	24.0
Low Self-confidence	9	18.0
Feelings Of Dissatisfaction	14	28.0

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Increased Use Of Tobacco, Alcohol, Pills And/Or Other Substance	3	6.0
Precarious Health	1	2.0
Tense Relations With Others (Family, Friends Etc.)	6	12.0
Lower Work Productivity	11	22.0
Sleep Disturbances	11	22.0
Weight Loss Or Weight Gain	8	16.0
Weakness	2	4.0
Change Of Eating Habits	5	10.0
Apathy	2	6.0
Difficulty Concentrating	12	24.0
Difficult Decision-making	6	12.0
None Of The Above	15	32.0

As we can see, 32% of the social workers didn't experience any stress consequences. 68% experienced one or several stress consequences, the most frequent being:

1. Feelings of dissatisfaction (28%)
2. Low motivation for work (24%)
3. Difficulty concentrating (24%)
4. Lower work productivity (22%)
5. Sleep disturbances (22%)

Job burnout is a special type of work-related stress, a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity. 68% of the social workers suffer / experienced one or more that one stress consequences, which can mean that they might be experiencing job burnout.

The last section of the survey intended to explore ways of improving social workers' professional activity.

Table 6. Descriptive statistic for the use of different ways to improve professional activity

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emotional Regulation Techniques	50	1	3	1,58	0.73094850316949
Supervision From Another Professional	50	1	2	1,84	0.7102744511232
Communication With Other Colleagues	50	2	3	2.32	0.68332918532008
Being A Member Of A Professional Network / Association	50	1	3	1.44	0.76023626832286
Professional Training	50	1	3	1.96	0.66883999489826
Reading About The Latest Developments In The Field Of Social Work	50	1	3	1.92	0.80407127311259
Exchange Of Experience W/ Other Professionals In My Field (From My Country Or From Abroad)	50	1	3	1.62	0.66670067940446

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As we can observe from table 6, social workers use to a large extent three ways of improving their professional activity: communication with other colleagues (2,32), professional training (1,96) and reading about the latest developments in the field of social work (1,92). They use less, being a member of a professional network / association (1,44), emotional regulation techniques (1,58) and exchange of experience with other professionals (1,62).

Table 7. Descriptive statistic for the need of different ways to improve professional activity

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emotional Regulation Techniques	50	1	3	2.3	0.65205066369663
Supervision From Another Professional	50	1	3	2.02	0.59476171413318
Communication With Other Colleagues	50	1	3	2.24	0.6869037302955
Being A Member Of A Professional Network / Association	50	1	3	2.02	0.62237202602263
Professional Training	50	1	3	2.5	0.61445180478876
Reading About The Latest Developments In The Field Of Social Work	50	1	3	2.18	0.56024775860365
Exchange Of Experience W/ Other Professionals In My Field (From My Country Or From Abroad)	50	1	3	2.32	0.55106575777103

As we can see from table 7, regarding the need of different ways to improve professional activity, social workers say through the survey, that they need, professional training (2,5), exchange of experience with other professionals (2,32), emotional regulation techniques (2,3), and communication with other colleagues (2,24).

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