

ANALYSIS OF CONTEXTS OF COPING WITH OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT AND SOCIAL WELFARE PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract

In the present article the impact of stress experienced by educational support and social welfare professionals on their professional activity and the opportunities of coping with it have been analysed applying a qualitative research approach. To analyse the subjective experience of educational support and social welfare professionals (N=27), a qualitative research approach has been chosen, the ontological basis of which consisted of the interpretive constructivist paradigm. The results of the research were validated using the expertise method: for external expertise the experts who did not participate in the research were employed, for internal expertise – persons who participated in the research and the researchers themselves. The data presented in the article are related both to the negative impact of stress on the professional activity and the positive impact leading to changes and improvement.

***Keywords:** occupational stress, the coping, educational support and social welfare professionals, subjective experience.*

Introduction

In recent decades, as constant political, economic, and social changes take place, as the rhythm of personal and professional life intensifies, stress becomes a constant companion. Strong stressful experiences can lead to nervous, mental, psychosomatic illnesses, and can cause occupational burnout syndrome – the result of stress in the work environment, when the requirements for the individual are high, meanwhile personality and professional resources are limited. The group of the most stressful occupations includes military personnel, law enforcement officers, firefighters, and professionals in health and social care (Burba, 2014; Bruschini, Carli, & Burla, 2018; García-Herrero, Lopez-Garcia, Herrera, Fontaneda, Báscones, & Mariscal, 2017; Pikūnas & Palujanskienė, 2005; Lee, Jeong, & Choi, 2019; Wagaman, Geiger, Shockley, & Segal, 2015).

There are studies on the phenomenon of occupational stress and the context of its consequences in the works of Lithuanian and foreign authors (Burton & King, 2004; Grakauskas & Valickas, 2006; Folkman & Maskovic, 2004; Kriukova, 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002; Scott & Wilks, 2008; Wright, Matthai, & Budhathoki, 2018). The authors present the possible constructive (motivation for activity, activeness) and destructive (wasted health, unproductive professional activity, disharmony of interpersonal relationships) consequences of stress. The latter consequences become the epicentre of special interest of various sciences (psychology, biomedicine, management), on the decision of which the success of professionals' work activity, meeting of human needs, harmonization of organizational culture and interpersonal relations ensuring successful development of a sustainable society may possibly depend (State Progress Strategy Lithuania 2030/Valstybės pažangos strategija Lietuva 2030).

Despite the fact that there is a lot of research in Lithuania and abroad about the expression of occupational stress among different professionals (Bubelienė & Merkys, 2012; Bandzevičienė, Birbilaitė, & Diržytė, 2010; Burba, 2014; Bruschini, Carli, & Burla, 2018; Kepalaitė, 2013; Kriukelytė, Vaškelytė, & Žitinaitė, 2005; Perminas, 2018; Tonna, 2019; Wright, Matthai, & Budhathoki, 2018) but opportunities, techniques and strategies for coping with stress are increasingly being analysed. Coping with stress can be considered as a process, during which the individual attempts to manage a burdensome environmental influence through cognitive and physical activity, or as a stabilizing factor that can help the professional adapt to stressful situations. Having analysed the research of the authors (Burton & King, 2004; Campbell-Sills, 2006; Coutu, 2002; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Ortega, Beauchemin, & Kaniskan, 2008), strategies for coping with stress are revealed and they should be understood as a changing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral change process to manage external or internal stressors. The authors' research presupposes **problem**-focused stress coping strategies that include problem definition efforts, solution planning, foreseeing of alternatives, acquisition of new skills, and **emotion**-focused strategies aimed at reducing emotional distress, distancing from the problem, seeking social support, and outpouring of emotions.

The research problem is defined by the questions that require a new empirical analysis: *What is the impact of stress experienced by educational support and social welfare professionals on their professional activity? What is the context of coping with stress in terms of the subjective experiences of the professionals? What are the techniques and strategies these professionals use to manage stressful situations?*

The aim of the research – to reveal the impact of stress experienced by educational support and social welfare professionals on their professional activity and the opportunities of coping with it.

The object of the research – the impact of stress experienced by educational support and social welfare professionals on their professional activity and the context of the opportunities of coping with it in terms of the subjective experiences of the professionals.

The sample and methodology of the research. Respondents were selected by targeted convenience sampling, i.e., social and special educators, speech therapists, psychologists, social workers (N = 27), employed in education and training or care institutions with at least two years professional experience and higher university education, were sampled. A qualitative data collection approach was chosen to analyse the subjective experience of these professionals (semi-structured *interview*), the ontological basis of which consisted of the interpretive constructivist paradigm stating that social phenomena and their meanings are constructed

by people, researchers and experts operating in various social contexts (Poviliūnas, 2017). In the course of the research, we used subjective interpretive epistemology, which foresees that social reality is understood and reconstructed by analysing, reflecting, and interpreting it (Bitinas, Rupšienė, & Žydžiūnaitė, 2008). The approaches of the methodology of interpretive research allow to explain how the participants of the research – education support and social welfare professionals – subjectively perceive the real field of occupational stress and coping opportunities, and what meanings they attribute to it. This reality is reconstructed from the perspective of professionals, is subjective and is revealed during an individual semi-structured interview, where the participants' attitude towards the phenomenon under investigation is highlighted.

The research used open questions not limiting possible responses according to the evaluation areas intended by the researchers, which were identified after analysing scientific literature and authors' research revealing the peculiarities of stress and coping opportunities (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993; Valickas, Grakauskas, & Želvienė, 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The content of the responses was distributed according to the respective diagnostic areas and divided into generalized semantic units, the notional statements were selected and ranked. The data of the research were analysed applying the method of content analysis and using the open coding procedure (Corbin & Straus, 2014; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2003).

In order to minimize the subjectivity of data interpretation characteristic of qualitative research, we used an internal (research team) and external (experts) validation method of the obtained data. The research team and experts analysed the empirical tables of the qualitative research with generalized semantic units and illustrative statements and expressed their opinion on the validity and reliability of the data. This has led to a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being analysed, the quality of the analysis, the interpretation and presentation of the results. Thus the objective preconditions for deeper understanding of the analysed phenomenon of occupational stress and coping arise: to summarize, critically and reflectively evaluate the experiences of different research participants (education support and social welfare professionals, research team, experts), the meanings attributed to them, and possible differences between theoretical and experiential practical contexts of the analysed phenomenon of social reality.

Analysis of the research results

During the research, we investigated the impact of stress on the professional activity of education support and social welfare professionals by analysing the contexts of their subjective experiences (Table 1).

Table 1. The impact of stress on the professional activity of education support and social welfare professionals (N = 27)

Category	Examples of statements*	Number of statements
Unproductive professional activity	<i>“I no longer work so productively that day, I focus on just one case, I no longer have time for other students”, “I do not manage to “feel” into my work and do it well until the end”, “after stress, work productivity drops significantly for several hours”, “I do not want to do anything that day, I do my works dismissively”, “I can no longer do any work responsibly”.</i>	25

Continued Table 1

Attention disorders	<i>"I do not concentrate, my thoughts are constantly tense and focused on negative things", "it is difficult to concentrate", "I become distracted, forget, do not concentrate, I am somewhere else with my thoughts"</i> .	24
Declining motivation	<i>"I no longer have the motivation to work and often think on weekends that I would gladly not go to work on Monday", "the motivation to work is decreasing not only that day but also for the job in general", "when I compare my job in the first years and now, I understand that the motivation for work has dropped significantly"</i> .	21
Deteriorated health	<i>"blood pressure rises", "I cannot fall asleep, I wake up at night and get nervous", "my heart beats fast", "the sweat breaks out"</i>	10
Positive impact of stress	<i>"Optimal stress makes you get smarter, express yourself more actively at work, stimulates your desire to improve, search for answers to your issues of concern", "I could not argue that it directly causes harm to my work results – on the contrary, it encourages me to work more actively"</i> .	6
Total		86

* We thank K. Juodeikytė, the student of the Institute of Continuing Studies, Šiauliai University, for helping in the collection of empirical data.

Reconstructing the context of the impact of stress experienced by education support and social welfare professionals on their professional activity (statements N = 86) the following consequences characterized by generalized semantic units emerge: *unproductive professional activity* (N = 25), *attention disorders* (N = 24), *declining motivation* (N = 21), *deteriorated health* (N = 10), *positive impact of stress* (N = 6).

The analysis of the professionals' opinion allows reconstructing the dual effect of stress on the quality of professional activity: on the one hand, the research participants identify negative effects of stress such as **unproductive professional activity** described with the statements (*after stress, work productivity drops significantly for several hours, I do not want to do anything that day, I do my works dismissively*), **declining motivation** (*the motivation to work is decreasing not only that day but also for the job in general*) or even **health** (*blood pressure rises, I cannot fall asleep, I wake up at night and get nervous, my heart beats fast*) and **attention disorders** (*I do not concentrate, my thoughts are constantly tense and focused on negative things, I become distracted, forget, do not concentrate, I am somewhere else with my thoughts*).

On the other hand, statements made by the professionals (*optimal stress makes you get smarter, express yourself more actively at work, stimulates your desire to improve, search for answers to your issues of concern, I could not argue that it directly causes harm to my work results – on the contrary, it encourages me to work more actively*) imply a generalized semantic context that reveals the **positive impact of stress**.

Scientific research (Selye, 1956) show that stress is an inevitable part of life and professional activity, where optimal stress (eustress) is a motivational force, a personality state, in which human capabilities and work capacity increase, general well-being and resistance to physical and spiritual difficulties possibly improve. On the other hand, as the level of stress increases and it turns into distress, it can become dangerous to health, work capacity, motivation, and productivity. This is also confirmed by the statements of the research participants.

External stressors (conflict situations, heavy workload, unexpected complicated cases, etc.) experienced by education support and social welfare professionals in their professional activity field may violate their internal balance. Human protective reactions and the ability to resist may be different, depending on personality resilience, the possibilities of adaptivity, and the severity of the stressor. With weak personality defense mechanisms and strong long-term stress, having used up adaptational energy, there is a risk of occupational burnout and exhaustion (Pikūnas & Palujanskienė, 2005).

As stress increases until it reaches the allowable limit of personality resources, the resistance to stressful situations and the opportunities of their control and coping also increase. When one reaches a critical threshold, and with prolonged exposure to a stressor, resistance and resilience decrease, motivation and productivity decline, and somatic and mental illness can occur. One cannot avoid stressful situations and must not run away from them: simply, it is desirable to experience eustressful situations and, as far as possible, reduce distressful situations, given that the personality's adaptive abilities are not infinite.

In the course of the research, the context of the opportunities, techniques, and strategies of coping with occupational stress of education support and social welfare professionals was reconstructed by analyzing their subjective experiences (Table 2).

Table 2. Techniques of coping with stress experienced by education support and social welfare professionals (N = 27)

Category	Examples of statements	Number of statements
Soothing hobby, entertainment	<i>"I read my favorite literature", "I listen to music, draw and sing while cleaning up rooms", "I go to do all kinds of handicraft, knit, then the rest of the world disappears", "I go outside, to my flower garden, I water the flowers, I cherish them, it makes me relaxed", "Trips to certain places, entertainment", "I stay in nature".</i>	27
Support from family and relatives	<i>"I talk about these things with my loved ones", "conversations with family members", "probably talking to my family is the most helpful", "to relieve stress, making just one call to my husband, children or parents helps me".</i>	26
Physical activity, meditation	<i>"I try to regain my temper, to meditate", "I go working out, jogging", "cycling quite a few kilometers", "sometimes I go to the gym or just work out outside", "I go for a walk"</i>	21
Peer support and consultations	<i>"conversations with other colleagues", "communication with colleagues", "in stressful situations, I look for support primarily from colleagues who either help directly or simply support psychologically", "conversation with colleagues", "after a complicated situation, I try to stay with my colleagues for a few minutes, talk, discuss"</i>	16
Participation in seminars, supervisions	<i>"recently, I attended a stress management seminar and learned quick stress coping techniques and measures", "I attend seminars, analyse why I react this way", "if I have the opportunity, I attend various seminars, I can relax there and divert my thoughts elsewhere", "I went to a peer support group for social educators, we met once a month in a small group", "I attend a supervision group".</i>	14

Continued Table 2

Separation of work and rest	<i>“I took stricter control of my work and rest time, I do not answer the phone after work, I do not deal with any work related issues on weekends”, “I do not do any unfinished paperwork or other work at home”, “I try to learn that work is work, rest is rest”, “I try to distance myself from work when I get home”, “when I close the door at work, I distance myself from everything”.</i>	11
Total		115

Having analysed the subjective experiences of education support and social welfare professionals, the obtained data allow the reconstruction of the techniques and strategies of coping with stress in their professional activity. The semantic units decoded and summarized in the course of the research reveal the most typical contexts of these professionals' stress coping techniques in their professional activity (N = 115): *soothing hobby, entertainment* (N = 27), *support from family and relatives* (N = 26), *physical activity, meditation* (N = 21), *peer support and consultations* (N = 16), *participation in seminars, supervisions* (N = 14), *separation of work and rest* (N = 11). It highlights the most common stress coping strategies used by these professionals, relatively defined as withdrawal **from a stressful situation** (N = 59), **social support** (N = 42), **problem solving** (N = 14).

The analysis of the professionals' opinion reveals that the professionals try to cope with stressful situations by **distancing** themselves from them, i.e., finding **soothing hobbies, entertainment** (*they read literature, listen to music, sing, draw, do handicraft, look after plants, stay in nature*), **being physically active** (*go working out outside or to the gym, go for a walk, go cycling*), **separating work from rest** (*do not answer the phone after work, do not work on weekends, do not work at home*).

The data of the research show that education support and social welfare professionals cope with stressful situations in their professional activity seeking **social support**. The professionals get social support from **family members** (*conversations with family members, to relieve stress, making just one call to my husband, children or parents helps me*), **peer support and consultations** (*after complicated situations, I try to stay with my colleagues, talk, discuss*). Such a strategy for coping with occupational stress may be considered to be partially constructive because, on the one hand, it does not create a plan for dealing with a complex stressful situation, but it allows for emotion control, gaining support, listening, and assistance (Bubelienė & Merkys, 2012; Gustems-Carnicer, Calderón, & Calderón-Garrido, 2019; Klizas & Šulnienė, 2012; Loikienė & Pileckaitė-Markovienė, 2013). These findings are partially confirmed by the research conducted by García-Herrero et al. (2017), revealing the importance of emotional demands on work, as well as the support of colleagues and superiors and recognition for one's work.

The analysis of the research data shows that the professionals also cope with stressful situations in their professional activity by **solving problems** in a constructive way, trying not only to reduce physical and emotional tension or retreat from difficult situations. The research participants *attend seminars and supervisions organized by the professionals* (*I attended a stress management seminar and learned quick stress coping techniques and measures, I attend supervisions*). Stress coping strategies provided by the professionals in the field are likely to help education support and social welfare professionals constructively solve stressful situations in their professional activity (Pikūnas & Palujanskienė; 2005, Kriukova, 2010;

Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It should also be noted that an increased level of implementation of seminars on coping with **stress** (as well as at universities studies) itself suggests that learning and utilizing functional coping strategies can contribute to a reduction of **stress** among professionals (Kriener, Schwertfeger, Deimel, & Köhler, 2018).

Conclusions

Summarizing the experience of the impact of stress experienced by educational support and social welfare professionals on their professional activity, the dual effect of this phenomenon is revealed. On the one hand, the generalized semantic units reveal a negative (health and attention disorders, unproductive work, decrease of motivation) impact of stress (distress) on the professional activity, on the other hand, they reveal a positive impact (eustress), which mobilizes and provokes changes in professional activity and encourages improvement. This implies the concept of the phenomenon of stress as an inevitable component of human life.

The context of coping with stressful situations in professional activity reveals the professionals' options described as withdrawal from a stressful situation, seeking social support, and problem solving, where stimulatory-reactive or retreative-dispositional coping with stress is relatively dominant. Narrower stress coping options are probably influenced by a young and not sufficiently developed professional support system for social support professionals who experience stressful situations, social-cultural tolerance of stress, lack of interest and activity from the professionals themselves. Involvement of experts in this field, peer involvement, and the use of specific methods are likely to increase the opportunities for coping with stress experienced by educational support and social welfare professionals.

Reconstructing the field of coping with occupational stress of professionals reveals the multidimensionality of this process, allowing to analyze the phenomenon in the context of many ambiguous variables (physical and mental health, personality characteristics, social conditions, etc.). It is likely that coping with stress should also be associated with the assessment of different variables (intrapersonal, interpersonal, societal), where the flexible use of the strengths of personal and social environmental resources becomes important.

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Summary

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The impact of stress experienced by educational support and social welfare professionals on their professional activity and the opportunities of coping with it have been analysed applying a qualitative research approach. The research problem is defined by the questions that require a new empirical analysis: *What is the impact of stress experienced by educational support and social welfare professionals on their professional activity? What is the context of coping with stress in terms of the subjective experiences of the professionals? What are the techniques and strategies these professionals use to manage stressful situations?*

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interpreting it (Bitinas, Rupšienė, & Žydžiūnaitė, 2008). The approaches of the methodology of interpretive research allow to explain how the participants of the research – education support and social welfare professionals – subjectively perceive the real field of occupational stress and coping opportunities, and what meanings they attribute to it. This reality is reconstructed from the perspective of professionals, is subjective and is revealed during an individual semi-structured interview, where the participants' attitude towards the phenomenon under investigation is highlighted.

Summarizing the experience of the impact of stress experienced by educational support and social welfare professionals on their professional activity, the dual effect of this phenomenon is revealed. On the one hand, the generalized semantic units reveal a negative (health and attention disorders, unproductive work, decrease of motivation) impact of stress (distress) on the professional activity, on the other hand, they reveal a positive impact (eustress), which mobilizes and provokes changes in professional activity and encourages improvement. This implies the concept of the phenomenon of stress as an inevitable component of human life.

The context of coping with stressful situations in professional activity reveals the professionals' options described as withdrawal from a stressful situation, seeking social support, and problem solving, where stimulatory-reactive or retreative-dispositional coping with stress is relatively dominant. Narrower stress coping options are probably influenced by a young and not sufficiently developed professional support system for social support professionals who experience stressful situations, social-cultural tolerance of stress, lack of interest and activity from the professionals themselves. Involvement of experts in this field, peer involvement, and the use of specific methods are likely to increase the opportunities for coping with stress experienced by educational support and social welfare professionals.

Reconstructing the field of coping with occupational stress of professionals reveals the multidimensionality of this process, allowing to analyze the phenomenon in the context of many ambiguous variables (physical and mental health, personality characteristics, social conditions, etc.). It is likely that coping with stress should also be associated with the assessment of different variables (intrapersonal, interpersonal, societal), where the flexible use of the strengths of personal and social environmental resources becomes important.

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