

Italian Survey, Dar Voce Reggio Emilia
1. Research methodology
1.1. 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.

1.2. Participants

The sample consists of 48 social workers from rural areas of Reggio Emilia (Italy). They are 11 men (22,9%) and 37 women (77,1%). Table 1 shows the participants' age distribution.

Table 1. Participants' age

| | | Frequency | Percent |
|-------|-------|-----------|---------|
| | < 25 | 4 | 8,3 |
| Valid | 26-35 | 28 | 58,3 |
| | 36-45 | 11 | 22,9 |
| | 46-55 | 5 | 10,4 |
| | >56 | 0 | 0 |
| | Total | 48 | 100,00 |

The social workers average age of experience is 8,34 years of work; maximum workexperience is 23 years and the minimum is 1.

Tabel 2 shows participants' education level.

Tabel 2 Participants' education level

| | | Frequency | Percent |
|-------|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| | Highschool | 6 | 12,5 |
| Valid | BA degree in social work | 20 | 41,6 |
| | BA degree in another field | 2 | 4,2 |
| | MA in social work | 7 | 14,6 |
| | MA in another field | 12 | 25 |
| | PhD | 1 | 2,1 |
| | Total | 48 | 100.0 |

1.3.Measure

Romanian University of Pitesti, the Leader Partner, designed a questionnaire for our research. The construction of the questionnaire began with a consultation of the partners involved in the project, at the kick-off meeting of the project, held in Pitesti, in December 2018. We discussed and agreed upon the objectives of the survey and the structure of the questionnaire. We discussed the research objectives stated in the project proposal and we 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;
- Stress consequences on personal and professional life of social work professionals;
- Ways to improve professional activity in social work;
- Professional training and development needs.

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 6 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.

2. Results and discussion

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. | 48 | 2 | 5 | 3,68 | .694 |
| I have the occasion to consult another professional when I have difficult cases. | 48 | 1 | 5 | 3.89 | .983 |
| I have too much work to do. | 48 | 2 | 5 | 3,46 | .776 |
| I have a difficult collaboration with the authorities. | 48 | 2 | 5 | 3,17 | .669 |
| I can organise my work by myself. | 48 | 1 | 5 | 3,51 | .929 |
| I feel emotionally drained from my work. | 48 | 1 | 4 | 2,85 | .833 |
| I face the lack of understanding and cooperation from my clients. | 48 | 1 | 5 | 3.12 | .991 |
| I solve the work tasks by myself. | 48 | 1 | 4 | 2,87 | .946 |
| I feel tired when I wake up in the morning and I have to face a new work day. | 48 | 1 | 4 | 2.65 | .814 |
| I’ve become more callous toward people since I took this job. | 48 | 1 | 4 | 2.02 | 1.010 |
| I feel I’m positively influencing other people’s lives through my work | 48 | 1 | 5 | 3,44 | .802 |
| I have the support of my colleagues in my activity. | 48 | 1 | 5 | 4.02 | .793 |
| I have the support of my boss/bosses in my activity. | 48 | 2 | 5 | 3.93 | .672 |
| My work tasks are clear to me. | 48 | 1 | 5 | 3.85 | .859 |

| | | | | | |
|---|----|---|---|------|------|
| I feel I treat some clients as if they were impersonal objects. | 48 | 1 | 4 | 1.55 | .774 |
| Working with people is really a strain for me. | 48 | 1 | 3 | 1.95 | .779 |
| I accomplish tasks which are not in my responsibility. | 48 | 1 | 4 | 2.25 | .765 |
| I really don't care about what happens to some clients. | 48 | 1 | 3 | 1.29 | .548 |
| I feel I need to know other professional intervention methods. | 48 | 1 | 5 | 3.53 | .747 |
| I have difficult cases to handle and solve in my work. | 48 | 2 | 4 | 3.51 | .621 |
| I have all the resources I need to do my job. | 48 | 1 | 5 | 3.06 | .791 |
| My work is appreciated by my colleagues. | 48 | 2 | 5 | 3.78 | .623 |
| I feel exhilarated after working closely with my clients. | 48 | 1 | 5 | 3.68 | .887 |
| I have to fill in many documents in my activity. | 48 | 2 | 5 | 3.25 | .966 |
| My work is appreciated by my boss. | 48 | 1 | 5 | 3.82 | .731 |
| Valid N (listwise) | | | | | |

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 but they feel comfort to ask help to their colleagues, they have many resources they need to do their job and the work tasks are clear to them.
- regarding **the work with their clients**, the perceptions are positive. Social workers say that they deal effectively with the clients' problems; they are not treating some clients as if they were impersonal objects and they haven't become more callous toward people since they took this job. Few of them say that working with people is a strain for them, and that they really don't care about what happens to some clients. They feel they have an impact on their clients (They feel they are positively influencing other people's lives through their work) and they feel exhilarated after working closely with their clients.
- regarding their **work relations**, the social workers say that they have the support of their colleagues and boss/bosses in their activity and that they feel that their work is appreciated by their colleagues and boss.

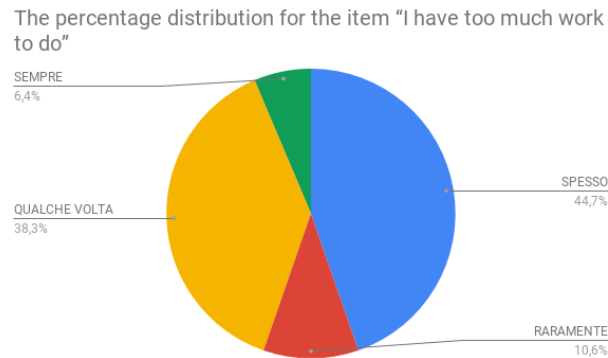
There are few negative aspects in social workers' opinion:

- a large workload (I have too much work to do) but at the contrary, not the requirement to do other tasks (I accomplish tasks which are not in my responsibility).
- the difficult cases (I have difficult cases to handle and solve in my work)

- the lack of professional tools (I feel I need to know other professional intervention methods).
- The figures 1-4 show the percentage distribution of responses to the negative aspects discussed above.

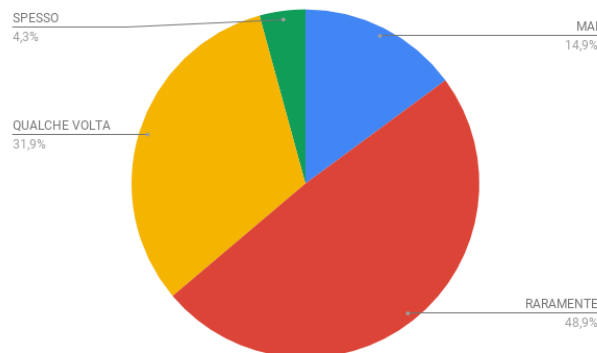
Fig. 1. The percentage distribution for the item “I have too much work to do”

Sempre =Always
Spesso = Often
Qualche volta= Sometimes
Raramente = Rarely
Mai = Never



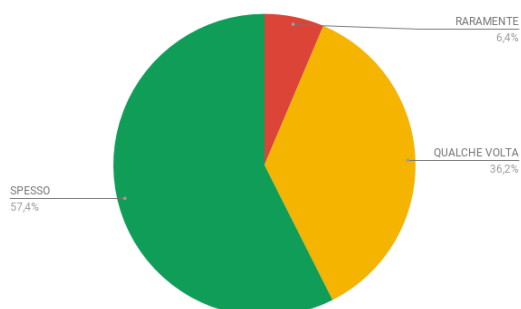
According to fig. 1, 50% of the respondents say they have often and always too much work to do.

Fig. 2. The percentage distribution for the item “I accomplish tasks which are not in my responsibility”



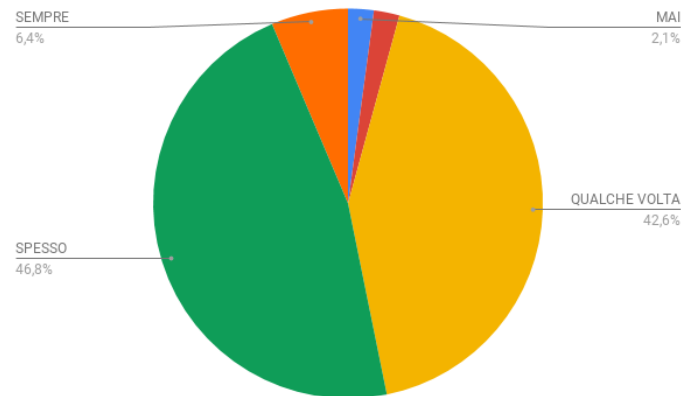
According to fig. 2, but at the contrary, the graphic shows that more than 60% of the social workers say they never or rarely accomplish extra work tasks. No one says always.

Fig. 3. The percentage for the item “I have difficult cases to handle and solve in my work”



94% of the social workers say they often and sometimes have difficult cases to handle and solve at work, according to fig. 3

Fig. 4. The percentage distribution for the item “I feel I need to know other professional intervention methods”



As we can see from fig. 4, 98% of the respondents always, often and sometimes feel they need other professional intervention methods.

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

Tabel 4. Descriptive statistics for the sources of work satisfaction

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---------------------------|----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| Salary and rewards | 48 | 1 | 4 | 2.65 | .866 |
| Promotion opportunities | 48 | 1 | 4 | 2.87 | .875 |
| Work conditions | 48 | 1 | 5 | 3.38 | .922 |
| Work itself | 48 | 2 | 5 | 4.08 | .583 |
| Recognition of my work | 48 | 1 | 5 | 3.46 | .830 |
| Work climate | 48 | 2 | 5 | 4.00 | .932 |
| Relationship with clients | 48 | 2 | 5 | 3.87 | .679 |
| Valid N (listwise) | | | | | |

As we can see from table 4, only 2 of the means reaches are under 3, the theoretical mean of the scale. This means that social workers are coherent with all the aspects listed above. This is not contradictory to most of their positive opinions expressed in the first section and consistent with others.

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 | % |
|---|--------------|----------|
| Feelings of dissatisfaction | 21 | 43.8% |
| Tense relations with others (family, friends etc.) | 16 | 33.3% |
| Change of eating habits | 15 | 31.3% |
| Low motivation for work | 13 | 27.1% |
| Difficult decision-making | 12 | 25.0% |
| Sleep disturbances | 10 | 20.8% |
| Weakness | 10 | 20.8% |
| Low self-confidence | 8 | 16.7% |
| Weight loss or weight gain | 8 | 16.7% |
| Difficulty concentrating | 7 | 14.6% |
| None of the above | 7 | 14.6% |
| Increased use of tobacco, alcohol, pills and/or other substance | 4 | 8.3% |
| Lower work productivity | 4 | 8.3% |
| Precarious health | 3 | 6.3% |
| Apathy | 1 | 2.1% |

As we can see, only the 14.6% of the social workers didn't experience any stress consequences. 85.4% experienced one or several stress consequences, the most frequent being: feelings of dissatisfaction, tense relations with others (family, friends etc.), change of eating habits, low motivation for work, sleep disturbances, difficulty concentrating and increased use of tobacco, alcohol, pills and/or other substance. We cannot identify the extent to which the work has led to these effects. It is possible that other stressors, unrelated to social workers' professional activity, to generate such consequences.

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 | 48 | 1 | 3 | 1.57 | .650 |
| Supervision from another professional | 48 | 1 | 3 | 1.87 | .575 |
| Communication with other colleagues | 48 | 2 | 3 | 2.82 | .379 |

| | | | | | |
|--|----|---|---|------|------|
| Being a member of a professional network/ association | 48 | 1 | 3 | 1.63 | .764 |
| Professional training | 48 | 1 | 3 | 2.17 | .480 |
| Reading about the latest developments in the field of social work | 48 | 1 | 3 | 2.04 | .464 |
| Exchange of experience with other professionals in my field (from my country or from abroad) | 48 | 1 | 3 | 1.80 | .680 |
| Valid N (listwise) | | | | | |

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, professional training, reading about the latest developments in the field of social work. They use less: emotional regulation techniques ,supervision from another professional, being a member of a professional network/ association, exchange of experience with other professionals in my field (from my country or from abroad).

One social worker added to this section “group dynamics management” and another one added “techniques of meditation”

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

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--|----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| Emotional regulation techniques | 48 | 1 | 3 | 2.48 | .621 |
| Supervision from another professional | 48 | 1 | 3 | 2.57 | .541 |
| Communication with other colleagues | 48 | 2 | 3 | 2.93 | .247 |
| Being a member of a professional network/ association | 48 | 1 | 3 | 2.17 | .760 |
| Professional training | 48 | 1 | 3 | 2.61 | .533 |
| Reading about the latest developments in the field of social work | 48 | 1 | 3 | 2.61 | .533 |
| Exchange of experience with other professionals in my field (from my country or from abroad) | 48 | 1 | 3 | 2.57 | .541 |
| Valid N (listwise) | | | | | |

As we can see from table 7, regarding the need of different ways to improve professional activity, the respondents say they need, the highest means are: communication with other colleagues,

professional training, reading about the latest developments in the field of social work, exchange of experience with other professionals in my field (from my country or from abroad), supervision from another professional.

Conclusions:

The main results of our survey are:

- Social workers assess as positive various aspects of their work: work and working conditions, work with their clients and work relations.
- The participants identified as main sources of stress: workload, the difficult cases and lack of professional tools.
- Italian (Reggio Emilia) social workers involved in this survey are quite satisfied of different aspects of their job.
- 16% of the social workers didn't experience any stress consequences and the rest of them (84%) experienced one or several stress consequences, including physiological, psychological and social effects.
- Regarding the need of different ways to improve professional activity, the respondents say they need: communication with other colleagues, professional training, reading about the latest developments in the field of social work, exchange of experience with other professionals in my field (from my country or from abroad), supervision from another professional.

Limitations

The number of participants included in our research is small, so we cannot extend our results and conclusions to the reality of all social workers working in rural areas, although our results are consistent with findings from other research.

Another limitation derives from the data collection procedure. Emailed questionnaires prevent the researcher to control the conditions in which the survey is filled in. We cannot know if the answers reflect only our respondents' perceptions and opinions. In addition to this, it is possible the anonymity was affected by the fact that we asked participants to send us back, via email, the filled in questionnaire, which made them identifiable. This could influence the answers, despite our assurance regarding confidentiality.

Implications for practice and for future research

These findings stress social workers' need for support in ongoing professional development, the need for organizational change in order to reduce stress and to identify sources of satisfaction. This is a difficult task for Italian institutions, because first of all they have to consider human resources as the most valuable resource.